

# **TALENT IDENTIFICATION AND DEVELOPMENT IN MALE RUGBY LEAGUE**

**by**

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment for the requirements for the degree of Professional  
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## AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

# STUDENT DECLARATION FORM



Type of Award      Professional Doctorate

School      Sport and Wellbeing

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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the effectiveness of the Talent and Performance Pathway in professional (male) English Rugby League, in order to meet the aims of both the Rugby Football League (RFL), the National Governing Body (NGB) of the sport in the UK, and Super League (Europe), the premier club competition in Europe. Specifically, the thesis has focused upon how optimum environments can be created in order to propel England to consistent World Cup wins and ensure that the Super League is supplied with high quality players providing ‘world class’ spectator and broadcast entertainment that drives increased commercial revenues.

This work has been viewed through the complex social, financial and political backdrop in which the sport operates. The origins of the sport of Rugby League and the communities that it serves, through an engrained culture are initially investigated. These factors are shown to have a direct impact upon the Talent and Performance pathway since discrepancies were found between what current talent identification and development (TID) literature says and what is happening in practice. These discrepancies have been investigated using a mixed methods approach where a comparison with our major international competitor in Australia was conducted. Findings dispelled the myth that all England had to do was copy what the Australians did due to the social milieu in which the sport exists in both countries.

Qualitative approaches were used to investigate challenges relating to the competition structure within the talent and performance pathway. Findings revealed that there is too much emphasis being placed upon short term results as opposed to long term development at the base of the pathway (i.e. community RL and first selective environments). In addition, an inappropriate development environment and competition offer was found to exist for athletes transitioning between age-group and elite performance environments resulting in players being

ill-equipped to maximise their potential. Using the empirical evidence gathered, an alternative competition offer has been proposed.

In an attempt to create better environments, behaviour change literature was explored and discrepancies between behaviours and desired outcomes from TID literature are discussed. To conclude, further areas of investigation arising from the thesis are suggested namely talent inclusion and people development.

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To get on (and survive!) in professional Rugby League the first thing you need above anything else is a supportive family. Alison, Rebecca and Jessica, sorry for the lost weekends but without your encouragement and assistance it would never have been possible!

## ABBREVIATIONS

CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CPD	Continuous Professional Development
CRL	Country Rugby League
DCMS	Department of Culture, Media and Sport
DOBs	Dates of Birth
EPM NRL	Elite Programmes Manager, National Rugby League
EPPP	Elite Player Performance Plan
FA	Football Association
FMS	Functional Movement Screen
GMF NSWRL	General Manager Football, New South Wales Rugby League
HOYP	Head of Youth Performance
KTP	Knowledge Transfer Partnership
LTAD	Long Term Athlete Development
MEP	Member of European Parliament
MM	Mixed Methods Research
NAM	National Academy Manager
NCL	National Conference League. This is the tier of competition immediately below League 1.
NFL	National Football League
NGB	National Governing Body
NHL	National Hockey League
NPDM	National Player Development Manager
NRL	National Rugby League

NSW ISP	New South Wales Intrust Super Premiership
NSWRL	New South Wales Rugby League
NYC	National Youth Competition
NZ	New Zealand
OTS	Over Training Syndrome
PCDEs	Psychological Characteristics of Developing Excellence
QRL	Queensland Rugby League
QRL ISC	Queensland Rugby League Intrust Super Cup
RAE	Relative Age Effect
RFL	Rugby Football League
RFU	Rugby Football Union
RL	Rugby League
RLWC 2021	Rugby League World Cup, 2021 that will be held in England
ROI	Return in Investment
SLE	Super League Europe
SMTD	Standard Model of talent Development
SOO	State of Origin
TD	Talent Development
TDE	Talent Development Environment
TDEQ	Talent Development Environment Questionnaire
TID	Talent Identification and Development
UK	United Kingdom
UKCC	United Kingdom Coaching Certificate
USA	United States of America

## **PUBLICATIONS ARISEN FROM THE THESIS**

### **Book Chapter**

Mather, B., & Rotheram, D. (2019). The transition to elite performance. Societal contrasts in the same sport. In D. Collins., A. Cruickshank., & G. Jordet. *Routledge handbook of elite performance* (pp. 310-321). London: Routledge.

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION AND OUTLINE OF THIS THESIS**

This chapter is intended to outline the background of the thesis and the scope and importance to this field of work is described. Finally, an overview of the other Chapters of the thesis' is presented.

#### **1.1 Context of the work**

##### **1.1.1 My position and interests**

My interest in the field of talent identification and development (TID) has been with me for over 30 years. I have been immersed in sport all my professional life as a physical education teacher, coach and National Governing Body (NGB) system builder. Many of the roles I have held in teaching and coaching have involved working with talented children and young adults. In Rugby League (RL) this has been largely with athletes who have been labelled as talented either in a professional club or NGB talent programmes since 1999 to present day.

I actually began my postgraduate studies in 2009. At this point in time, there was a lucky collision between my beginning employment with the Rugby Football League (RFL), the National Governing Body of RL in the UK and commencing my level 4 RL coaching qualification. This qualification was via a Higher Education partner and upon successful completion, candidates receive two qualifications; their level 4 coaching qualification and a Postgraduate Diploma in elite coaching practice.

I started my RFL career as a National Player Development Manager. Originally, I had been interviewed for the role as a Coach Development Manager, but it was considered that I would be more appropriate for the player development role, which I accepted! Very quickly it became apparent to myself that I actually knew very little about TID, let alone how this related to the complex political and financial world that surrounds NGBs. Consequently, being on the



programme of study for level 4/PG Dip, allowed me to gain a greater knowledge and understanding and be able to translate that into my world of work.

Since completing that course of study in 2011, my thirst for learning more has not wavered. The PG Dip was topped up to a master's which then led to starting this programme of doctoral study in early 2015. I am now the Talent and Coaching lead for the RFL. This is a complex role that transcends the whole sport, from elite adult men's performance, women and girls, community rugby league (all levels and ages) and lately an emergence of disability RL. As well as the 'on-field' aspects of player and coach development, the role interfaces with a complex governance structure. In undertaking the writing of this thesis, it has allowed me to critically evaluate the real issues facing TID in RL and be able to provide an evidence base to underpin business decisions made by the RFL accounting for the complex world of governance that we occupy.

### **1.1.2 A guide to the key 'players'**

As with any sport, there are several key stakeholders who hold an influence on the direction of travel of an organisation such as a NGB. This section outlines the key stakeholders and how they link to the process of TID.

As the NGB, the RFL governs, develops, promotes and grows the sport, and as its mission statement says, "provide great rugby league experiences." It is also recognised by the government and international bodies as the single lead organisation which governs the game in the UK.

The board of directors is the ultimate decision-making body and exercise the powers of the organisation. The board is responsible for setting the strategy, approving long-term financial plans and monitoring and evaluating the performance of the organisation. Corporately, the RFL is structured into four quadrants which, when the thesis unfolds, demonstrate a symbiotic relationship with each other. These are; operational (finance, HR,

data and insight), on-field (performance, coaching, community development and match officials), regulatory (legal, competitions, safeguarding and welfare), and commercial (commercial, marketing, digital and media). This is illustrated in Figure 1.1.

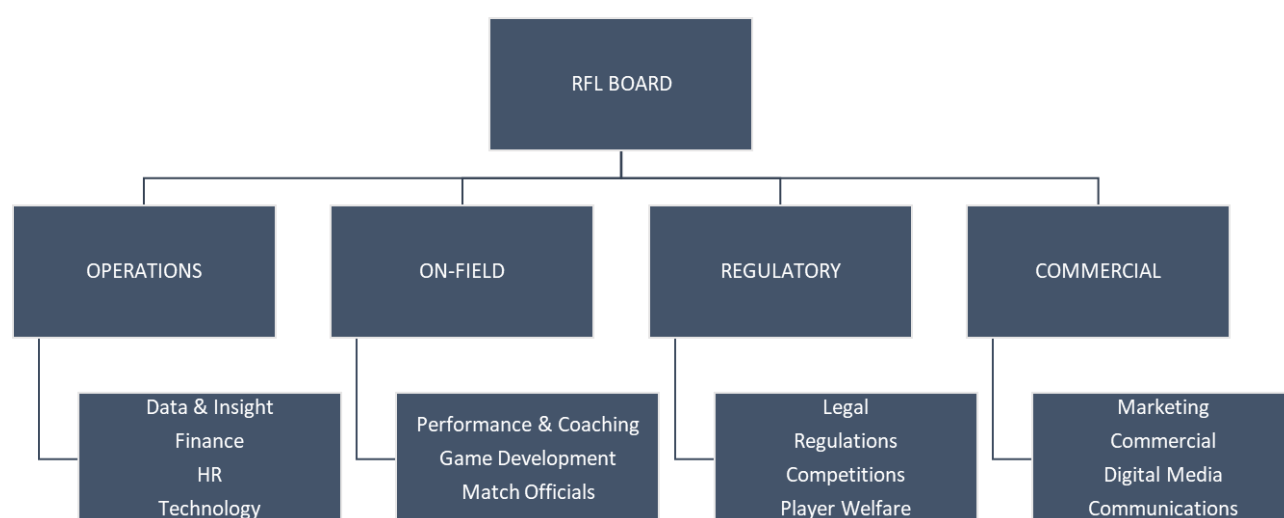


Figure 1-1. Governance structure of the Rugby Football League

Of strategic importance to the RFL is of course the performance of England teams. In 2021, England will host three Rugby League World Cups. It is a strategic aim of the organisation to win these three World Cups namely men's, women's and wheelchair. Therefore, the talent system that underpins the elite performance must create the appropriate challenging environment for players to develop. Some 'hot topics' are investigated in detail in Chapters 6, 7 and 8 to suggest how to optimise what happens within the talent pathway for the benefit of the elite end of the sport.

Super League (Europe) Ltd (SLE) is the overarching umbrella body of the 12 clubs that compete in the Super League, RL's premier competition. Their aim is to provide RL entertainment that creates spectators, broadcast and commercial income that can be re-invested into the member clubs to enable them to sustain progressive growth. SLE is a key player in RL's TID system since it funds and delivers much of the work via its clubs' academy structures.

A key stakeholder, and enabler for 44 NGBs is Sport England. Sport England is a National Sporting Organisation (NSO) that sustains participation levels and helps more

talented people from all diverse backgrounds excel. Sport England is the RFL's biggest customer as in essence, they pay NGBs to deliver against their agenda for both participation and talent. With this funding comes contractual conditions that are to be met on a 4-yearly basis. The implications of relatively short-term funding against long-term player development is re-visited throughout the thesis.

A key dependency of the talent and performance pathway is the community arm of RL. In England there are over 300 clubs with 102,000 registered participants from age 7 years onwards. Typically, the community game is arranged in regional leagues, the largest two of which serve the RL 'heartlands' of the North of England in Yorkshire and the North West. 'Heartlands' has been a phrase often used in RL to refer to the area of England where the game first began in 1895; the industrial towns within Yorkshire and Lancashire. To this day within these geographical areas, 75% of participants and 87.5% of the English professional clubs are domiciled.

Nationally, there are 25 community leagues that fall under the umbrella of RFL member leagues. These cover all variants of the game across all ages. These are described in Table 1-1.

Table 1-1. *Settings where RL is played in UK*

Category	Age (years)	Gender	Setting where played
Primary Rugby League	7–11	Mixed	Schools
			Community Clubs
Youth (full game)	12–18	Single sex	Schools
			Colleges
			Community Clubs
			Selective environments
Open-age (full game)	16+	Single sex	Universities

Category	Age (years)	Gender	Setting where played
Wheelchair RL	14+	Mixed	Community Clubs
			Professional Clubs
			Selective environments
			Community Clubs
			Selective environments
Masters RL	35+	Single sex	Community Clubs
Physical Disability RL	16+	Single sex	Community Clubs
Learning Disability RL	14+	Mixed	Community Clubs

NB. Selective environments refer to either professional club Academies and/or England representative teams at all levels.

## 1.2 My approach to this topic

As the Talent and Coaching lead for the RFL, I am motivated to be constantly pushing the boundaries of what can be achieved within this domain. In this position, I believe that I am in the middle of a complex network of relationships of NSOs, clubs, leagues and the aspirations of the RFL itself. Consequently, I want to be able to draw upon both theory and the empirical research of myself and others to be able to deliver findings that will contribute to TID for RL and also develop me as a practitioner in the field.

Clearly, in the field of TID, there is a large body of literature that can potentially be reviewed. A literature review is a broad base review across a subject area which demonstrates familiarity with the body of knowledge, summarises prior research and how this links to the work and demonstrates what can be learned from others as a start point for suggesting new ideas (Royal Literary Fund, 2019). Given the nature of my work, topic and interest, however, there was a need to develop a concise and focused piece which could be directly downloaded to interested parties and provide a clear picture. Accordingly, rather than complete a full

literature review, I searched for materials pertinent to improving what is happening in my current professional interests and fulfil my specific purpose.

Such materials are used throughout the thesis. In short, I critically reviewed papers which offered information *directly* pertinent to the theme of the thesis. For example, papers about talent development in dance were seen as less worthwhile, papers about talent development in football would be of more interest and papers concerning talent development in RL were highly relevant. Similarly, papers regarding talent development at age 5 years were not relevant, at age 10 years were of greater interest and (since RL is a late performance sport) age 14 years and over would be relevant. Another area of the literature base of relevant interest is that which makes comparisons of global sporting systems either across sports or within the same sport. In summary, my decision to provide a focused review, in effect a ‘desktop study’ was to best address the aims of reviewing relevant literature, driving the work towards my exact purpose and provide the basis of an ‘information source’ which could be distributed to interested stakeholders.

As befitting a vocational block of study (leading to a Professional Doctorate), the approach to this topic can be described as ‘pragmatic.’ A pragmatic approach can be defined as a study that “focuses on an individual decision maker within an actual real-world situation” (Salkind, 2010). This quote is a succinct summary of my position and reasons for wanting to carry out this research. Furthermore, Giacobbi, Poczwadowski and Hager (2005) suggest that pragmatic research is the best approach to close the gap between academic and applied research. For the purposes of this thesis, a pragmatic approach is advantageous and appropriate since the research “emphasises practical solutions to applied research questions and the consequences of inquiry” (Giacobbi et al, 2005, p. 19). This will be considered further in Chapter 2.

A personal aim for me in completing this thesis was to help RL inform its decision making based upon objective evidence. The research conducted in Chapters 6, 7 and 8 has impacted upon the work of the RFL, specifically within the talent pathway of our professional clubs. As a result of my own research, this has provided decision makers and practitioners (e.g. RFL and SLE boards, club management, coaches) information to promote change in systems and delivery that will ultimately raise standards. This has been done in the knowledge that the talent system is aiming to raise the standard of the Super League (i.e. the premier domestic competition) and improve the fortunes of the England team so that it has the depth of players to be able to win international series and the RL World Cup. This is emphasised in Figure 1.2.

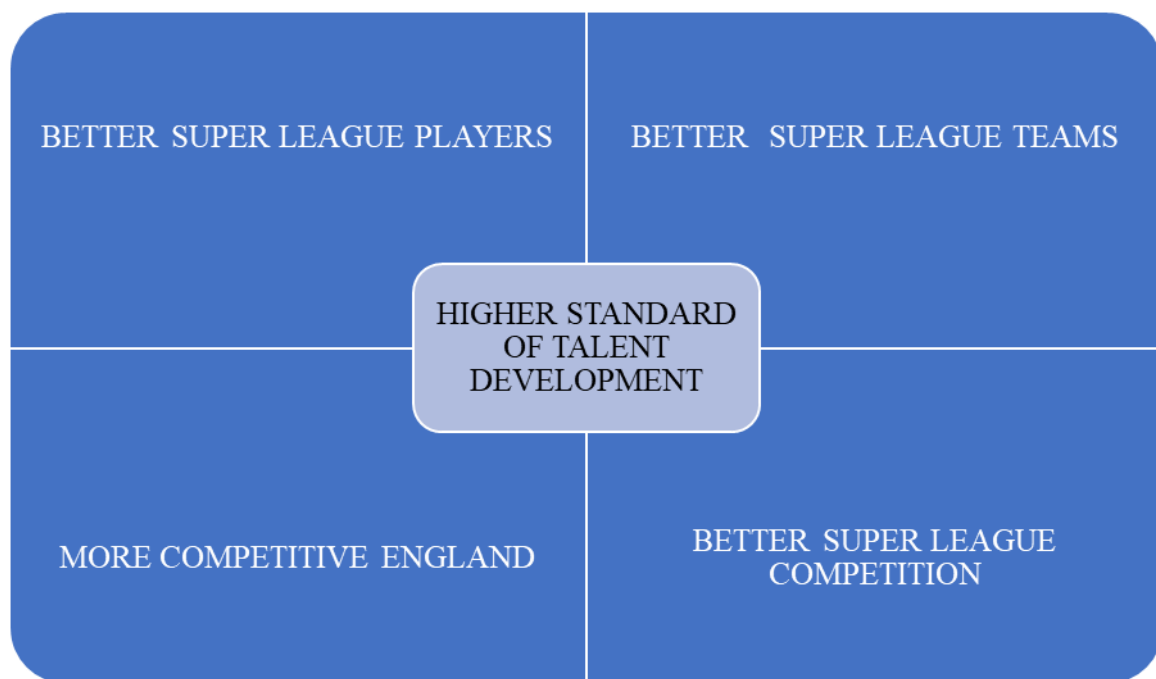


Figure 1-2. Higher standards of TD impacting on performance

### 1.3 Research Objectives

Research into TID has received some considerable attention in both academia (e.g. notable contributors such as Collins, Côté, Vaeyens) and mainstream media (e.g. Gladwell, Syed). Whilst RL is well represented in research, this is mainly from a physiological

perspective (e.g. works by Jones, Till, Twist, Gabbett). In contrast, too little RL specific research exists within other performance domains or disciplines.

Therefore, the aim of this thesis was to provide an overview of the current context that the TID system is working in within RL and to focus upon specific areas that could inform current practice and policy for the sport in order to reach the corporate goals of both the Super League and RFL. Consequently, the aim was captured via the following objectives:

1. To consider the wider social, financial and political context of TID within RL and to explore the consequential challenges faced.
2. To highlight common assumptions that have been made within the game over time and compare these to up to date TID research.
3. To investigate some current TD issues within the sport and suggest solutions to the problems we are trying to solve.

By meeting these objectives, the thesis is intended to contribute to the knowledge base within the sport and better inform policy decisions of RL. Of course, this *could* be also applicable to other sports. Importantly, however, my personal focus in this vocational doctorate was to impact of actions, behaviours and attitudes in my own sport of RL.

#### **1.4 Guiding the reader through the thesis**

This thesis consists of 10 Chapters which are instrumental in highlighting the journey so far of TID within RL and the future direction of travel against the backdrop of an ever changing political and financial landscape.

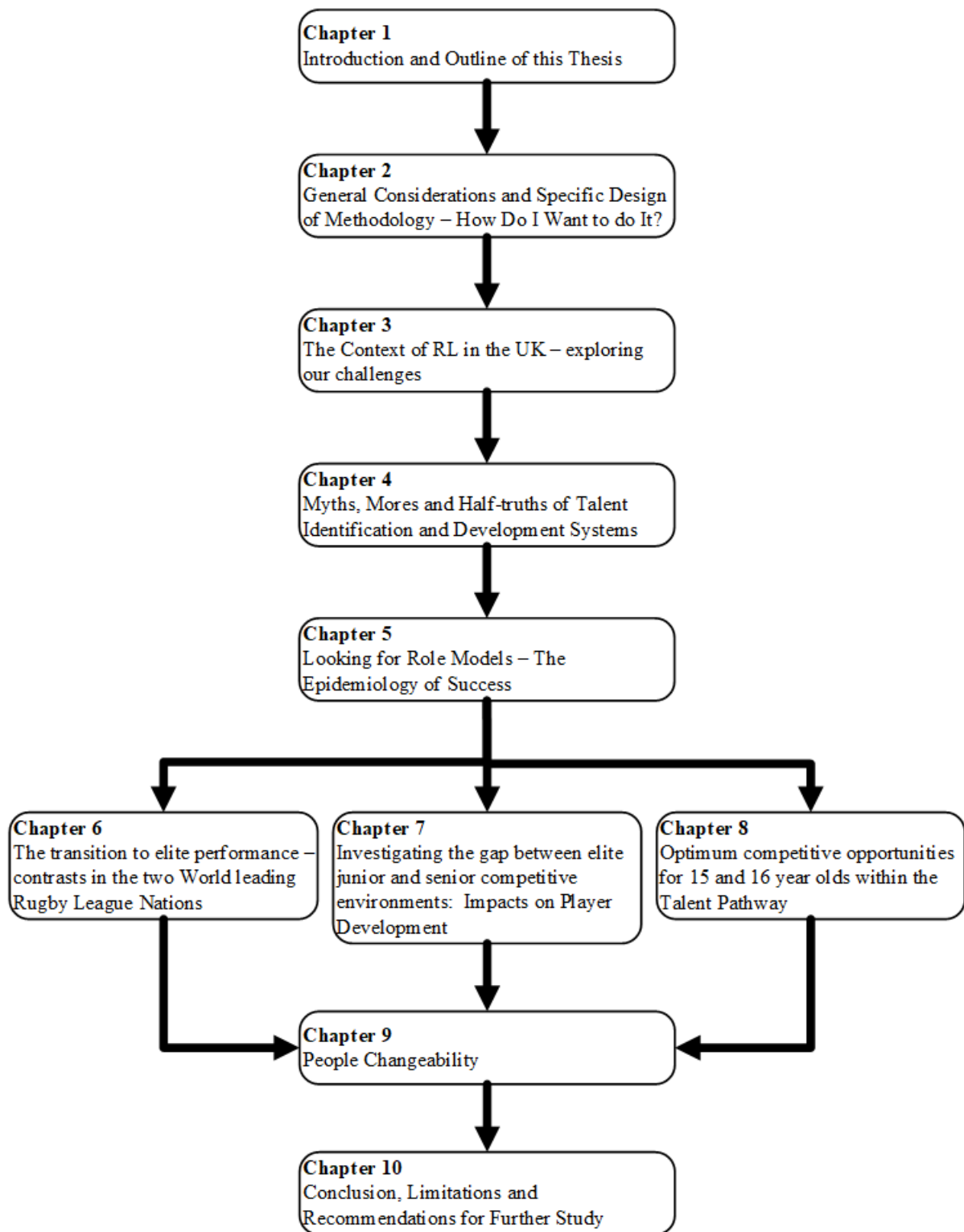


Figure 1-3. Flow of the Thesis



## **CHAPTER 2**

### **GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS AND SPECIFIC DESIGN OF METHODOLOGY –**

#### **HOW DID I WANT TO DO IT?**

##### **2.1 Introduction**

The purpose of this chapter is to outline the approach and methodological framework used to explore the aims and objectives highlighted in Chapter 1. I explore the options that are available and consider their strengths and weaknesses when applied to the field of TID. Finally, I outline the reasons underpinning selection of the chosen methods.

##### **2.2 What information did I need?**

Being immersed in the day to day evolution of a TID system, I was concerned with finding ‘new knowledge’ that could be transferred into our specific world of work in RL. Specifically, I wanted to focus upon the relationship between TID and the social milieu of different contexts and cultures that influence the process. Given that the aim of the TID system is to develop world class performers, characteristics leading to elite performance unfold during and after athlete’s time at the elite level (cf Bloom, 1985; Côté, Ericsson, & Law, 2005). Thus, it was important for me to investigate the views of key stakeholders and influencers within the process to find out what worked well, what could be improved and barriers to making progress.

Of relevance to this thesis was being able to research the effectiveness of the TID system in which athletes are being developed. Research with similar aims to this thesis into TID, particularly studies relating to psycho-behaviour and psycho-social factors associated with TID have been weighted towards a qualitative approach (e.g. Ogden & Edwards, 2016; Fletcher & Howells, 2015, 2016, Lund, 2017). This approach aims to understand the standpoint of stakeholders (e.g. coaches, athletes, system builders) and how they navigate any given TD system as they experience it (cf Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

## **2.3 Research methods for consideration**

### **2.3.1 Qualitative Methods**

In the context of this thesis, the qualitative approach has many strengths. A potential reason for choosing this approach was that in order to explain specific points, it provided ways in which to understand peoples experiences relative to the research question thus providing a rich description of participants' feelings, opinions, and experiences in each study (Denzin, 1989, Rahman, 2017). Importantly for this thesis, qualitative approaches would allow me to discover the participants' inner experience, and to figure out how meanings are shaped through, and in the culture of RL, and specifically TID (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). In short, the objectives of qualitative research are description, understanding and meaning (Jones, 2015).

Where disadvantages of qualitative research are concerned, small sample sizes relative to the stakeholder group could be considered limiting to generalisation of the messages, whilst data analysis can become more difficult and complex (Richards & Richards, 1994).

### **2.3.2 Quantitative research methods**

Quantitative research on the other hand “attempts to investigate the answers to the questions starting with how many, how much, to what extent” (Rasinger, 2013). Given that much of the data collected would be statistical in nature, “quantitative research focuses on those aspects of social behaviour which can be quantified and patterned rather than just finding out them and interpreting their meanings the people bring to their own action” (Rahman, 2017, p. 106). Quantitative research findings can be generalised to a specific group owing to its random selection (Carr, 1994). Quantitative research can also be less time-consuming owing to the fact that analysis of collected data can be done using software applications.

### **2.3.3 Mixed Methods research**

A mixed methods (MM) approach to research can be defined as “the combination of at least one qualitative and one quantitative component in a single research project” (Bergman, 2008 p. 1). As identified in Chapter 1, I wanted to provide information for stakeholders that would inform their practice. In this regard, Creswell and Clark (2007) stated “that the use of quantitative and qualitative approaches in combination provides a better understanding of research problems” (p. 5). Consequently, using a mixed methods approach may allow for a focus on “research questions that call for real-life contextual understanding” (Johnson, 2019 p. 136). MM research can deliver strong results (Nau, 1995). For example, qualitative data can be used to “support and explicate the meaning of quantitative research” (Jayaratne 1993, p.117).

### **2.3.4 Determining the methods**

Jones (2015), points to there being “no one better approach” (p. 26). Consequently, I must select the research method that best links to and is appropriate for the research question.

For my thesis, using a mixed methods approach allowed an in-depth, rich investigation of stakeholder perception of current issues within RL. Accordingly, I considered that the aims of this thesis would be best addressed by a mixed methods design.

### **2.3.5 Collecting Data**

With regard to the aims of the thesis, semi-structured interviews were selected as one method of data collection since “they provide a flexible but structured method of obtaining a rich set of data for analysis” (Peesker, Ryals, Rich & Boehnke, 2019 p. 322). This method of research aims to gain a deeper understanding from participants about their perception of the topic being investigated. “This encourages the interviewee to share rich descriptions of phenomena while leaving the interpretation or analysis to the investigator” (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006, p. 314).

One drawback to such qualitative data collection may be the relatively small sample size. However, my professional relationship within the participants used mitigated this risk. I was able to elicit the views of a high percentage of decision makers in RL; in short, despite the small numbers involved, my sample was genuinely representative and impactful. It was almost a case of ‘who else could I have asked’. What was evident, however, was that analysis of the data was an incredibly time-consuming feat and thus could be considered a drawback.

Therefore, interview guides for each study (Chapters 4, 5, 6, 7 & 8) were developed to explore issues and findings relevant to this thesis, but also reflecting the present political climate of the sport. Similarities can be drawn from other relevant studies that have investigated similar research questions about Talent Pathways and environments. Two such studies emanate from ice hockey (Ogden & Edwards, 2016; Stambulova, Perhson & Olsson, 2017) which were qualitative in their approach.

For each interview, pilots were conducted with a suitably experienced member of RFL staff. These pilot interviews confirmed the interview schedules to be appropriate in each case. Each question was open ended which allowed personalised responses. Probes and stimuli were used to be able to gain a deeper response and to clarify any key points. For example, open ended questions were used initially which could then be followed up with probes such as “how” and “why” (Creswell & Clark, 2007). These provided the opportunity “to gain an account of the values and experiences of the respondents in terms meaningful to them” (Stephens, 2010 p. 4).

Group interviews were also used on three occasions (Chapters 5, 6 & 7). Multiple participants took part in the interviews, sharing their knowledge and experience of the subject in question. (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Group interviews were used because of time factors (e.g. limited time with two groups of players in Australia) and me being able to gain buy in from a key group of stakeholders (Netball Talent Leaders, Chapter 4 & Heads of Youth

Performance, Chapter 7). Where these HOYP's are concerned, performing a group interview meant that they believed their views on a very topical matter important to them were being heard, and potentially acted upon. Their responses to questions provided probes and stimulus to each other. This supports the assertion that group interviews are "more effective than individual interview collections. The synergies and interaction elements between group members are useful for drawing in-depth opinions" (Chang, Sohng, Kim, Won, Choi & Chaung, 2019 p. 211).

In person and telephone interviews were also used. Whilst telephone interviews were first used in quantitative research, with technological advances (quality and cost factors) telephone interviews are being used more in qualitative research (Given, 2008, Opdenakker, 2006). There is concern that telephone and face to face interviews may yield different results. However, research into these interview styles indicate that there are no significant differences between the two approaches (Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004; Shuy, 2001). Indeed, there are advantages to telephone interviewing namely better uniformity in interviewer delivery and a greater standardisation of questions (Shuy, 2011).

A possible disadvantage to telephone interviews may be that it is harder for interviewers to probe deeper and elicit more thoughtful answers. Also, since some of the issues being explored are complex, face to face interviewing is better suited to over the phone when handling complex issues (Shuy, 2011). Due to synchronous communication of face to face interviews, they can take advantage of social cues. "Social cues, such as voice, intonation, body language etc. of the interviewee can give the interviewer a lot of extra information that can be added to the verbal answer of the interviewee on a question" (Opdenakker, 2006 p. 4). In the present thesis, however, I felt that my familiarity (with the topics, individuals and possible initiatives/remedies) were a counter to these concerns. Indeed, given that I had known most of the UK-based participants and protagonists for much of my professional life, it felt an almost

positive move to avoid the greater potential for ‘confrontation’ which may have occurred from face to face interviews. In short, I am happy that our joint commitment and relationships, coupled with the methods used for ensuring member reflection, were a good decision in this respect.

### **2.3.5.1 Single versus multiple methodologies**

A drawback of using solely quantitative research, and the main reason why I rejected it was that this type of research often does not take place in natural settings. In addition, it did not allow participants to explain their choices or the meaning of the questions may have for those participants (Carr, 1994). In simple terms, their responses would have lacked the depth and richness essential to the level of understanding my topic required.

However, quantitative approaches were used in Chapter 6, where the fully validated Talent Development Environment Questionnaire (TDEQ) was used. Other quantitative data was obtained to highlight some contextual points in relation to participant numbers (Chapters 3, 4, 6 & 7) and the impact of the relative age effect (Chapters 5 & 6).

Choosing a MM approach gave an understanding of underlying reasons, opinions, and motivations. It provided insights for example how results from one method informed the other thus enabling to expand the breadth of enquiry.

## **2.4 Summary**

With the focus of the research being how RL overcomes some of its challenges in the field of TID, this chapter has identified the most appropriate research methods and the reasons why they have been deployed. These decisions were made owing to my aim of providing meaningful knowledge back into RL so that we can bring about positive change that will improve talent and performance environments.

Considering the aim of the thesis and the pragmatic philosophy I wanted to take, a mixed methods approach was deemed as the most appropriate strategy to meet the aims of the thesis.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **THE CONTEXT OF RL IN THE UK – EXPLORING OUR CHALLENGES**

#### **3.1 The Sporting Landscape of TID in RL**

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a context against which the thesis outputs can be positioned and evaluated. Indeed, when I have worked with coaches in a RL talent setting and inquired about the influences upon how talent is developed, they invariably respond with such comments as:

- NGB policy
- Funder's (e.g. Sport England/Super League) expectations
- New ideas and trends, whether generated by academic investigation, transfer from another sport or through central direction
- Your geographic location and social environment
- Beliefs based on previous success and failure
- What your major competitors are doing

Over time, these influences have originated and continued from many different sources according to the social, financial, political, sporting and epistemological perspectives apparent. Reflecting upon these issues, I now consider birthplace effect and social influence, funding, internal RL stakeholders and academe, offering an overview of pertinent literature and constructs and their implications for RL practice.

##### **3.1.1 Birthplace Effect and Social Environment**

One contextual factor that can influence TID is known as the 'birthplace effect'. The idea is that where you are born and raised "can contribute to the attainment of sporting expertise" (McDonald, Cheung, Côté, & Abernethy, 2009, p. 81). The majority of contemporary Rugby League activity is based in the north of England, and predominantly in the counties of Lancashire and Yorkshire. From its origins in 1895, the "Northern Union



heartlands were regions that had been built on the industrial powerhouses of the Victorian era: coal and textiles in Lancashire and West Yorkshire, shipbuilding in Barrow, docks in Hull, chemicals in Widnes and glass manufacture in the St Helens and the Wakefield area” (Collins, 2006, p. 1). As such, even to this day RL has remained contained to these working class and industrial regions and, therefore, socialisation within the sport and wider society often go hand in hand.

With such strong traditions of the sport in these communities, there is an inevitably strong influence on the source of talent, matching the traditional flow towards Rugby Union in Wales and New Zealand, or to football in Brazil. For example, of the 2015 England squad, 79% were born in towns or cities in the north of England with a population of 160,000 or less (ONS, 2011). This proximity ensures that players are within easy reach of the RL club network and where there are a large number of both primary and secondary schools with RL playing opportunities.

This is comparable to USA sports where smaller cities provide “young athletes with greater accessibility to infrastructure and more opportunities for spontaneous play” (MacDonald et al, 2009, p. 85). Indeed, several researchers (e.g. Bahish & Côté, 2014; McDonald et al., 2009) identified the nature of such close communities as being an important factor in the efficacy of a Talent Development Environment (TDE). Accordingly, selection of role models to drive the optimisation of English RL processes may beneficially focus on socio-psychologically similar environments. Good practice may be apparent in certain football or Rugby Union academies for example. However, transfer from these exemplars *may* be less effective unless the physical or social setting in which something occurs or develops is carefully and critically considered. ‘Role models’ are considered in this context as both TDE’s where we can draw support and guidance and also that of elite players who in RL, are seen as positive role models within their local community.

Reflecting the above comments, the social milieu plays a significant role in determining how theory and practice are applied to specific settings. This is particularly pertinent in the field of TID in RL owing to the nature of the communities that the sport traditionally, and currently, serves. Former MEP Terry Wynn (1999) stated that “Rugby League is more than a sport ... for those in its heartland in the north of England it is a cultural identity, a passion, a way of life. Its history is one of determination to succeed against the establishment, to fight discrimination and intolerance and to be an honest sport” (cited in Collins, 2006, p. 188). The sport of RL was born out of the principle “of equal opportunity for all - that everyone should be allowed to play rugby to the highest level of their ability, regardless of their school, their status or their social background” (Collins, 2015, p. 108). Over 100 years later these very principles are the heart of Sport England’s talent objectives of inclusion, integration and progression (Sport England, 2014). Indeed, the 2021 RL World Cup will feature women’s and wheelchair competitions which demonstrates the inclusiveness of the sport.

### **3.1.2 Governmental influence – Funding and the wider national sporting agenda for talent and participation**

In the absence of significant independent funding (cf. Premier League and the Elite Player Performance Plan, 2011), sports such as RL are largely dependent on Government funding. For my own NGB and others, Sport England has taken responsibility to assist in the funding of TID for 44 NGBs of sport throughout England. Over a 4-year cycle (2013–2017) Sport England invested up to £100 m in the ‘talent’ domain with circa £1 m per annum being invested in RL. This investment has enabled the delivery of thriving programmes that has enabled the progression of athletes to upper tiers of the pathway.

Notably, however, the central influence of government extends beyond funding, with policy decisions, setting the sporting landscape and other factors also playing a significant role. As one example, consider the influence exerted by government through policy. In the summer

of 2015, the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) embarked upon a consultation towards a new sports strategy for the UK. Despite the many successes of the 2012 London Olympics, Weed et al. (2015) claimed that the Active People Survey (post 2012) showed “that London 2012 has neither been successful in attracting new participants to sport, nor in increasing sport participation frequency” (p. 220). This has prompted DCMS to look at sport through a different lens to ensure that “sport is designed to meet the demands of consumers, who each have different motivations and engage with sport in different ways” (Crouch, cited in DCMS, 2015, p. 4). Similar insights were gained in 2014 by Sport England. Their report clearly demonstrated that children’s participation in sport was changing compared with previous generations. The technological age is now dominating teenagers’ lives—on average only 6 hours a week are spent playing sport (Sport England, 2014, p. 10). A 2019 publication by the World Health Organisation (WHO) (published in *The Lancet Child and Adolescent Health*) revealed that “the majority of adolescents do not meet current physical activity guidelines.” This was also expanded upon by one of the authors of the report who stated that “the electronic revolution has encouraged teenagers to sit down more, they tend to do more digital than active play” (Riley, 2019, cited in <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/global-health/climate-and-people/four-five-teenagers-not-enough-exercise-says-blame-electronic/>). Where the UK is concerned according to WHO guidelines, 75% of boys and 85% of girls do not get enough physical activity. This does not necessarily need to be organised team sports but refers to physical activity. In other words, children are choosing activities other than sport to participate in during their leisure time.

Inevitably these changes will impact RL as a whole due to a reduced pool of potentially interested participants. Data trends suggest that team sport participation generally remained unchanged for a number of years whereas mass participant activities (e.g. gym membership, Park Run, Tough Mudder) are increasing; perhaps representing a stronger motivational drive

for the benefits of exercise instead of sport, or simply the experiential side of participation. Reasons cited by current reports as negative for sport participation are prevalent in RL in that it “is too structured, competitive or serious” (Sport England, 2014, p. 21). Given that growth in participation has not changed and concerns exist about the general health of the nation then “a new approach is needed that reflects the social, financial, attitudinal and technological realities of the time” (DCMS, 2015, p. 6).

Whether these contentions are accurate or not, they certainly represent the distillation of current government thinking. Therefore, for me as the talent lead of a sporting NGB, it is of great importance that I understand the political sporting landscape so that we can remain agile enough to respond to the ever-changing sporting world. It is also very important to be able to keep our sporting stakeholders (both internal and external) informed of such developments so that they too, can understand and fulfil their place and role in driving the development of our sport.

As stated earlier, sports in the UK are largely funded in 4-year cycles. Whilst this funding is much needed to deliver the RL talent plan, there are clear issues with the design of any longer-term initiative (such as focusing on players who graduate through a talent system) which is evaluated on a series of short-term achievements. Furthermore, are these objectives and annual targets necessarily the ‘right’ thing for each individual sport? Does a broad-brush approach actually contribute to the creation of optimum TDEs for each sports circumstance? In RL, we are measured annually on progress towards a 4-year target (see Appendix A). These measures largely relate to the quantity of athletes that are accessing programmes or achieving certain scores in performance profile measures. This type of measure is difficult to quantify for two reasons; talent does not develop on a linear trajectory (cf. Martindale, Collins & Daubney, 2005; Phillips, Davids, Renshaw & Portus, 2010) and measuring the developmental process in team sports is much more difficult than some individual centimetres, grammes and

seconds (CGS) sports where discreet measures of time and distance are more easily observed (Vayens, Lenoir, Williams & Phillippaerts, 2008).

What we *can* do is to use data trends as a demonstration that we are on track in the pursuit of continuous improvement toward elite level performance. For example, England is

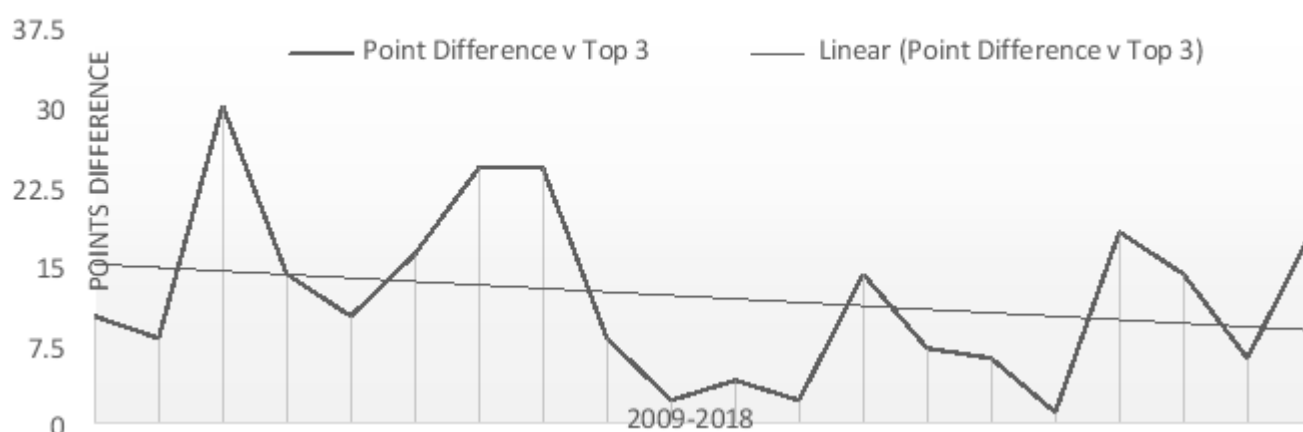


Figure 3-1. Points differential, England versus Australia and New Zealand 2009–18

currently ranked number 2 in World Rugby League (as of December 2018). Strategically, the NGB had a recent goal of winning the World Cup in 2017. Whilst the development of players is a long-term process, what we *are* able to show is that England’s performance at the elite level, based on points differential, is closing the gap on major competitors.

This finding could provide confidence to Sport England that the team performance is closing the gap, thanks in part to the talent system that currently exists. The England squad at the 2017 World Cup contained 62.5% of players that had progressed from Talent Development programmes (i.e. club Academies, England Youth, Academy, Knights) since 2010. In short, things are improving, and data supports it!

Importantly, however, performance improvement is only one of the factors used by government to distribute funding. In order to access and retain this funding, NGBs must comply with the conditions laid down by Sport England (2014). Their three objectives for talent were:

**Progression** – higher quality athletes to each tier

**Integration** – with community and education sport

**Inclusion** – young people can access a TDE regardless of circumstance

These points will be discussed in greater detail in Section 3.2 since, to evidence and make best use of these objectives, the socio-political climate of the sport must be considered. However, at present, Sport England acknowledged RL as rating highly in its talent system ‘Key Elements Review’ (2016) where we were judged against these three objectives (see Appendix B).

### **3.1.3 Influence of Academic Research and Higher Education Institutions**

NGBs of sport and professional clubs often turn to Academics for advice and services. This comes in many forms and, as both a coach and Talent Development practitioner, I have been involved with academe on several levels: These include:

- Knowledge Transfer Partnership (KTP)
- Academic research literature
- Coaching qualifications at all levels of UK Coaching Certificate
- Impact studies of specific interventions
- Research projects
- Specialist services
- Facility and specialist equipment usage
- Consultancy advice

I next present two examples from this list of ways in which academic influence has been applied to the RL talent pathway. The first is an initiative which I led for 2 years (2014–2016), the KTP. A KTP is a relationship between a business and a Higher Education Institution in order to “improve competitiveness, productivity and performance by tapping into the knowledge in UK Universities” (Technology Strategy Board, 2011, p. 1). Based on this objective, I saw specific advantages for the RL in developing a KTP to focus on aspects of TD.

In order to develop elite athletes, it is important to understand that “athletic talent consists of a complex mixture of physical, psychological, and cognitive abilities, skills and dispositions that interact in unique and complex ways” (Gould & Cowburn, 2011, p. 4); in fact, taking this definition further, contemporary models of talent development understand this interactive process as biological (including physical), psychological and sociological in nature (Bailey et al., 2010). Therefore, a broad range of “competencies is required for coaches to perform their role effectively” (Santos et al., 2010, p. 63). Accordingly, in 2013, the RFL recognised a gap in its knowledge in the field of sports psychology. A KTP was successfully applied for with the aim of providing bespoke solutions for the sport on integrating mental skills coaching to the RL Academies for talented athletes aged 16–19 years. By aiding the ‘all round’ performance of these athletes, we felt that this would contribute to the strategic targets of the sport (as previously described).

The presence of the KTP allowed a dedicated member of staff (a KTP associate) to be present in the organisation and who has researched the business problem to be solved and set about implementing strategies and solutions to improve the delivery of mental skills to talented athletes. The work was supported through a university department that has considerable international expertise in the domain. This has enabled a clear transfer of knowledge to both the RFL and its key stakeholders (i.e. club Academies) responsible for developing talent for the sport. The initiation and completion of the KTP were an important part of my work in the area described in this thesis. Accordingly, a copy of the final report is included as Appendix C.

However, at least so far, the full impact made by this KTP initiative remains unclear. The use of the newly created knowledge will be dependent upon how effective TDE leaders and coaches are able to apply the theories and concepts to their own specific environment. The concepts presented to them were adapted from the psychological characteristics for developing

excellence (MacNamara, Button & Collins, 2010). The importance of psychological characteristics as positive precursors of talent development is acknowledged in literature (McNamara, 2015). This is coupled with a strong evidence base suggesting that positive interventions to develop these psychological characteristics for developing excellence (PCDE's), are central to high functioning TDE's (e.g. Elferink-Gemser & Visscher, 2012; McCarthy & Collins, 2014).

Each environment (e.g. RL club) is uniquely different in its mission, philosophy, values and beliefs. However, we do know from research (e.g. Adamoulas, 2014) that elite coaches do consider the presence of mental skills as a hugely important pre-requisite for elite performance. As such, even though the KTP period has ceased, there still remains much potential for this work to be integrated across the pathway resulting from its relevance, it may simply need to be packaged and sold in a more digestible way to coaches.

It is worth considering the way in which this knowledge will be applied, evaluated and refined, since this provides an exemplar of how 'academic knowledge' may best be employed. The key driver for the KTP was to be able to instil a mental skills 'package' that fitted into the social milieu of the particular club setting. Of course, as highlighted by the various factors discussed in this chapter, implementing this is far from straight forward. "A coach arrives at any learning opportunity with a pre-existing set of epistemological beliefs, attitudes and dispositions that have been, and continue to be, tempered by their experiences and interactions with their social milieu" (Dodds, 1994, p. 153). Therefore, in the sporting context of Rugby League we must firstly bring to life the importance of this field of sports science and set about influencing coaches to at least modify their beliefs so that their practice is influenced to such an extent that they meet the full needs of the developing athletes in their charge. This idea of 'resistance to change' is an important factor in improvement, and I will return to this several times throughout the thesis. This stance is supported by the work of Martindale and Nash



(2013), who noted that despite coaches recognising the important interaction of sports science disciplines, they were not fully aware of how to best integrate this into their practices.

A second example in which Rugby League has been influenced by academic research is the move away from the Standard Model of Talent Development (SMTD; Bailey & Collins, 2013). A move away from SMTD was implemented in 2013 due to RL being a late maturation sport and many potentially talented athletes were being de-selected at an early stage due to “the over-reliance on early (de)selection policies common in TID programmes” (Till, Cobley, Morley, O’Hara, Chapman & Cooke, 2015, p. 1244). For these reasons, it was felt that investing huge amounts of money at the base of the pathway was not providing a ‘return on investment’. These are both important examples as it represents a distinct and substantial change to existing practice. It also provides an example of the apparent disconnect between theory and practice highlighted in Chapter 4, and the impact that this is having upon TID.

The SMTD is based on a pyramid structure; the idea is that a wider base of more participants will enable a higher peak. In simple terms, were RL to get more players at the base level, this would ‘automatically’ result in greater international success. The model has been, and indeed still is, the main driver for the major North American team sports (e.g. American Football). For decades, RL employed a standard model to the identification and development of talent. There are several plausible reasons as to why these were employed, whether it be tradition, ease of organisation or that the processes were considered to be correct and allowed for the optimum development of athletes.

The SMTD is focused “solely on progressing those identified as talented, and not on the wider group of participants, even though these may meet the necessary standards later” (Bailey & Collins, 2013, p. 249). This is where the academic research has influenced Rugby League’s approach to talent development in recent years by questioning the validity and appropriateness of early selection. This approach may serve to de-motivate young players as

they could perceive themselves as not good enough if not selected early and may leave the sport despite there being many opportunities to re-enter the talent pathway at a later date or simply enjoy playing the game.

Rugby League has set about challenging the notion of the SMTD. In doing so, representative teams (i.e. Town, County and Regional) have ceased below the age of 16 years as part of the recognised talent pathway. The intention for talent at the adolescent ages of 12–14 years is to widen the base so that more athletes access a talent environment, thus allowing them to demonstrate and develop their talents more often. This approach has had some implementation challenges in that some deeply held assumptions about TID have needed to be (and continue to be so) overcome. A programme of youth coach education and the devising of a talent curriculum and profiling system has been researched and developed with the aid of academics applying theory to our specific sporting needs. Crucially, however, such reform necessitates a two-way relationship in which both educators and coaches must be susceptible and willing to change (Collins, Abraham & Collins, 2012).

By adopting this approach, the sport has attempted to alleviate some of the issues that a SMTD has put in place and is proving detrimental to both participation and optimal talent development. These issues include:

- Large numbers of children de-selected at an early stage
- Once de-selected it is difficult to get back into the ‘pathway’
- Early success regarded as a pre-requisite for future elite performance

In implementing this approach, we as the NGB have found that there is some resistance from Club Academies to this new way of thinking. Given the infancy of our programme, there is little evidence for us to show that this approach is actually working as assessed by producing greater numbers of more talented players. Previously, the SMTD was perceived (at face value) to be ‘working’ in that there was “no way of knowing who might have succeeded through

different systems, and who were de-selected from the system but might have (under different circumstances) gone on to achieve high performance” (Bailey & Collins, 2013. p 249). However, our data does tell us that players do emerge at the higher echelons of the sport who were ‘missed’ as juniors.

Further evidence by Bailey and Collins (2013) reveals that the SMTD is somewhat undermined and provides support (when coupled with evidence from RL) for an alternative approach which are emphasised in the points below.

1. Extremely talented adults rarely start out identified as highly able children (Abbott, Collins, Martindale et al., 2002; Bloom, 1985). For instance, in a RL context 29% of the (2017) England World Cup squad did not graduate through a recognised talent pathway as juniors.
2. A large proportion of those identified as protégés fail to realise their early promise (Bailey & Morley, 2006). Again, this is evident in Rugby League where a large proportion of players identified as talented (aged between 12–16 years) are from quartile 1 and 2 (i.e. born in the first half of the chronological age group cohort). However, at professional and international level, this relative age effect is negligible (McCarthy & Collins, 2014).

In summary, several aspects of the impact of research on practice need to be considered. Firstly, the change in approach which such ideas can bring – for example the abandoning of the SMTD. Secondly, how effective relationships with academe can generate positive change. Finally, that designing and then fine-tuning ideas to make them (and ‘sell’ as) bespoke to the particular context can carry significant benefits. I will return to these important principles in future chapters when considering how best to apply my own research for effective change.

### **3.1.4 Influence of Key Internal Sporting Stakeholders**

For a variety of reasons, cultural, financial and political, key stakeholders play an enormous role in driving how TID is enacted in sports such as RL. 1996 saw the introduction of the Super League as a new professional era for the sport by moving to a summer season and attracting significant investment from broadcast rights, thus elevating, almost overnight, the sport into full-time professionalism. Over the last 20 years, this competition has seen various conditions applied, the most significant of which was a period of 6 years where clubs were licensed, and the league was immune to promotion and relegation. Consequently, what licencing gave us was a period of time where clubs were required to evidence that they met the 'licence requirements' for Super league membership. One of these criteria was that a club needed to have an 'accredited Academy'. What this did was provide the RFL Performance department the opportunity to set some minimum standards of expectation for an optimum Academy talent development environment (TDE).

The Super League, although administered in part through the RFL, is a limited company, Super League (Europe) Ltd. Therefore, all income derived from broadcast and commercial interests is the property of the Super League shareholders (i.e. the member clubs) and not the RFL as the sport's Governing Body. Accordingly, elite athletes and the Academies from which they emerge are effectively controlled by the clubs themselves and not the NGB. This is different to some other professional sports, cricket or rugby union for example, where the majority of finance that contributes to the professionalisation of the sport is generated by the NGB and distributed to its constituents with some very strict conditions that allows the international game to have full access to the elite players. In this respect, RL is closest in structure to Association Football, although the differences in resources are clearly very different indeed, especially at the premiership level. These similarities and differences do mean that RL needs to be careful what lessons it learns and from whom. For example, there would

be little sense to the implementing of a complex system such as the Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP) in RL, unless there was also a sudden change in the funding available! To achieve this within football, there are multi million-pound investments into football academies and the quality assurance mechanism. In RL, the total academy budget across the sport will be circa £3m, making a similar arrangement affordably out of reach.

The central to club distribution model is clearly not applicable in RL since it is the clubs themselves via Super League (Europe) Ltd, that generate the income. Consequently, the NGB does not fully control the elite players nor the developmental pathway. At elite international level, the England programme will only gain access to players at the end of the season in a 5-week window. The significance of this will be further investigated in Chapter 6.

Where the development of talent is concerned, the major professional team sports in the United Kingdom invest considerable human and financial resources in their Academies. These are player development programmes operated by professional sporting organisations that have the function of searching for, recruiting and developing talent with the ultimate aim to support the first team manager/head coach and provide players for the first team squad. For developing players “the notion of professionalism is introduced through the Academy system. In this environment, relationships with significant stakeholders such as Academy directors, coaches, Heads of Education and Welfare (HoEWs) and sports psychologists may mediate players’ developmental experiences” (Richardson, Gilbourne & Littlewood, 2004, p. 195). This environment will aid the transition from age-banded to senior football.

Collectively, Super League (Europe) Ltd commits over £3 million towards TID via Academies in order to provide a supply of players for the Super League competition. It is of vital importance that these Academies are constantly striving for continuous improvement as a driver for change. It follows that, if the standard of Academies improves, then this will ultimately create better Super League teams, thus resulting in an improved Super League

competition. Therefore, as a result of a better product on the field, a club, as an organisation in the business of sporting entertainment, will ultimately experience greater success with the benefit of generating greater profits for its shareholders.

As described earlier, however, there is a lack of significant financial resource to support TID systems. In 2013, RL underwent a ‘policy review’ of its developmental procedures. One of the main drivers from Super League (Europe) was to seek a greater return on investment (ROI). Initial proposals for Academy reform suggested that fewer, higher quality Academy programmes were needed. The CEOs review stated that “the level of waste currently experienced at Academy level demands that fewer, but better Academies are supported” (RFL, 2013, p. 4). This change would have been a very good political solution owing to the falling numbers of participants in the community game, meaning that less players would be elevated to professional club Academies, thus preserving numbers in community clubs. However, this was rejected in favour of all clubs having the right to retain their Academy systems and a major implication was that already sparse resources needed to be spread even more thinly. Of note here is that in 2017, Huddersfield Town FC, on its promotion to the Premier League, decided to down-grade its Academy and focus upon players aged 18–23 years. In justifying its decision, the Huddersfield Town club chairman stated that “our Academy system must provide a strong and obvious pathway to the First Team for players who are good enough, whilst also representing value for the Club. Upon review, this is not something that we could claim” (Hoyle, 2017).

In fact, although the clubs did agree to all being able to retain an Academy programme, these have been subsequently differentiated according to their ability to deliver and based on geographic location, being of strategic significance to the sport. Academies are also financially incentivised for their contribution to the player supply at different stages of the pathway. This is done in the belief that by incentivising the production of players who possess the necessary

skills and potential to develop further, a better ROI will be realised. In simple terms, however, these represent compromises which, based on political realities, have still served to limit progress.

### **3.1.5 The Academy System in Rugby League**

The term ‘Academy’ is used extensively in British team sports. As the word Academy implies, club academies are *learning* environments that identify and develop talented athletes to be able to compete to a “world class standard” (RFU), “produce football excellence” (FA) and provide a “modern Rugby League education” (RFL).

RL academies are concerned with detecting, selecting and developing talent, starting from 12 years old. The ethos at the start of the TID programme (12–14 years) is upon appropriate development and not short-term success. The removal of selective environments has been replaced by an extensive coach development programme targeting coaches in community clubs and schools and educating them on sound evidence based TID principles. (cf. Martindale & Collins, 2005). These sound principles are complemented with a ‘talent curriculum’ where coaches and players are made more aware of what is required across performance domains if one is to progress further. This approach widens the talent base and increases the number of players that are accessing more relevant ‘talent’ coaching and reducing the risk “of unwittingly excluding performers with great potential but who have yet to demonstrate their skill capabilities due to maturational or other influences” (Farrow, 2012, p. 53).

Once selected into the Academy at age 15 years, the programme has approximately 5 years to develop players who will make the transition to senior RL. Most Academies are well equipped to provide programmes of a high standard. In 2015, 10 of the 14 Academies were independently rated against a set criterion as good or outstanding in their delivery. These criteria were leadership and management, programme delivery, how the needs of the players

were being met and the achievements of the system. Whilst this follows a somewhat ‘OFSTED’ framework, it does align to the Martindale, Collins and Daunbey (2005) model of the characteristics of a TDE. However, the production of most players for the Super League appears to be coming from six of the Academies.

These six Academies have two things in common. Firstly, they have a strong culture and a philosophy of developing players. Secondly, they also invest considerable extra finance in supporting the work of the academy. A function of the academy is to be the cornerstone of creating multiple teams for the long-term viability and success of its club. There has always been a strong correlation between success and home-grown players in the first team. The two most successful clubs of the Super League era (1996 to present) are Leeds Rhinos and St Helens. Of their match day squad of 17, these two clubs have averaged at least 10 home-grown players per game since 2006.

It has been well documented that “strong organisational cultures are vital to long-term corporate success” (Schroder, 2010, p. 99). Therefore, in a professional team sporting context (where there are regular changes in players and coaches) it is the task of the club management to “institutionalise the organisation’s method of operating so that success can be sustained even in the face of constant turnover of personnel” (Bolchover & Brady, 2002, p. 139). Whilst we acknowledge that clubs will have their own culture and philosophy in the way they do things, there does need to be a baseline of stakeholder coherence as a scaffold on which the system will operate. This was highlighted by Pankhurst, Collins and MacNamara (2012) where they found that key tennis stakeholders, namely coaches, NGB and parents failed to agree on adhering to sound TID principles and showed a lack of understanding about the role each one played in the process.

As a consequence of this, Academies are now financially rewarded for the production of players at various levels of the talent pathway. This was decided by the clubs themselves in



a realisation that some clubs displayed strong philosophies toward TID and provided a quality player supply for themselves and others.

Several messages should be taken from the current state of play in RL academies. For example, the need for adequate resources and high levels of organisational commitment and coherence are clear. In addition, academies seem to work best when there is a clear and achievable exit route for their ‘graduates’. The lack of such outcomes has been noted as a significant limiter in other sports, with the Chelsea football Academy, although very successful at youth level (at the time of writing, winners in seven out of the last ten FA Youth Cups) singled out due to the almost complete absence of home-grown players in the first team. Many high-profile young soccer players are now moving abroad due to lack of opportunity in Premier League clubs. It is true to say that many graduates play for other clubs, but the lack of progression represents, at best, a hiccup in player progression with consequent loss of motivation at crucial stages (see also Webb, Collins & Cruickshank, 2016). I return to this issue later when the important ‘bridging role’ of age group and reserve teams is considered.

### **3.2 ‘Prequel’ influences on TID**

As with all sports, we are challenged with falling numbers of participants and a potentially shrinking talent pool. In 2014, Rugby League’s ‘active people survey’ (used by Sport England to measure the number of adults taking part in sport in England) indicated a drop in its number of participants resulting in some Sport England funding (of the 2013–2017 cycle) being withheld. We know from registration data that there is a drop off in participants post age 14 (Figure 3.2).

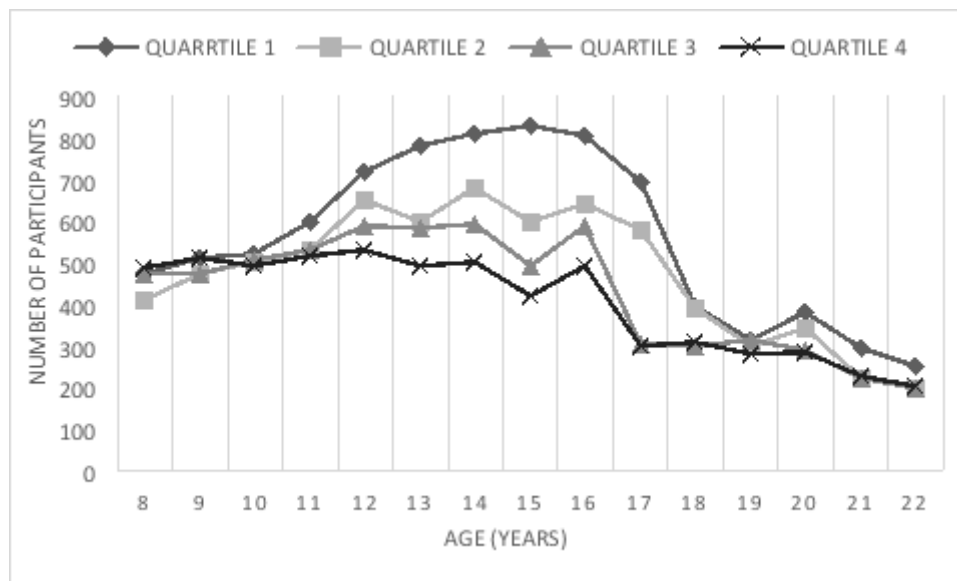


Figure 3-2. Participants in Rugby League age 8 to 22 years (2015)

In the words of the RFL CEO (2013) “a central tenet of the ‘whole game approach’ is the interdependency of every aspect of the sport.” Professional clubs have for decades searched for and recruited players from the community game. However, shrinking numbers of participants in community clubs leave them vulnerable when boys are taken out by professional Academies from the age of 15. The question arises as to what prompted the comment regarding shrinking numbers? Let us investigate further.

As the talent lead of the NGB, it is reasonable to say that the talent development pathways are a ‘customer’ of the community and education arm of the sport. In 2016 we won praise from Sport England for our ability to show an integrated approach to our pathway (i.e. at the base of the pathway we are connected to community and school sport). The delivery of a talent and participation development model is achieved through a set of principles that are a ‘scaffold’ on which it is built. Two such examples are the Long Term Athlete Development model (Byali & Hamilton, 2004) and Developmental Model of Sports Participation (Côté, 2007). The philosophy on which models are built must be player focused, coach enhanced and environment supported.

**Player Focused** - The primary driver in the decision making and planning of programmes. All programmes will work with players to identify their development needs and fulfil these to realise their goals.

**Coach Enhanced** - Every coach at every level should enhance the experience for every player. This will be through the quality of delivery, the quality of the experience or the quality of the service provided.

**Environment Supported** - Providing the appropriate delivery environment for the developmental needs of the player at the appropriate time.

However, there exists a disconnect between long term objectives of talent and participant development and the actual practice that is evident in the game. Coupled with underpinning evidence from the Sport England (2014) review into Youth participation, RL does need to moderate some of its practices, particularly in community and school sport to be able to react to the insights from research and data.

Adolescents drop out from sport owing to a variety of reasons and not only negative experiences. According to Rottensteiner, Laakso, Pihlaja, and Kontinen (2013) the main factors that influenced drop out from sport in Finnish adolescents were perceived negative behaviours of coaches and teammates which led them to look for alternative things to do. With children now generally having more choices in their leisure time and an increased competition for participants amongst sports, there needs to be an understanding from coaches and administrators that “the quality and quantity of coaching appear to be more crucial determinants for young athletes to participate in youth sports than in previous generations.” (Rottensteiner et al., 2013, p. 30). Accordingly, in RL, we must adjust to wants and needs of 21<sup>st</sup> Century young people. Chapter 4 will look at the general mores (customs) of talent systems that are built upon decades of tradition. However, research is telling us that the ways in which individuals ‘consume’ sport is ever changing. The RFL, the NGB of RL in the UK is currently

undergoing a ‘transformational change’ programme in a bid to be seen as the most ‘consumer facing NGB in the country’.

To accomplish this, the start point will be to make use of insight that “creates actionable insights about target customers’ needs, influences and behaviours.” (Sport England, 2015, p. 7). The concern in RL is the drop off in participation from the age of 14 years. Therefore, to arrest this decline the RFL must “create compelling products/services for each target customer group.” (Sport England, 2015, p. 7). Due to the shrinking number of participants, the talent system is attempting to satisfy the wants and needs of 38 professional clubs from a pool of approximately 2,000 16-year-old participants. Couple this with the quantity of community teams, there is clearly a demand for players that outstrips supply at all levels, leaving the professional game having to accept a ‘political’ whole sport solution to the development of talent. The paucity of players means that those in the talent system are being overplayed and underprepared. Players are asked to play for community club, school, professional club, academy and England international teams. If these talented players were to be restricted in their activity this would (in the short-term at least) lead to the decimation of some community teams. So why are we in this position?

Whilst no formal study into drop out has taken place in the UK, an example of insight into participant trends can be drawn from RL in the state of Queensland, Australia. Queensland Rugby League (QRL) are experiencing a 30% drop out rate in junior players not returning to play the following year. This is double the attrition rate of other sports in Australia. The QRL surveyed lapsed participants as to the reasons why. The results of the study revealed that the main reason for 6–17 year olds leaving the sport were “negative coaching and club experience” coupled with “a win at all costs approach which included coaches’ selection processes, player development and an over-competitive environment” (QRL, 2015, p. 22).

### **3.3 The Role of Competition**

For the last 124 years, RL has thrived from its competitive nature. Indeed, one of the reasons for the breakaway of the Northern Union was (aside from paying its players) a demand from the northern clubs for league and cup competition, something that was frowned upon by the Rugby Union of the day. The origins of cup competitions can be traced back to 1888 in Lancashire where this roused interest in local communities and matches were attended by large attendances (Collins, 2009). It is fair to say therefore that competition is part of the sporting DNA of RL and accordingly the sport is governed in the community game by its ‘playing leagues’ around the nation based upon being split up geographically. However, the prevalence of leagues and cups at young ages (i.e. 12 years and upwards) does appear to encourage behaviours that are less conducive to long term development and retention within the sport.

A possible effect of this can be seen in Figure 3.2 where the participants per quartile are depicted. At age 12, there is a very even distribution of participants across the quartiles. However, post 12 years, a considerable drop off of quartile 3 and 4 is observed whilst the numbers of quartile 1 and 2 participants rise. This increase could be due to the fact that coaches are using the physically bigger and stronger children to win games and the smaller children become de-motivated by playing against more mature children or are simply not selected. The evidence from the QRL report seems to back up this trend.

This phenomenon is one that all team sports especially are encountering, as outlined in Sport England’s document ‘The challenge of growing youth participation in sport’ (2014). In RL some serious consideration must be given to reforming the competitive element of the sport. However, any changes must be handled with sensitivity since it will go against the very foundations on which the sport has been built over 124 years of existence. This would represent a paradigm shift in that radical change is required to replace the current thinking.

What is the impact on the talent system? In crude terms, the curriculum does not meet the needs of the exam. By this I mean that we have a long term player development model that purports being player focused and environment supported, yet it is being tested on a weekly basis via an ultra-competitive competition framework.

### **3.4 Summary**

Therefore, in summarising the existing context for RL, I would suggest the following overarching statements:

- The game is improving against our major international rivals.
- There are positive signs that our TID structures are gaining traction and becoming more efficient.
- BUT these positive changes must be viewed against the possibly greater progress being made by our competitors (Australia and New Zealand) and most notably Rugby Union, both across the country and in our traditional stronghold of the North.
- In parallel, our progress must also be set against current and emerging government agendas, especially as these offer our major source of funding.

Of course, any efforts in TID must also be placed against the current knowledge and state of play in TID as a topic. Accordingly, in the next chapter I complete a brief review of the state of play in TID research and application before turning in Chapter 5 to where we can look for the extra next edge in developing our systems.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **MYTHS, MORES AND HALF-TRUTHS OF TALENT IDENTIFICATION AND DEVELOPMENT SYSTEMS**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

There are many pressures placed upon professional sports clubs and NGBs to produce winning teams and/or Olympic and World Champions. Coaches lead high-performance teams of athletes and staff in often stressful circumstances and there is a high expectation from public funders, boards of directors, sponsors and supporters to succeed. Consequently, the identification and development of sporting talent is of significant importance to NGBs and professional sporting organisations since “sport systems capable of developing athletes to the highest international levels are likely to receive financial rewards and recognition” (Henriksen, Stambulova & Roseleer, 2011, p. 341).

In order to be successful, sporting organisations need to be able to recognise and select athletes who show potential to excel at a more advanced level (i.e. talent identification; Cobley, Schorer & Baker, 2012) and subsequently provide “the most appropriate environments for athletes to accelerate their learning and performance” (Abbott & Collins, 2004, p. 399). Therefore, talent development systems must be considered symbiotic in approach with equal scrutiny towards support in place and not simply a reflection of players’ abilities.

Unfortunately, however, the imperative of identification may have led NGBs and teams to pursue methods which, although apparently grounded in sound science, are actually less than effective in the long term. Accordingly, this chapter explores the apparent dis-joint between what current research and current applied practices tells us, many of which have been the cornerstone of TID systems for decades.

Reflecting upon the socio-economic importance to sport of TID and the fact that early success is often related to low success rates as adults (Güllich & Emrich, 2014; Pankhurst &

Collins, 2013) I suggest that many TID systems, or elements of the systems have been based upon:

- Phenomena that are believed by a social group - myths
- Norms that are more widely observed as “the way we’ve always done things” - mores or customs
- Something that in reality is only a belief and appears to be knowledge - half-truths.

## **4.2 Myths of Talent Identification and Development**

Williams and Hodges (2005) noted that current coaching practice has often been determined by subjective experience and historical precedence set by NGBs and professional clubs rather than empirical evidence. Parents, coaches, administrators and athletes themselves have for decades believed in TID practices that on face value seem plausible but upon further interrogation are potentially suboptimal. This mismatch is supported by Régnier, Salmela, and Russell (1993) who concluded that the long term prediction of talented athletes is unreliable, especially when detection of talent is attempted during the prepubescent or pubertal periods of growth. Therefore, applying elite adult strategies to adolescents is unreliable (Burgess & Naughton, 2010; Collins & MacNamara, 2018) but still continues despite the fact that this was questioned over 20 years ago!

An example of this is the practice of using ‘trial’ matches to select for team sports representative squads. Presumably the intention of a trial is to give an opportunity for players to show their abilities. From this the selection for onward participation is based upon performance in the trial event (e.g. a game) and so the athlete’s potential in other performance domains is not observed.

This point is well illustrated in Rasmus Ankersen’s video ‘Goldmine Effect’. Here, he compares an early maturing 15-year old sprinter who has had the best coaching to a less



physically developed athlete who has had no coaching. There is little difference between their sprint times, and he poses the question of who is more likely to succeed in the long term?

There are three ‘sub-myths’ associated with this ongoing issue; early specialisation, the 10,000 hours rule and elements of Long Term Athlete Development (LTAD). These are discussed in turn.

#### **4.2.1 Early Specialisation**

The early specialisation pathway is characterised by a high volume of deliberate practice and a low amount of deliberate play in one sport and focuses on performance as early as age 6 or 7 years (Côté, Lidor & Hackfort, 2009). Many parents, coaches, sporting administrators and athlete’s themselves have assumed that early specialisation in a given pursuit will lead to adult success. (Russell 2014, Güllich & Emrich 2012, Gould & Carson 2004, Mostafavifar, Best & Myer 2013).

Despite inspiring high-profile examples (e.g. Tiger Woods started playing golf at 3 years old), however, the odds of even making it to professional sport are quite bleak (Christianson & Deutsch, 2012). Whilst a case can be made for early specialisation in some sports (e.g. ice skating, gymnastics and motor sport) there is an overwhelming body of research that suggests, for a variety of reasons that early *diversification* is more beneficial to the developing athlete particularly in team sports. Indeed, Côté, Lidor and Hackfort (2009) identified the seven postulates that support the developmental model of sports participation (DMSP). These postulates highlight that with early sampling of several sports, children will learn wider emotional, cognitive and motor skills which will stand them in good stead by the time they reach their adolescent years where they may choose to focus on one main sport. Conversely, early specialisation has been linked to injury, burnout and early departure from sport due largely to an inability to adapt (White & Oatman, 2009).

#### **4.2.2 10,000 hours rule**

Associated with early specialisation is the notion that to be expert at something 10,000 hours or 10 years of deliberate practice is required. Ericsson, Kramper and Tesch-Romer (1993), through the study of musicians, stated that the amount of time an individual is engaged in deliberate practice activities is monotonically related to that individual's acquired performance and that it extends for a period of over 10 years. However, a popular myth surrounding the work of Ericsson et al. is that of the 10,000 hour rule. This was actually brought about by the popular writer/sports journalist Malcolm Gladwell who in his book 'Outliers' claimed that 10,000 hours of deliberate practice was required to become an expert. This demonstrates the ease in which myths can be spread and, unfortunately, persist, via mainstream media. However, it is also pointed out that several other constraints are acting, namely: resource, motivation and effort. Indeed, Ericsson and colleagues note that deliberate practice is not so motivating and may not lead to immediate success. "This oversimplification of achievement attributed to deliberate practice alone, claims that absolutely everyone is capable of high performance success irrespective of natural abilities and negates many other variables influencing development" (Fuchslocher, Romann & Gulbin, 2013, p. 10).

According to Wall and Côté (2007) this model does not dictate task specificity and has again been associated with athlete drop out particularly in team sports. Gould and Carson (2004) suggested that the development of talent was not wholly dependent on deliberate practice of technical sport specific skill but the development of psychosocial behaviours and family support. In either case, there is strong support for the notions that expertise takes time to develop and is the result of biopsychosocial interactions.

#### **4.2.3 Long Term Athlete Development (LTAD)**

Balyi and Hamilton (2004) proposed the LTAD model and, with the explicit encouragement of UK organisations, several NGBs within sport adopted such an approach

towards the construction of athlete development models. Examples of these are evident in Badminton England, (2006); British Gymnastics, (2006); England and Wales Cricket Board (2005). (Ford et al., 2011, p. 390). The LTAD principles are based upon physiological and psychomotor factors to develop athletes in line with biological maturation with 'windows of opportunity' highlighted as to when developing athletes may make significant physical or skill gains. The implication being here that, if these windows of opportunity are missed, it is unlikely (or impossible) that an athlete can develop these requisite skills later on.

However, it is very difficult to relate these physiological windows to chronological age since children will mature towards adulthood at varying rates. As such, athletes engaged in TID systems may be subjected to inappropriate training programmes which may have an adverse effect on both optimising their development of talent and their lifelong involvement in the sport. This has been acknowledged by some NGBs in the way that laws of games have been modified at younger ages, for example netball 'Hi-Five' and primary Rugby League.

Balyi and Hamilton (2010 p. 20) stated that "if fundamental motor skill training is not developed between the ages of eight to 11 and nine to 12 respectively for females and males, a significant window of opportunity has been lost, compromising the ability of the young player/athlete to reach his/her full potential. "If believed, this carries massive implications for the age at which talent should be selected and directed towards sport/activity specific training" (Ford et al., 2011, p. 522). Even into adulthood and upon reaching levels of elite performance, athletes can suffer slumps in performance which can result in subtle changes of technique, hence having to effectively 're-train' the body to adapt. This was documented by Collins, Morriss and Trower (1999), where an elite javelin thrower had 'unintentionally lost' his technique and this case study demonstrated how through a multi-disciplinary approach (biomechanical, psychological), the athlete 're-trained' to bring about a performance improvement.

So, does failure to maximise opportunities during these windows impact on an individual's future performance? Bailey et al. (2010) correctly question whether the 'windows of opportunity' actually raise the ceiling for future potential or actually enable an athlete to reach their ceiling performance level at a younger age. This may actually give rise to an over emphasis on early success rather than the long term development for which it was intended. Indeed, it has been documented that, "no empirical evaluation of the impact of LTAD has been commissioned by the agencies that have promoted the approach" (Collins & Bailey 2013, p. 186).

Despite this evidence these myths continue to have a powerful influence upon strategy and policy decisions of NGBs and professional sporting organisations in that they continue to be spread and promoted as best practice.

Many studies have shown that elite sporting performance can be achieved following 3,000 to 4,000 hours of sport specific practice, particularly where peak performance occurs after the age of 20 (Bailey & Collins, 2013). In Rugby League if a player begins playing the sport at 6 years of age and makes a professional debut at age 20 s/he will have amassed a maximum of 4,120 hours of training that will have included all strands of performance (RFL, 2016). At the highest level in UK professional football Academies, a player will have practiced for between 6,000 and 8,000 hours between the ages of 5–21 years (EPPP, 2011).

The search and recruitment strategies of global TID programmes have further served the myth of the need for early specialisation. This has been evident in professional soccer academies where recruitment begins at the age of 7 years. Presumably the reason behind this is the assumption that success at elite level will happen if a greater volume and intensification of sport specific training is applied from a young age. This is sometimes magnified in the media, an example of which was when Real Madrid signed a 7-year-old Argentinian boy in a blaze of publicity in 2011 (ESPN).

This is where the disconnect exists between theory and practice. The concept of early specialisation lends itself to the notion that athletes will endure a “linear career path” (cf. McCarthy & Collins 2014, p. 1607) and that the likelihood of success will increase with training and competition in one sport. Additionally, it has been assumed that early training, early competitive successes and being in sport specific talent programmes will correlate with adult success. Studies have shown that in Olympic sports disciplines, Olympic standard athletes only started specialising at a later age “implying that for many Olympic sports specific training from an early age is not an indispensable precondition for later senior success” (Vaeyens et al., 2009, p. 1369). Data gathered by Vaeyens et al (2009) from 10 national programmes between 1978–2005, provided indicators of low to moderate efficacy in talent identification programmes based on early age recruitment.

#### **4.3 Mores of TID**

Many TID processes worldwide have been built upon ‘the way things have always been done’ or events that have become customary whether that be on a local, regional or national level. An example of where this notion is well established can be seen in the origins of School Sport Australia which can be traced back to the 1920’s, where interstate representative school football and netball competitions were first held. This practice continues today across 18 sports (School Sport Australia, 2015).

Selective age-banded programmes have been common practice for decades. These “traditional talent development pathways for adolescents in team sports follow talent identification procedures based on subjective games ratings and isolated athletic assessment” (Burgess & Naughton, 2010, p. 103). Selection is often dependent on a performance snapshot rather than the potential that an athlete may show. Most models have therefore focused on applying current motor performance and/or competitive success as the main or only selection criterion (Vaeyens et al, 2009). An example is the National Football League Combine in USA

where 300 top College athletes are assessed over a 4-day period. This event has been held annually for over 30 years. However, doubts have been raised about the validity of tests that are used to determine future NFL players (Lyons, Hoffman, Michel, & Williams, 2011), and past performance (i.e. College performance) is of a more reliable nature.

Selection for team sports is often based upon physiological and motor-performance factors (i.e. what can easily be measured) and ignores other predeterminants or covert characteristics of elite performance. In contrast, many studies (e.g. Collins, MacNamara & McCarthy, 2016; MacNamara, Button & Collins 2010) have shown that the psychological and psychosocial aspects of performance are key factors in separating elite and sub-elite performers, yet as sports we still subscribe to practices that further reinforce this behaviour.

Talent identification practices are reliant upon the subjective judgment of a talent scout or coach. Therefore, repetitive misjudgements may occur at this vital first stage (Unnithian et al, 2012). This situation is made worse since “coaches/sports scientists in charge of elite talent development may be unfamiliar with current research models” (Burgess & Naughton, 2010, p. 108).

Such practices are evident at the point of entry to most team sport talent pathways in the UK. For example, at the base of hockey’s ‘single system’, players are nominated to Junior Development Centres from age 13 years. These nominations are solicited from club coaches or teachers. In Australian Rugby League, selection takes place for state squads at age 12 years. Selection processes appear to ‘de-select’ many children at the initial stage. In the state of Victoria, Rugby League in 2015 trialled 130 Under 12 players and selected 42 for a further trial, or in other words de-selected 88 ([www.ssv.vic.edu.au/sport/rugby-league](http://www.ssv.vic.edu.au/sport/rugby-league)). Given the low validity of early identification programmes (as described earlier), this does call into question the efficacy of the programme and the specialist support on offer in terms of TID from NGBs or other end users (e.g. professional clubs).

These approaches are characterised by the standard model of talent development (SMTD; Bailey & Collins, 2013). As described in Chapter 3, the SMTD is a ‘pyramid’ consisting of a broad base and reaching an ultimate peak where each stage will be populated by fewer and fewer participants. On face value the SMTD appears to work in that many elite athletes have come through such a system. Many sports have for decades relied upon a SMTD to select athletes who progress to the next stage of a performance pathway. This model makes an assumption that talent development is a generally linear process. However, this is not often the case and the path to elite standards is most typically characterised as a ‘rocky road’ (McCarthy & Collins, 2014, Collins & MacNamara, 2012). The rocky road is a feature of the pathway depicting multiple age and stage-specific challenges (bio, psycho and social) that are forged by many eventual elite athletes. These elites have learned to overcome, or better still prepare for, setbacks such as injuries, loss of form and moving between competitive tiers of competition. Conversely, those athletes that almost made it are “characterised by a fairly linear and smooth ride up to a certain level where, all of a sudden, the wheels come off and they either plateau, or drop out of the sport” (Collins & MacNamara, 2018, p 176). Good TD systems will have considered building this into their ‘curriculum’. For example, ‘dropping’ players (U-16 squad) in order for them to deal with the disappointment this may bring and, of course, this should be carefully planned with parents to ensure coherence of messages and support.

Selection “is more complex in team games than in individual sports (e.g. track and field, swimming, rowing and cycling) where there are discrete objective measures of performance” (Reilly, Williams, Nevill & Franks, 2000, p. 695). Particularly with team sports, the selection of athletes that progress is hugely subjective and at young ages the relative age effect is magnified. Data in Rugby League shows that the England Under 16 years representative team of 2014 had 85% of its players born in the first half of the year. The full England squad of 2014 had 43% of players born in the same two quartiles. This analysis shows the presence of

a ‘Relative Age Effect’ (where players born in the first 2 quartiles of annually age-grouped cohorts) in selective youth programmes, but this appears to level out at senior level. We will return to this in more detail later in this chapter. Athletes who progress through a performance pathway are frequently selected on the performance at the time rather than their future potential. Indeed, I have been 80% accurate in predicting squad selections for U-14 netball solely looking at lists of dates of birth! This is supported by Nesti and Sulley (2015) who noted that there is an 85% attrition rate in football Academies.

The subjective nature of the SMTD means that many potential elite performers are being de-selected from programmes on an annual basis. But, although research informs us to the contrary, sports still engage in such practices where the selection of talented young athletes is based upon current competition and performance.

The problem here is that because young athletes are identified as talented, they receive much support from NGBs or professional clubs at a young age based upon current performance. TID systems are in a sense rewarding early maturing children with better access to coaching, sports science support and higher-level competition opportunities. This can be likened to the “Matthew effect” where an accumulated advantage is prevalent for some (Merton, 1968). What the research tells us is that these early identified athletes have no guarantee of progressing to elite standards and indeed their transition to elite status exposes some frailties in existing systems.

In a previous study (Rotheram, 2013), I researched the transition from youth to elite in Rugby League. One of the findings from this work was that whilst the sport has advocated a long term player development model, practices at many levels of the sport did not reflect this. One of the main contributory factors was the over-reliance on competitive leagues and cup competitions as the main playing opportunities that prevail in the U-12 to U-16 age group. This drives coach, player and parent behaviour to over-emphasise short-term success rather than



long term development. The consequences are alarming with 17% dropout rates in participation from the ages of 14–18 years which leaves less of a ‘talent pool’ from which to develop future elite athletes. In terms of talent development, there is a disconnect between what is being learnt in the talent pathway and community sport with the requirements of the sport at the elite level. Coaching mainly focusses upon the technical, tactical and physical and other predeterminants of elite performance such as mental skills (e.g. goal setting, coping with contact, commitment, realistic performance evaluation) and coachability (e.g. communication, wanting to learn, punctuality) are neglected. Super League Head Coaches stated that the most important factors required to be present in an elite player were attitude, discipline and an ability to learn. This relates back to Chapter 3 and the KTP, where a gap in knowledge and application was found in the coach education process. The KTP showed psychological characteristics for developing excellence (PCDEs) need to be present in elite athletes and a key output of the KTP was a set of resources that helped system builders and coaches teach athletes PCDEs through their programmes.

Yet by emphasising the short-term gains too often, athletes fail to develop and understand other predeterminants of elite performance. Whilst some will enjoy short term success, by emphasising winning, coaches are doing players a long term dis-service. Early maturing boys do not develop the necessary technical and tactical skills required at the next level. Indeed, one leading coach stated that “I’m running into it all the time – coaches who want to be successful with their junior teams thinking it adds kudos to them as a coach and they don’t develop players as players” (Rotheram, 2013, p. 53).

More importantly in the later teen years when maturation status levels out, maybe these players have failed to develop some of the mental skills required at the next level. Indeed, a steep drop off in participation is prevalent in quartile 1 players (50% between the ages of 14 and 18 years). Conversely, whilst there are not as many quartile 4 players in the sport, the drop

off in their participation is not so pronounced (33% between the ages of 14 and 18 years). As a result of their lower level of physical prowess, players in this group may well have developed better coping strategies and mental skills that are required for future elite performance (McCarthy, Collins & Court, 2016).

Coaches and community clubs gain themselves a good name by being able to say that they have a winning team. Sometimes, parents and impressionable young players associate a good programme with its win: loss ratio. Reflecting the wider presentation of what constitutes “good practice” within TID, Pankhurst and Collins (2013, p. 92) suggest that “the predominance of social status for coaches being gained through winning rather than developing athletes for the long term it seems that substantial change must take place to the social milieu of coaching (through mentoring for example, Cushion, 2006) as well as in the quality of coach education if the clearly necessary changes in TID processes are to be made” (Pankhurst & Collins, 2013).

Current practice in Rugby League (ages 12–14 years) is showing that by widening the talent base, the sport can reach a greater number of potentially talented athletes. This has been accomplished by re-examining the predeterminants of elite performance and has subsequently tailored the player development curriculum, on-going coach professional development and player profiling to reflect these.

What this has enabled is that more athletes get to show their talents in differing domains. Simmonton (2001) observed that talent is ‘emergenic’, meaning that the various characteristics appear and differentiate over time. In a practical sense, boys of a chronological age of 13 may have a biological age range of 9 to 16 years. In contrast, some boys may have a biological age of 10 but possess the social and mental skills expected of a 16-year-old.

Research by Martindale, Collins and Daunbey (2005) noted that for talent development environments to be effective, four key features must be present:

- Long term aims and methods
- Coherent messages and support
- Individualised on-going development
- An emphasis on long term development not early success

The next section will investigate these features in more detail and how this applies in practice.

#### **4.3.1 Long term aims and methods**

Sporting organisations whether they be NGBs or professional clubs need to develop a vision of where they are going. The vision may be to improve numbers of participants, viewers and spectators, or create teams or individuals capable of winning on the world stage. The development of talent therefore underpins this latter vision for the development of world class athletes or athletes that through positive experiences remain as participants, coaches and volunteers.

It is important that this vision is shared amongst stakeholders, however. It becomes problematic in some professional sports such as football and RL where the vast majority of the finance to support talent development is generated by the clubs themselves (e.g. Premier League, SLE). Since the clubs are “service enterprises engaged in the business of performance, entertainment and financial profit” (Relvas, Littlewood, Nesti, Gilbourne & Richardson, 2010, p. 165) then there may not be a philosophical congruence between clubs themselves and NGBs.

#### **4.3.2 Wide ranging coherent messages and support**

At each stage of a talent pathway there must be coherent messages delivered to parents, athletes and coaches. These messages must be able to define expectations of participation within the pathway and demonstrate linkage of how an athlete will progress or potentially exit at each stage.

In reality, however, this may not necessarily be the case. For example, Pankhurst et al. (2013) noted that stakeholders in British tennis (NGB, coaches, parents) did not only show a lack of understanding of the aims of talent identification and development but also showed a lack of knowledge in the role played by each other. In such a situation, where stakeholders do not share a common knowledge of the environment then this will inevitably constrict athlete development in some way.

There are 44 NGBs funded for talent by Sport England. Sports receive funding based upon how they will meet the talent objectives set by Sport England. Importantly, however, these are generic objectives that may or may not suit the development of talent in every sport. An added complication is that funding cycles last for 4 years and then are susceptible to significant change – even if they meet their podium objectives! Some sports may experience loss of funding that means programmes can no longer continue, making a shift in philosophy and delivery agent inevitable.

#### **4.3.3 Emphasis upon appropriate development and not early success**

The provision of an appropriate development environment will hold different meanings to various stakeholders. If we can build upon the assumption that coherent messages are in place, then developmentally sound principles can be inserted at all levels of a sport specific environment.

Many sports have development models (e.g. the FA four corner model) that offer a ‘scaffold’ on which player development is built. These models need to focus on the needs of the athletes (e.g. technical, tactical, physically, psychologically) at various stages and must be understood by coaches who are required to enhance the experience for athletes. The environment must cater for the appropriate delivery according to the developmental needs of the player at the appropriate time.

The provision of competition within a pathway is an important element. However, on some occasions the role of competition is over-emphasised and is used as a tool to decide upon who advances to the next stage of a pathway. By selecting talent based upon performance outcomes, sports are running the risk of selecting on maturity and not potential.

This effect, known as the Relative Age Effect, or RAE, is common in most UK Team Sports. RL has traditionally shown a large bias towards selecting players from the first half of the year based on annually age grouped cohorts (see also Figure 5-6. Quartile distribution of selective environments in English Rugby League, 2015

#### **4.3.4 Individualised and on-going development.**

Martindale et al. (2005) suggest that TID programmes should cater for as many youngsters as possible. This approach is supported by the statement that a “greater focus on inclusivity at grass roots level with a greater emphasis on providing high quality coaching based on representative practice for all children involved in programmes.” (Renshaw et al., 2012, p. 78). However as already illustrated, sports persist in early de-selection of many athletes thus losing sight of their long term aims.

Another area where individualisation is critical is in the transition between youth and senior sport. Across sports there are substantial variations in age when performers are considered at their peak. For example, female gymnastics is considered an early performance sport whilst middle distance running is considered a late performance sport. Therefore, athletes will require individualised support through key transitional stages at different chronological ages that are relative to the sport.

An example where sports invest significantly in the transition between youth and elite sport are the major UK team sports use of ‘Academies’. Academies must equip young athletes for the transition between youth and senior sport across the following important parameters;

athletic, individual (psychological), psychosocial and academic/vocational (Finn & McKenna, 2010).

The main point here is that development programmes must be genuinely comprehensive, both in topics covered and in catering for individual needs. However, in some sports and environments, such as US golf Academies, there is a greater emphasis on facilities and graduates rather than the quality of service provided (Grecic, Carson, Collins & Ryan, 2017).

#### **4.4 Half Truths**

Some practices in TID may have an element of truth in them but upon further investigation can be deceiving to the recipient and thus can be considered ‘half-truths’.

##### **4.4.1 Function Movement Screen (FMS)**

An important part of any TID programme is the development of an individual’s athletic ability. The pursuit of physical prowess has resulted in athletes being inefficient in fundamental movements. Put simply, some TID programmes are simply adding “fitness to dysfunction” (Cook, Burton, Hoogenboom, & Voight, 2014, p. 397).

Many sports have taken to using specific FMS tests as an integral part of their athletic development programme. “The Functional Movement Screen (FMS)<sup>TM</sup> is a screening system that attempts to allow the professional to assess the fundamental movement patterns of an individual (Cook, Burton, Hoogenboom & Voight, 2014, p. 398). This test generates a numeric score based on performance attributes during 7 dynamic tasks, where a low score purports to reflect future injury risk (Krumrei, Flanagan, Bruner, & Durall, 2014). This is done in the belief that athletes must have their fundamental movement patterns tested before the onset of a specific training programme. Accordingly, FMS testing is incorporated into screening in order to determine who possesses, or lacks, the ability to perform certain essential movements (Cook et al., 2014). FMS screening conducted in RL with national level elite male U-18 players

showed that 66% scored less than the baseline threshold set (i.e. a score, out of 21, less than 14). Similarly, a study conducted with elite ice hockey players aged 13–16 years, showed that 60% scored less than 14 out of 21.

Other purposes of using FMS screening are to assess individual athletes for their susceptibility to the risk of injury, individualise a training programme to correct deficiencies, provide a way of monitoring an individual's progress and create benchmark to show scores for a specific population (Cook et al., 2014). It can also serve to empower athletes by showing evidence of progress and how it is making a difference to performance (cf. Collins, Carson & Cruickshank, 2015). However, several researchers have questioned the accuracy of the FMS since the tests are not performed in a sport specific competition context and that there is an element of subjectivity in some of the seven tests (Parenteau et al., 2014, Fox, O'Malley & Blake, 2014).

Cook et al. (2014) (who developed the FMS) also acknowledge the limitations and 'half-truths' of the FMS. For example, they suggest that the use of a total FMS score for predicting injury risk should be avoided. This is due to the fact that individual components are not correlated with each other and that sport specific demands are not performed during the FMS procedure. Thus, whilst a low score (<14) does indicate a higher risk of injury in very active people (Krumrei et al., 2014), one study conducted with US Marine officer recruits indicated that a high score (>18) also showed that they were more susceptible to injury (O'Connor et al., 2011). Indeed, Cook et al. point out that even if an individual scores highly they could be at risk of injury due to other factors such as inferior technique or being under-developed in one or more athletic requirements of the sport.

Another study by Fox et al. (2014) noted that elite Gaelic players perform no better than a young, active population (sub-elite players) in the FMS, indicating a potential problem with

the FMS as a measure. This means that sporting performance, or perhaps even the other important precursors suggested, cannot be predicted by using the FMS alone.

#### **4.4.2 Over Training Syndrome**

Another feature of TID programmes is the requirement of the developing athlete to commit more time and effort to their training programme. Professional sports clubs and NGB talent pathways demand greater athlete/coach direct contact time and educate athletes and parents on the notion of being a performance athlete. This apparent large volume of training maybe born out of adherence to early specialisation and the 10,000 hour rule. A comparative study (as quoted in EPPP, 2011), stated that for talented athletes aged 12–16 the recommended weekly hours dedicated to practice are: Swimming 15 hours, tennis 12–18 hours, cricket 6–18 hours and football 12–16 (based upon a 40-week season).

Whilst a well-structured individualised programme will be of benefit, there is also a risk of over training which in the long term could prove detrimental to future prospects. This has been defined as “overtraining syndrome.” (Slivka, Hales, Cuddy & Ruby, 2010, p. 2604). Over training syndrome (OTS) is a condition of excessive training and inadequate recovery leading to underperformance (Wyatt, Donaldson & Brown, 2013) and potential damage. A study conducted with young Brazilian footballers found that over training syndrome was commonplace (Fabiula, Fernandes et al., 2016, p. 242).

Whilst physical conditioning programmes are important and seen to accelerate the development process, there is a high prevalence of OTS within TID systems. Over 60% of distance runners, 50% of professional soccer players (in a 5 month season) and 33% of basketball players (in a 6 week training camp), all of whom are elite adult performers, have been reported to exhibit signs and symptoms of OTS. (Saremi, 2009). A more recent study, (Szewczyk, Rębowska, & Jegier, 2018) noted that OTS set in with athletes in the 73<sup>rd</sup> month of training if they were subject to 20 or more competitions a year. Psychological OTS



(otherwise known as burnout) is associated with early sports specialisation and playing one sport but for multiple teams. This is evident in RL where a talented 15 and 16 year old could be involved in England Youth, professional club scholarship, community club and school teams. Anecdotal evidence points to some players experiencing over 60 games per year as well as fulfilling the training requirements of each environment. These players are over-competing and underpreparing. In doing so, they are meeting the wants and needs of the teams they are associated with rather than fulfil their developmental needs as athletes.

Whilst competitive opportunities are an essential part of a talent development programme, early specialisation may also lead to burnout particularly in sports such as swimming and gymnastics where many hours per week from a young age are devoted to practice and conditioning. These aspiring athletes are susceptible to overuse injury, psychological issues and disturbed sleep patterns.

#### **4.5 Conclusion**

In reflecting on TID systems, it is apparent that some underpinning science on which they are based have been proven to be potentially flawed. The implementation of some systems has developed through tradition or has been principally based on economic motives (time, finances) (Vaeyens et al., 2009) where these approaches are based on the assumption that the development of talent is linear and that early success correlates with adult success.

Since the boundaries of performance in elite sport are being constantly pushed and the non-linear trajectory of talent development prevails, then the prediction of future elite performance remains difficult. TID environments have the responsibility to identify, select, develop and move on individuals to the next stages of their performance pathway.

Because of the myths and mores surrounding identification and selection, the use of limited resources should focus upon the developmental processes rather than some of the

questionable practices still employed that attempt to identify and select talent at an early stage in the hope that this will give an organisation a favourable advantage.

The following Chapter will now focus upon the financial and political angles associated with TID and how these closely related to the issues raised in this chapter.

## CHAPTER 5

### LOOKING FOR ROLE MODELS – THE EPIDEMIOLOGY OF SUCCESS

#### 5.1 The Political and Social Context of Talent Identification and Development

##### (TID); How does it work?

Success in international sport is of paramount importance to Governments and NGBs of sport in terms of national pride, perceived increase in sporting participation and commercial or exchequer income. Reflecting this drive, “increased state intervention has seen the formation of several elite sports institutions such as Australian Institute of Sport and UK Sport” (De Boscher et al., 2011, p. 116).

Another parallel driver to higher standards comes from media investment, as a reaction to public interest. The end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw a surge in the commercialisation of professional sports, particularly in the major team sports of the UK and Australia. Football, cricket, Australian rules football and both codes of rugby have benefitted hugely from the sale of their broadcast rights. Consequently, “the contemporary sport industry has been transformed from a predominantly volunteer led system to a commercially driven professional environment” (O’Boyle, 2015, p. 82). The increased investment in these sports has served to ensure that Governing Bodies and professional sports organisations can set some challenging, yet achievable, targets for sporting performance, commercial income, increased participation (both playing the sport and via media engagement) and spectators at live games. Thus, this commercial drive, coupled with the public investment available for participation and talent through agencies such as UK Sport and Sport England, puts the talent system amid a political, financial and cultural milieu.

So, on what principles and influences are these respective talent systems built? Is there a magical ‘one size fits all’ way of doing things or do the social, financial, political and cultural differences between sports and nations need to be taken into account?

Throughout recent history, governments and NGBs of sport have invested heavily into their elite sport systems. However, according to De Bosscher, De Knop and van Bottenburg. (2008) the optimum strategy for delivering international success is still unclear. There is some conjecture amongst academics as to the validity of comparing the effectiveness of international elite sport systems since “past studies often questioned whether nations are suitable units for comparison” (De Bosscher et al., 2010, p. 570).

In the UK, the development of talent is funded by Sport England and UK Sport. Sport England is focused upon getting “more people playing sport and creating opportunities for people to excel at their chosen sport” (Sport England, 2014, p. 32). Sport England invests up to £400 million in sport within every 4 year cycle with approximately 20% of those funds directed towards ‘talent’ programmes across 44 NGBs of sport. As explained by Sport England, this 20% is aimed at providing “strategic investment to enable Great Britain’s Olympic and Paralympic sports and athletes to achieve their full medal winning potential” ([www.uksport.gov.uk/aboutus](http://www.uksport.gov.uk/aboutus)). The provisions of these funds are sourced directly from the government exchequer and National Lottery. In order to understand how then these funds and resources are distributed to make maximum impact on talent systems and medal successes, a framework on which it is built first needs to be understood. A start point is Figure 5.1 which depicts the relationship influencers between individual and national success.

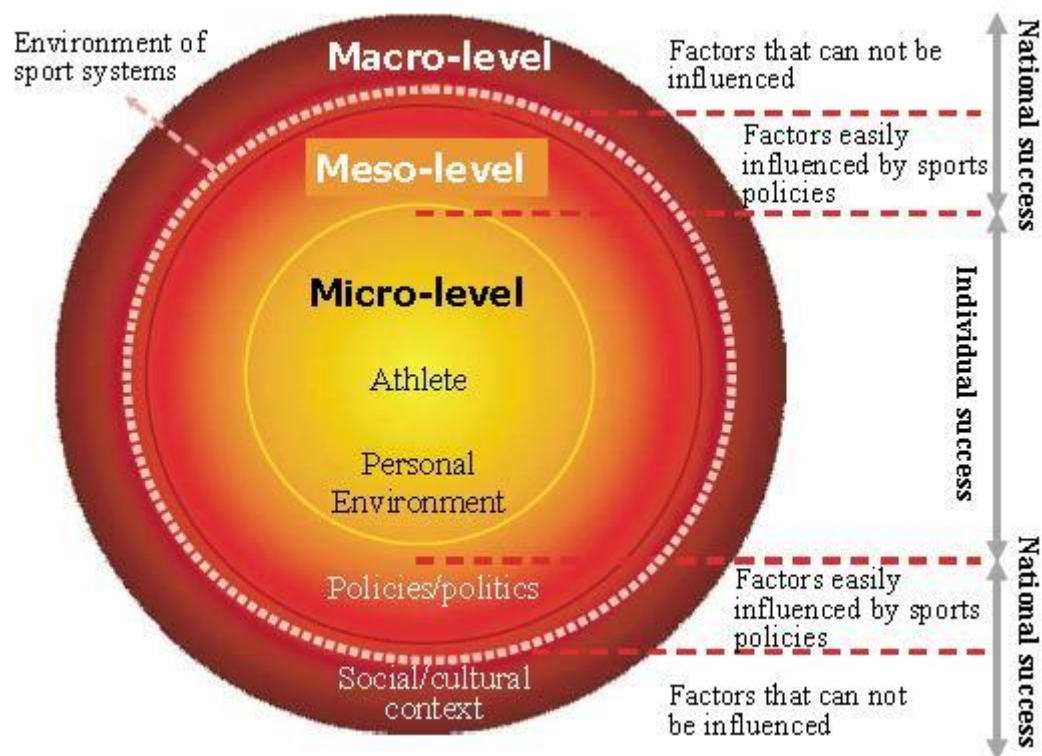


Figure 5-1. Model showing the relationship between factors determining individual and national success (De Bosscher et al., 2006)

## 5.2 The Rugby League (RL) Context

Firstly, it is important to understand how RL fits into the model suggested by De Bosscher and colleagues. It is suggested that “the success of an athlete or team depends increasingly on the performance capacity of the national system and its effectiveness in using all relevant resources for the benefit of elite sport” (De Bosscher et al., 2006. p 186). Consequently, we need to examine RL through the lens of the model in Figure 5.1.

### 5.2.1 Macro level

RL is a sport that was founded in 1895 when the Northern Union broke away from the Rugby Football Union. This ‘breakaway’ was strongly influenced by socio-economic factors. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century there was no such thing as the 5 day working week and in order to play rugby this meant that players would take time off work and not be paid. Clubs in the North of England wanted to compensate their players by providing ‘broken time’ payments.

This was met with disdain by the so-called middle classes of the southern clubs and the Rugby Football Union (RFU) who believed that sport should remain strictly amateur (cf. Collins, 2006). By receiving payment in lieu of work, these players were perceived to be professionals.

These clubs were predominantly situated in the industrial towns of Lancashire and Yorkshire. Whilst there is some RL activity throughout the UK, the majority of community and professional clubs remain situated in the Northern towns and cities in the proximity of those clubs that broke away in 1895.

## Geography – Clubs and Players

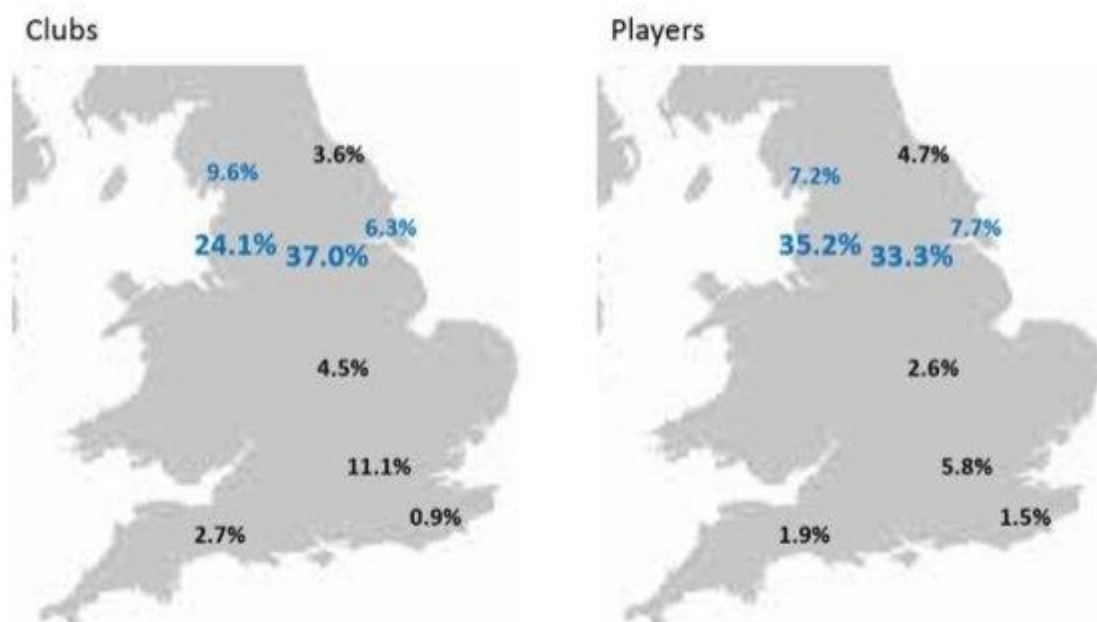


Figure 5-2. Map of England showing distribution of RL clubs and player population in 2015 ([www.therfl.co.uk/clubfinder](http://www.therfl.co.uk/clubfinder)). Note that blue numbers denote 'heartland' regions.

### 5.2.2 Meso level

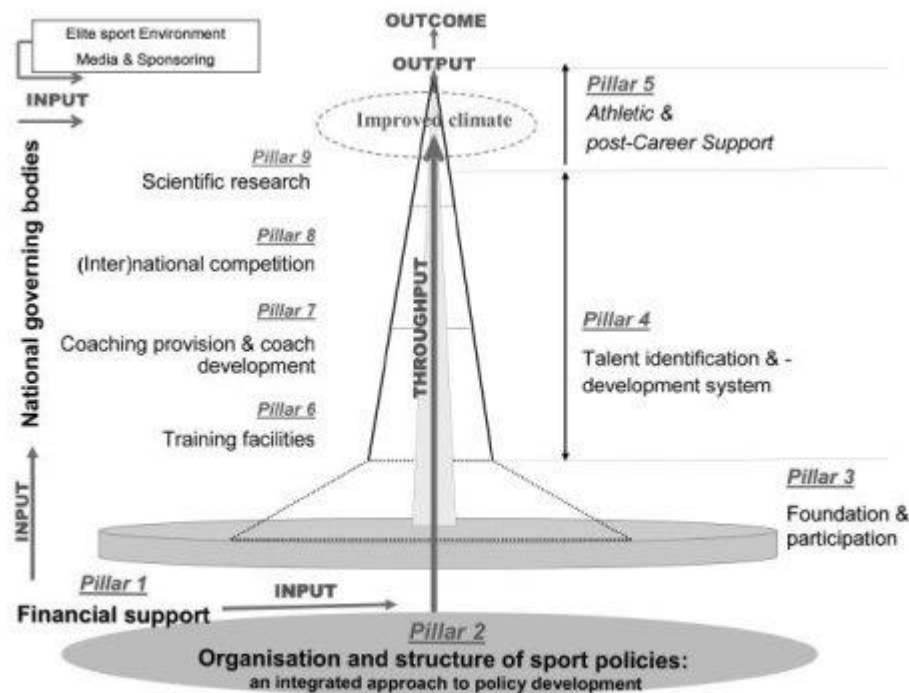
Over the past 40 years, RL has worked tirelessly to shed its stereotypical northern working-class image. The reasons behind this are so that the sport can optimise both commercial and public funding. Accordingly, the RFL must set out its policy and governance structure to be able to fulfil its mission: that is to be “a growing sport, available throughout the

country, that is recognised as providing positive experience for all participants and spectators, in environments that are welcoming, inclusive, vibrant, safe and comfortable-encouraging people to return again and again” (RFL, 2014, p. 5).

As stated earlier, funding for most sport is determined by government and is distributed on a conditional basis via Sport England and UK Sport. On that premise, “elite athletes will have a greater chance of success subject to the effectiveness of policy and investment decisions made in elite sport.” (De Bosscher et al., 2006, p. 9). In 2015, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) issued ‘A new strategy for sport: Consultation paper’. The stated reason for this was that “it has become increasingly clear since 2012 that the existing approach (directly funding NGBs) to increasing participation has exhausted its potential for further growth” (DCMS, 2015, p. 6). In short, this was a reaction to declining numbers of participants in sport since 2012.

This prompted Sport England to re-write its strategy – ‘Towards an Active Nation (2016–2021) leading to two further key documents, ‘The Coaching Plan for England (2016) and Sport England ‘Talent Plan’ (2018). This change in strategy has led to new ways that sport is funded and indeed viewed by the government. In turn, NGBs will need to be responsive in their approaches to any conditions that are laid down as a result of recommendations made from the consultation process.

So, against this backdrop, how does RL find its way through the socioeconomic and political intricacies to provide a ‘return on investment’ for its stakeholders? Throughout this section I will focus upon the TID system by applying the below model suggested by De Bosscher et al. (2006). In short, the model depicts a system of nine pillars derived from existing research literature about elite sporting systems, the policy making decisions behind it and the insight gained from experienced coaches and athletes as to the predeterminants of elite sporting performance.



**Figure 2** — SPLISS model: A conceptual model of 9 pillars of Sports Policy factors Leading to International Sporting Success (De Bosscher et al., 2006).

Figure 5-3. SPLISS model: A conceptual model of 9 pillars of Sports Policy factors leading to International Sporting Success (De Bosscher et al, 2006)

From the model, once the ‘foundations’ (i.e. pillars 1 and 2) of financial support and organisation structure are in place (what we would take for granted as the function of a NGB), then for an athlete there is a progression through pillars 3–5. Clearly, there is a common thread of organisational support and philosophical approach that will greatly influence the interventions at each pillar.

### 5.2.3 Financial and Organisational support

There are many reasons why the identification and development of talent is important. This is particularly the case in professional sports where “the early identification of future elite performers would give a competitive edge to any organisation that could identify the best prospects” (Morris, 2000, p. 715). By means of defining an organisation, this could mean a NGB of sport, the government through agencies such as Sport England and UK Sport, or a professional sports club. “Most, (if not all) national governing bodies and sports councils have visions of developing talent where the priority is to ensure that their athletes can develop to,



and successfully perform at, the highest senior international level” (Martindale et al., 2005, p. 5).

In pursuit of this, it is well documented that professional sporting organisations “continue to invest considerable resources in an effort to identify exceptionally gifted youngsters at an early age in order to accelerate the development process.” (Vaeyens et al., 2008, p. 704). Therefore, to be able to do this requires a significant financial input from investors who in turn wish to see a return on that investment.

Talent development in RL is funded from two sources.

- Sport England talent monies
- Super League (Europe) LTD

On a 4-yearly cycle, sports are required to submit what is known as the “Whole Sport Plan” bid. This bid covers both participation and talent and details how the sport will meet Sport England’s talent objectives through the delivery of its own programmes.

Sport’s talent bids will be different according to the context within which they work. However, they must be able to evidence that they are working within the parameters set by Sport England and regularly prove how it is meeting annually agreed targets.

### ***Sport England Talent Objectives***

Sport England’s mission is “to enable every athlete to fulfil their potential and develop a sporting habit for life”. This will be achieved by sports in which they invest developing talent pathways that are:

- a) Progressive - producing high quality athlete of each tier
  - b) Inclusive - opportunities to access a talent pathway regardless of circumstances
- (Sport England, 2018).

As the Head of Talent Development for the RFL, it lies with my team to demonstrate to Sport England that we do indeed protect and grow the financial investment made by them.

However, whilst we deliver on these targets, we as the NGB are not fully in control of the talent pathway. The development of talent in Rugby League sits primarily within the Super League clubs. As a NGB we have a duty to regulate and quality assure the activities of the clubs on behalf of Super League (Europe) Ltd.

#### 5.2.4 Rugby League Talent Objectives

The strategic aims (2015–2021) of the RFL, the Governing Body of Rugby League in the United Kingdom are shown below in Figure 5.4.



Figure 5-4. RFL Strategic objectives 2015-2021

Similar to football where clubs operate as businesses (e.g. Relvas et al, 2010) RL clubs operate in the same vein.

It is in the best interests of the clubs to develop sufficient talent so that the teams of Super League are stronger in turn, leading to a higher standard of Super League competition. If the domestic competition structure is of a higher standard this should make the international team stronger to compete on the world stage.

So, where do Super League players come from? The main source of players arises from the Academy system. “The English professional male team sports of football, rugby league, rugby union and cricket, have each taken visible steps to increase the number of home-grown academy players transitioning into, and competing in their first team squads” (Finn &

McKenna, 2010, p. 258). Of the 351 players that appeared in Super League in 2015 66.9% emerged from the club Academy systems.

At a 2015 conference, Alun Powell, (Head of RFU Regional Academies) highlighted the position of talent development in the socioeconomic and political climate of sports which illustrates the model proposed earlier by De Bosscher and colleagues.

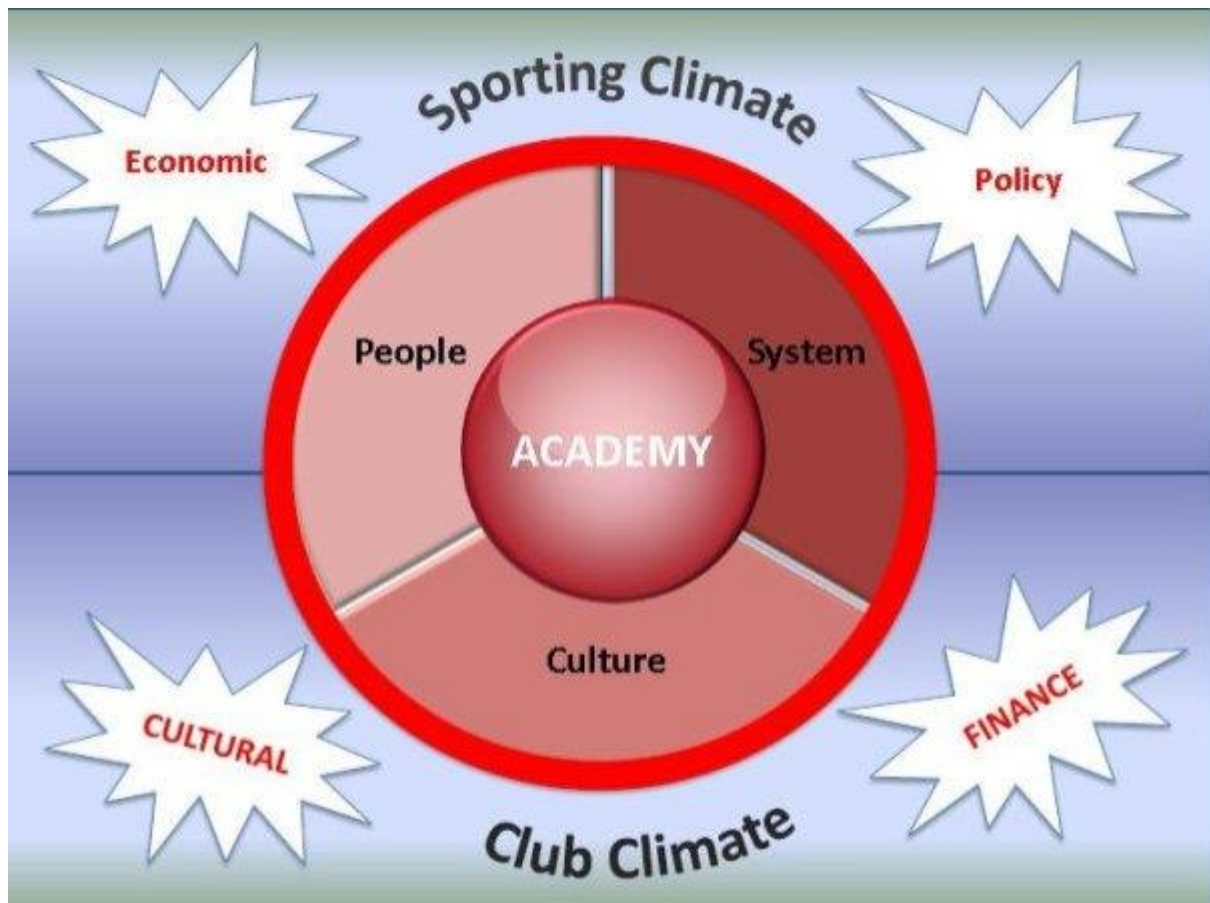


Figure 5-5. Impact of Club and Sporting Environment on Player Development

The figure above, Powell's model illustrates (where talent systems are mainly the responsibility of the clubs) how the Academy is at the confluence of two influencing factors; clubs – their wants and needs in accordance with their culture and financial resource – and the wider economic and political factors that affect all sports.

This is of particular relevance to RL. Driving the development of talent within the game are 15 club Academies. These Academies are operated by clubs that have demonstrated that they meet a standard of competency that will provide a ROI for SLE. Crucially for the

RFL, they also assist in evidencing to Sport England that they significantly contribute to their broader objectives stated earlier. As the NGB, we operate a quality assurance mechanism that monitors, supports and rewards the Academies in their pursuit of excellence in the field of TID. This quality assurance mechanism is in place as a means of the RFL monitoring and evaluating the performance and progression of the Academies invested in. It is also a call to all stakeholders in preparing our young players to step up to the challenge and improve standards for England and Super League to be recognised as the international benchmark of RL performance.

As described in Chapter 4, some TID systems still rely on questionable methods that have proven to be flawed. In a sport such as RL some of these methods are magnified due to the physicality of the sport. As a NGB, we are constantly working with our Academies to ensure that there are:

- Long term aims and methods
- Wide ranging coherent messages and support
- Emphasising appropriate development not early success
- Offering appropriate individualised and on-going development

(Martindale, Collins & Abraham, 2007, p. 189).

However, due to the deeply engrained culture and beliefs of clubs, I do not believe that we are able to demonstrate that these four characteristics wholly exist.

The main sporting objective of the RFL is for England to win the World Cup. There is evidence to suggest that whilst there is a common will for England to win, the methods of achieving that are being compromised due to the commercial demands of the clubs. In addition, albeit somewhat out of scope of this chapter, anecdotal evidence suggests that the make-up of the Super League annual calendar does not allow for the optimal preparation of international teams and players (this will be examined in more detail in Chapter 6). The top players can play

in up to 36 competitive club fixtures during the season and then be asked to play in an end of season international programme (usually minimum four games). Research from European football suggests that for mutual benefit that “the interests of clubs should coincide with those of the national governing body” (Nesti & Sulley, 2015, p. 39). Indeed, this situation does exist in Rugby Union where the RFU has a financial arrangement with the Premiership clubs over the access to players and the number of games they play annually.

Due to the individual circumstances of some clubs, there is a lack of coherence across messages being delivered to players and parents within the pathway. Despite the operational rules that govern the sport and evidence based guidance offered to clubs from the NGB, there are still inconsistencies and as to how programmes are communicated and delivered.

Academies all have Under 16 scholarship programmes. Taking one region of England – Yorkshire – there are approximately 1,520 registered community club players in the age groups to be eligible for scholarship. The reality of actual regular participants will be much less. Within Yorkshire are six Academies, all looking to recruit 40 players. If there are 1,520 regular players, this represents 17% of the playing population being labelled as talent. Given the close geographical proximity to each other (as depicted in Figure 5.2) there is a real sense of high demand and low supply of enough quality players to populate the talent pathway.

This scarce supply and high demand have led to selections being made on current performance rather on potential and has revealed a relative age distribution in relation to other environments as illustrated in the Figure 5.6 below.

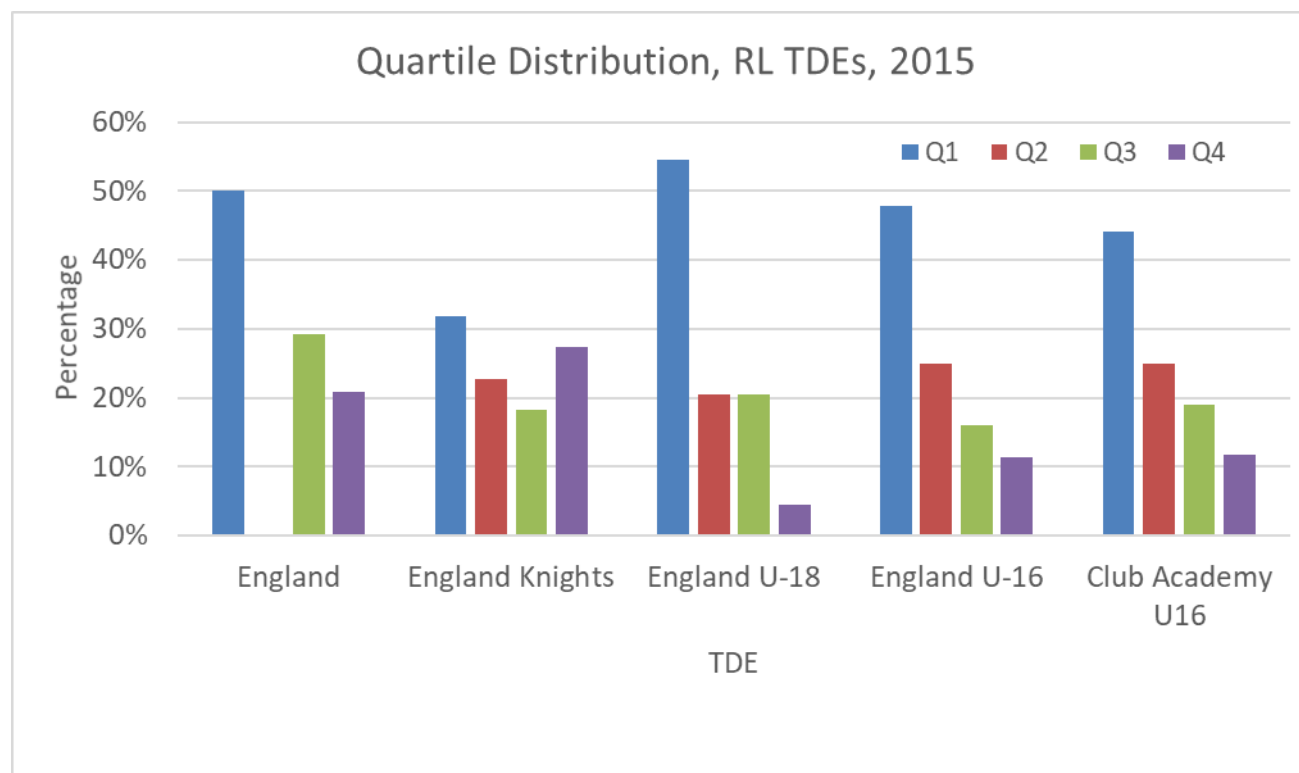


Figure 5-6. Quartile distribution of selective environments in English Rugby League, 2015

Q1 (September, October, November), Q2 (December, January, February), Q3 (March, April, May), Q4 (June, July, August)

What does the data presented in Figure 5.6 tells us? At first glance, it is apparent that when selection takes place early, there is a prevalence of players born in the first half of the year (i.e. quartiles 1 and 2). Chapter 4 demonstrated that those concerned with the detection of ‘talent’ may be mistaking maturity for ability. What this does tells us (when compared to the Elite end of the sport) is that there is an ‘exclusion’ of many and can de-select those that show promise a little later and that TID becomes more efficient with age.

As described earlier in the chapter, I am not purporting that there should be no TID at early ages (age 12–16 years). Talent development benefits everyone; indeed, one of the main drivers for children playing sport is to improve their ability (e.g. Fraser-Thomas, Côté & Deakin, 2008). Therefore, in a late maturation sport such as RL, then evidence points towards developing all players to achieve their potential for as long as possible without them being labelled from a young age as to their future potential as elite players. This can be illustrated by Figure 5.7 which shows a cohort of 16-year olds who were identified at 16 years (by virtue of being awarded an initial Academy contract) and later retained as full-time players.

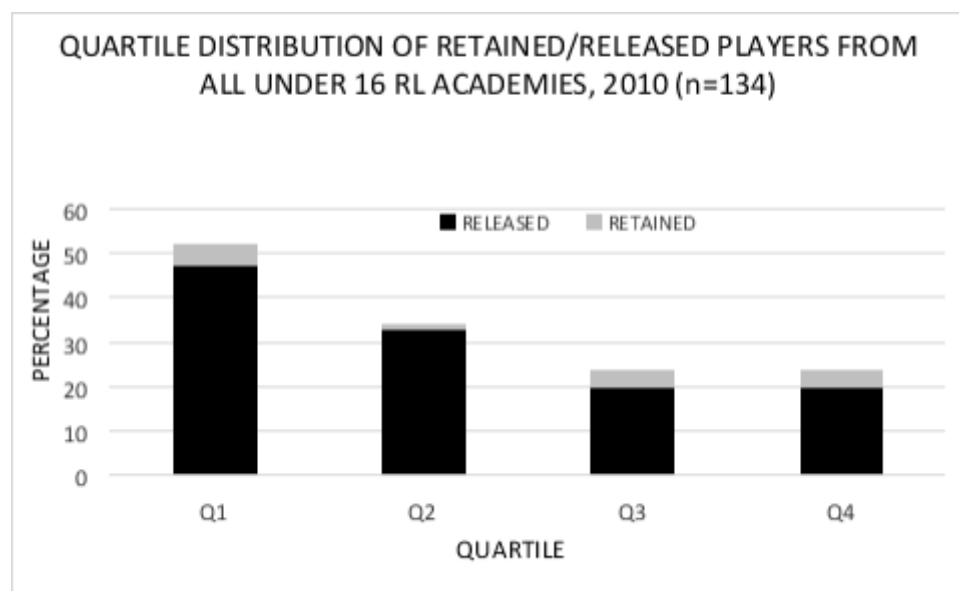


Figure 5-7. Quartile distribution of identified talented 16-year-old players (RFL, 2010)

What this tells us is that whilst there are less quartile 3 and 4 players initially selected proportionately more succeed and go on to be full-time athletes. “In short, the RAE advantage

apparent at selection and identification seems to be reversed by the end of the development process” (McCarthy & Collins, 2014, p. 1607).

### **5.3 Learning from another sport – Netball**

The year 2018–19 has been somewhat of a breakthrough year for the sport of Netball. The success of the senior England team has been well publicised; Commonwealth games gold medallists and the prestigious BBC Sports Personality of the Year ‘Team of the Year’ were won in 2018, catapulting the game, and its players, into the national sporting psyche. This explosion of the sports profile could not have been more timely ahead of a 2019 home World Cup in which they won a bronze medal.

Netball and RL have some very similar characteristics, hence the reason for choosing Netball as a sport that lends itself to being a role model to RL. So, what are these similar characteristics? “Netball is a fast, skilful team game consisting of running, jumping, throwing and catching” (Grobbelaar & Eloff, 2011, p. 45). Both sports occupy similar World ranking status. As of December 2018, England RL is ranked number 2 (of 49) and England Netball ranked number 4 (of 39). For both sports, the main international competitors are Australia and New Zealand.

At NGB level, both bodies have similar strategic goals of increasing participation and achieving World Cup success. Where World Cup success is concerned, both NGBs are in receipt of Sport England talent funding and support that helps underpin and resource the respective talent pathways.





Figure 5-8. England Netball strategic goals. Downloaded from <https://www.englandnetball.co.uk/about/vision-strategic-goals>

In 2005, Netball introduced the ‘Super League’, with “the intention to improve the recognition and profile of England Netball as a marketable brand and to enhance the visibility of netball through multi-media platforms was also identified” (Mansfield & Killick, 2012, p. 548). Fast forward to the start of 2019, the Super League enjoys live TV coverage and, by providing professional training and playing environments, has significantly contributed to the performance improvement of the England team.

Given these similarities, I have been able to probe deeper into Netball’s talent pathway and examine how and why they operate in the way they do by asking questions about aims and objectives, models of talent development used and integration with the wider Netball community. To do this, I approached the National Talent Pathway Manager and National Academies Coach. A semi-structured interview was used and can be found in Appendix D. Participants were provided with an information sheet and gave signed informed consent (see

Appendix E). It was important that the interviewees had a knowledge and understanding of the talent and performance pathway. This was important for the purpose of this section of the thesis to understand the differences and similarities in their approaches to the delivery of netballs pathway (c.f Ogden & Edwards, 2016).

The aims and objectives, as with RL, of Netball's talent pathway was very clear – “provide players for the seniors, to become World Champions”. Players emerge from (48) County programmes and enter the Super League and Regional programmes at ages U-17, U-19 and U-21. Of interest, there are 10 pathways at this level, of which, eight falls under the remit of Netball Super League franchises. England Netball is aware that it must provide an inclusive pathway and consequently the NGB operates a parallel pathway in two Regions, namely Yorkshire and the North East. Offering a pathway where Super League Netball has little geographical coverage is seen as an important element of England Netball's talent pathway. It is also seen as crucial in the eyes of our respective main funder, Sport England, since one of their key talent objectives is inclusivity where pathways are “accessible and inclusive to all who have the ability and potential” (Sport England, 2018, p. 20). This is something that RL has also managed to create. Ten of the 11 English Super League clubs are domiciled in England's North West and Yorkshire Regions. However, as the main funder of the talent pathway through its licensed Academies, SLE funds Academies in geographically significant areas such as London and the North East.

In comparison to RL, Netball has 35,858 participants (defined as members in clubs) aged 12–18 years. RL has 12 Academies that service its playing population of 16,818 of the same age. By looking at it in this way may provide some important insight for RL. As described elsewhere, there is not significant financial resource in RL to support all clubs having an Academy. Therefore, looking at two other team sports operating similar systems with

similar goals, the ratio of participants to Academies could be an important indicator that informs RFL and Super League policy in the future.

Table 5-1. *Number of registered participants per Academy (aged 12-18)*

	Participants aged 12–18 years (Community clubs only)	Number of Academies	Participants per Academy
Rugby League	16,818	12	1,401.5
Netball	35,858	10	3,585.8
Rugby Union	127,761	14	9,125.8

To a certain extent, as with RL, Netball relies upon significant public funding via Sport England to support the talent pathway. In turn, England Netball is able to support its franchises who are effectively delivering the pathway under a Memorandum of Understanding, similar to RL’s Academy licence. This public funding cycle runs until March 2021 and Sport England strategy post this date is unclear. What this again highlights are that a sports’ long term aims and objectives are being compromised by short term funding initiatives.

Turning to the upper echelons of the pathway, netball is very clear on the type of athlete required to succeed at the highest level. Major international tournaments require athletes to play several games in close proximity, often on consecutive days. Indeed, the path to the final for the 2019 Netball World Cup will mean playing nine games in 10 days. Consequently, Netball has identified the characteristics required in players and put in place appropriate training and competition programmes at National age-group level to prepare players for the demands of these major tournaments. Commenting on their talent identification and development philosophy, the Academy Coach stated that “our strap line was games player, netballer, athlete, whereas before it was very much give us the athlete and we’ll make them a games player.”

For example, the Roses Academy (U-19 years) in 2018 visited New Zealand and Australia and played four games in 5 days. The coach stated that “I’m going there to test their robustness, we are going there to re-create a World Youth Cup and a World Cup.” Regarded as a developmental tour, players were being prepared for the challenges of future major tournaments.

“We will use the whole squad, within there, my aim when I take them there is to expose all players, it’s no good taking them and sitting them on the bench. In the past, I’ve taken one match which I would call a performance match in that you’ve got to be selected, you stay on court, you do your job whereas the others we are looking at rotations; have they started a game, have they entered a game, have they played with that player – all those considerations. So, they are developmental tours.” (Head Coach, Roses Academy).

The availability of more regular international competition throughout the pathway is clearly of benefit to netball. In comparison, RL has fewer meaningful playing opportunities for developing players that gets the players accustomed to the very different competitive environment that is a major international competition. This is down to two things, namely, stronger opposition and cost. Outside of Australia and New Zealand, the rest of the RL World is relatively weak, especially across Europe. Inevitably, affording the opportunity to play against Australia and New Zealand is expensive. Indeed, New Zealand has not sent an age-group team to the UK since 1993.

However, one such initiative happened in 2018 where England RL took the England Knights on tour to Papua New Guinea. The England Knights is aimed at an identified group of players, regarded as being two to four years away from playing in the senior team. With the proximity of the 2021 Rugby League World Cup, this tour was the ideal environment to develop players to equip them with the knowledge and understanding of what it means to represent England (i.e. values and behaviours), being in an international team camp and at the

same time giving the players and staff positive life experiences. In RL, the opportunity to be part of a camp environment is rare. Even in club RL, players and teams are not required to travel great distances or spend any time away from home. Indeed, Super League players can go through a whole season and not spend a night out of their own bed! When this is compared to, for example Rugby Union, England players will spend significant time annually in camp with England (e.g. Six Nations, end of season tour) and in club rugby there is two levels of European competition. There is no doubt these experiences equip players with the psychosocial skills required that are crucial in World Cup campaigns. This again relates back to the reasons for the KTP and the continued importance to reinforce the development of the PCDEs.

Similar to RL, England's major international competitors are Australia and New Zealand. Both countries have similar domestic competitions to the Vitality Super League, England's premier netball competition. Suncorp Super Netball, Australia's premier competition, "just like the Premier League in football is recognised as the best league in the world" (Roses Academy Head Coach). Consequently, with its profile, and financial backing, several current England players have been signed to Australian franchises. Twenty five percent of the 80 contracted players in the Australian League are from overseas, and of these, eight are English. England Netball view this as a real positive and with many English players being exposed to a higher level of club Netball, competing regularly against major international competitors, this has improved the standard of the England team. An indicator of this may be the fact that England won the 2018 Commonwealth Games gold medal in Australia.

A news article highlighted the potential issue stating that "the Australian Diamonds could be in danger of becoming netball's equivalent of the England football team, who boast an impressive top domestic league full of international stars ineligible to play for their national team" (<https://www.stuff.co.nz/sport/netball>, 2017).

Since that Commonwealth Games loss, the Head Coach of the Australian team, Lisa Alexander, has called for a cap on imports into the Australian League stating that “we have a restriction on our players getting court time so that’s always a concern for me as national coach. Particularly our younger players who are knocking at the door — they don’t get those opportunities easily.” ([www.theaustralian.com.au](http://www.theaustralian.com.au), 2018).

Reflecting on the RL context, there are 10 of the current England or England Knights squad currently playing in Australia’s NRL. There are mixed feelings about this. From a National perspective, like Netball, we see this a positive step in improving the England RL team. However, from a Super League stand point, it is losing some of its best players and this could impact the quality and attractiveness (to spectators, broadcasters and sponsors) of the competition.

A limitation in the pathway highlighted by Netball colleagues was the competence of coaches, particularly lower down the pathway. Prior to the Franchises taking more control of the pathway in 2017, the bulk of TID was conducted by volunteers that lacked performance knowledge. England Netball has recognised this and has put in place measures to educate their workforce via scouting CPD and the Franchises gradually given more responsibility for coaching and development. The Pathway’s manager commented: “We have a lot of things on paper, but reality is we don’t have people to educate others or we have coaches in place who deliver and do their best, but we don’t have control check or update for their knowledge or reach them all with an opportunity to develop. That’s really a big topic for the whole sport how to develop coaches and how to improve the whole system about coaches.”

In terms of guidance for us, Netball has shown innovation in two areas seen as vital within talent pathways namely communication with parents and performance analysis. Clearly, with large numbers of athletes within the pathway, communication with parents is regarded as important. This is highlighted by a study conducted by Pankhurst et al. (2013) who concluded

that “the chances of success for a young athlete appear to be enhanced if all the stakeholders involved in his/her development have similar perceptions (and therefore similar behaviours and reinforcement/support systems) of all the key elements of Talent Identification and Development” (p. 378).

To communicate a consistent message with parents, Netball has innovated by conducting a series of webinars. The Academy coach commented: “We just set up webinars, so we’ve had nutrition, injury, the physio spoke to them. This year we’ve done one on time management and more on the lifestyle thing and they go down really well. Sometimes they are oversubscribed. All they need is to be sat in front of a laptop and you don’t need to leave the house.”

Netball has also innovated with its approach to performance analysis. The National Performance League is seen as the competition beneath Super League for developing players. Data are collected on players from all matches played in this competition. These data provide performance indicators throughout the season. It is collated through a central database administered by a small team of performance analysts working under the guidance of the Academy Head Coach. The data collected is focused upon three technical and tactical criteria for the specific position played, as described by the Academy coach: “We have 3 criteria for each position and they are ranked from 1–4 for each criteria (they can have half points). Criteria 1 is very much about their basics – movement, passing, catching. Criteria 2 is the key roles of that position (either attacking or defending) and moves from working individually to unit work. Criteria 3 is either the defence/attack part of their role that has not been covered in criteria 2. Both criteria 2 and 3 are based on the key positional responsibilities that we have developed.”

In response to recent national trends set by the English Institute of Sport (EIS) and encouraged by Sport England, sports have begun to develop what are known as ‘what it takes to win’ models. Such models ensure talent pathways are underpinned by athlete development

frameworks, informed by the standards required at elite level. These are something regarded as a work in progress for both Netball and RL since such models for team sports are more difficult to define than those for sports where measures of time and distance (e.g. athletics) are the key determinant.

These two innovations have also proved to be extremely cost effective and are something that RL can consider in the future as we have the capacity to be able to put something similar in place.

The ‘backdrop’ to RL presented in this chapter links to Chapters 6, 7 and 8 where I will turn attention to a comparison with our major international competitors and the impact of the competitive games programme on the long term development of talent.



## **CHAPTER 6**

### **THE TRANSITION TO ELITE PERFORMANCE – CONTRASTS IN THE TWO WORLD LEADING RUGBY LEAGUE NATIONS**

#### **6.1 Introduction**

As referenced in Chapters 3 and 5, Governments, NGBs and professional sporting organisations are forever searching for the ‘silver bullet’ that will bring international sporting success. In addition, but just as importantly, they seek the extra benefits linked to the generation of revenue, national pride and increased sporting participation. This ‘search for solutions’ is situated against an environment of increasing competition, however; particularly evident in the Olympics where nations have invested heavily but are still competing for the same number of medals (c. 300). Consequently, this has further elevated the demand for success, especially in the UK where considerable funds and political effort have been expended with apparent success leading to Team GB largest medal haul at the 2016 Olympics. On this basis, it seems that to be competitive and to raise standards requires greater finance to be invested in programmes.

In terms of Rugby League, Great Britain (or England) has not won the Rugby League World Cup since 1972. The Great Britain Lions have not won a three match test series against Australia since 1970. Perhaps as a consequence, when major tournaments are reviewed, there are always recommendations made and countless newspaper column inches devoted to where it all went wrong.

The last major public airing of England’s Rugby League performance strategy came in 2009 in the aftermath of the 2008 Rugby League World Cup via the ‘seven-point plan’. This plan detailed the intention to bring Player Development more in line with current research models, how the game’s elite players would gain more regular access to better athlete support, and the provision of a better Coach Education programme that matched the needs of those

athletes within the talent pathway, including the Elite Training Squad. Despite this robust and well financed plan, however, England remained a beaten World Cup semi-finalist in 2013.

Consequently, RL supporters, coaches, parents and even popular media (TV pundits, newspaper journalists) have expressed a belief that, to be able to beat the Australians in RL, we Brits should simply copy what the opposition does (cf. Ogden & Edwards, 2016). Is it a valid idea, either generally but also, of more relevance, in the context of RL? Accordingly, this chapter will investigate the financial, political social and cultural milieu that currently exists on either side of the world in RL and the influence these factors exert on developing talent to feed the elite National teams aiming for major tournament success.

## 6.2 Background

### 6.2.1 The UK/England Perspective

Clearly, the playing population and demographics are an important first consideration. In the United Kingdom (for the 2016 RL season) there were 27,279 participants aged 7–18 years in registered community Rugby League clubs. Of these players, 76% are domiciled in clubs of the traditional heartlands of the game in the North West of England and Yorkshire. These players are currently regarded as the talent pool from which future elite talent is identified and developed. A breakdown is shown in Table 6-1.

Table 6-1. *Registered Participants in RL Community Clubs Aged 7–18 Years. (RFL Data and Insight, 2016)*

Age	Total Registered	YORKSHIRE	NORTH WEST
7	1,817	793	731
8	2,063	912	797
9	2,231	1,035	792
10	2,168	1,055	712

Age	Total Registered	YORKSHIRE	NORTH WEST
11	2,184	1,022	680
12	2,396	1,100	715
13	2,371	1,063	727
14	2,460	1,177	694
15	2,291	1,038	747
16	2,730	1,135	827
17	2,471	948	805
18	2,097	689	568
Total	27,279	11,967	8,795

The TID processes employed in RL at the base of the pathway are via the community game and schools. Previous TID models in RL were aligned to a SMTD (cf. Bailey & Collins, 2013) of early selection and arguably, subsequent mass de-selection of potential future high achievers. Therefore, an alternative model was sought that widened the base of the pathway but also provided more athletes with access to appropriate TDEs. The model provided for better coach education, a progressive talent curriculum and a player profiling tool, allowing players to have some ownership of their learning journey. The advantages and disadvantages of this will be discussed later in this chapter.

In the UK system, the main responsibility for the development of talent sits with the 13 licenced Academies. Their function is to search for, recruit and develop talent for the Super League competition and England national squads. These are funded by Super League (Europe) with a total investment of £1.8 million per year. These funds are derived from the 7-year broadcast deal (2014-2021) between SLE and Sky Sports worth £146 million (RFL, 2014).

The member Clubs of SLE have agreed to ringfence the £1.8 million per year to support the Academy structure. Along with club ‘match funding’, the total annual investment into the Academies is circa £3.6 million, these figures being based on expenditure in 2016.

The Academies recruit players into their formal programmes from the U-15 age group. At U-15 and U-16, players are recruited into player development programmes known as scholarships. These are year-round development programmes with playing opportunities punctuated through the year. At U-19 level, there is a full playing season of 22 games and a play-off series. This is where age-banded RL effectively ends. Players are either signed as a professional or released and may find their way back into the semi-professional ranks. However, for many of those rewarded with a professional contract, the competitive playing opportunities outside of Super League first team games is somewhat limited. Chapter 7 of this thesis will focus on the gap between age banded and senior competition, identifying a significant gap which is currently filled by a rather ad hoc mix of reserve team and ‘dual registration’ that is available for clubs to develop their players.

The Super League competition is a 29-game regular season with play-offs. Additionally, all clubs enter the Challenge Cup (knock out competition) and at least one club enters the World Club Challenge. It is conceivable that players in successful club teams could play in up to 37 competitive club games per season between the first weekend of February and the second weekend of October.

The RFL, in its role as the NGB, holds the responsibility for age-banded international RL. These are National (i.e. England) player development programmes which operate at U16 and U18 age groups. These programmes select up to 40 players per year who receive further developmental and international playing opportunities. Players are drawn from the 13 Academies, which have a total of 400 registered players (U-16) and 300 registered players (U-18).

The senior England international team is drawn from players from the Super League competition and England, eligible players who have migrated to the National Rugby League (NRL) – the elite competition in Australia, or others who satisfy international eligibility rules. To provide some context, of the 382 players to appear in the Super League competition in 2016, 67% were eligible to play for England, and there are eight England internationals playing in the NRL. In addition to this, an England Knights programme for players considered 2–4 years away from full England selection.

### 6.2.2 The Australian Context

In Australia, the sport of RL is played nationwide but, as in England, centres around two major ‘hotspots’; namely, the states of New South Wales and Queensland. The numbers of junior players registered (age 3–18 years) are shown in Table 6-2.

Table 6-2. *Registered Participants in Australian RL, 2015*

Age Group (years)	National total participants
3–9	42,300
10–12	34,201
13–18	51,048
	127,549

While Queensland is governed wholly by the Queensland Rugby League (QRL), New South Wales (NSW) has two organisations responsible for the delivery of Rugby League. The Country Rugby League (CRL) have traditionally been responsible for rugby league within country areas (non-Sydney metropolitan) of NSW and are a member of the New South Wales Rugby League (NSWRL), the overarching governing body within NSW. Both the NSWRL and QRL are members of the Australian Rugby League Commission, along with the 16 NRL clubs throughout Australia and New Zealand.

There are 11 National Rugby League (NRL) clubs based in NSW, eight within NSWRL boundaries, two within CRL boundaries (Canberra Raiders and Newcastle Knights) and one club that crosses boundaries due to it being a joint venture (St-George-Illawarra Dragons).

The information offered in this section is based on the 2016–17 season and historical situation regarding talent development and talent pathways in Australia. The landscape will change in 2018, following a review of the National Youth Cup (U-20s competition) and associated pathway changes. Notably, however, the current system has been in place since 2008 and is responsible for the current crop of NRL athletes. Australian talent pathways focus heavily on SMTD-like representative playing opportunities at U-16 and U-18. These ‘junior rep’ competitions (in NSW) began in 1970 and 1965 respectively.

For NSWRL run competitions, each Junior League district club operates their ‘junior rep’ development programme through the spring/summer/autumn period, with an eight-game competition programme culminating in a grand final. This is replicated within the CRL at U-16 and U-18 with their Country Championship, a competition based programme used to identify the most talented athletes. In recent times, NRL scouts have used the U-16 Country Championship to identify and recruit talent, luring them to Sydney with the promise of a contract and an opportunity at an NRL club. Given that most NRL clubs are based within the Sydney metropolitan area, it is understandable why an athlete from the country may feel he needs to relocate to fulfil his ambition under the current model of development.

The NSWRL U-16 and U-18 competitions have 17 entrants in each, with the competitions running on a 2-year competition draw cycle. There is no central funding allocated to any of the teams in order to assist with development, nor are there any minimum standards of delivery, development philosophy, core curriculum or development framework imposed by either the National or State Governing body. Responsibility for this currently rests solely with

each team, with varying degrees of success usually dependent on the level of funding and resources available to them.

Each team can register a squad of 25 athletes for that year's competition, with U-15's allowed to take part in the U-16 competition, and U-17's allowed to take part in the U-18 competition. Initial trial and talent identification events can begin as early as September and it is not uncommon for over 100 athletes to attend the early stages of selection. Furthermore, athletes may often attend more than one district's talent ID events to maximise their opportunity for selection. Final selection of the 25 takes place in January, with the competitions commencing in February.

At U-20 level, each NRL club has a team that competes in the National Youth Competition which is a full season of league fixtures and a play-off series. This replicates the NRL competition with most games being played at the same venue as curtain raisers to the NRL game.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> tier competition is run by each of the State organisations, NSWRL and QRL. The NSWRL runs the Intrust Super Premiership, a 12-team competition with each of the teams affiliated to one of the 11 NSW based NRL clubs. The 12<sup>th</sup> team is affiliated to the NZ Warriors NRL team and is based in Auckland. The competition runs over 26 weeks, 22 games and 2 bye rounds and 2 split rounds, with a play-off series to finish. These games tend to be stand-alone events, although more NRL clubs are recognising the importance of the 2<sup>nd</sup> tier competition and integrating it into their match day programme. The season finishes with the winner of the NSW ISP competition playing the winner of the QRL ISC competition on NRL Grand Final Day. The Premier club competition, Telstra NRL, is a 24-game regular season competition with a play-off series.

Australia also has a state representative rivalry between New South Wales and Queensland. These representative games occur at U-16, U-18 and U-20 (1 game per year) and

senior level (3 games per year). The recent perception within Australia is that the Senior State of Origin (SOO) games are of a higher quality and standard than international games and that these have become the pinnacle of the development pathway rather than representing Australia. Presumably this is perceived because since 1954 the World Cup has been contested 14 times and Australia has won it on 10 occasions. The recent appointment of a full-time coach for the Australia Kangaroos team, and renewed enthusiasm for the Rugby League World Cup is, in part, a response to this and an attempt to re-establish and redefine the development pathway with the Australian national team (The Kangaroos) as the ultimate goal.

### **6.2.3 Key contrasts**

A summary of contrasts is shown in Table 6-3. Clearly, from the data and facts already presented, there are many differences between the RL TDEs of UK and Australia which offer two very different systemic pathways to becoming an elite athlete. As stated earlier, there has been a commonly held belief in the UK that, to beat Australia consistently, we simply must copy what they do and get better. This is not necessarily so as highlighted by 18<sup>th</sup> century philosopher, David Hume. ‘Hume’s law’ states that many make inappropriate claims about what *ought* to be on the basis of statements about what *is*. Therefore, in a RL context we must temper the use of the statement “Australia is doing this therefore we ought to...”

A search of academic literature reveals some comparative studies of TD systems, largely from the work of De Bosscher and colleagues (2008, 2010, 2011). These studies show that there were differences across countries in their sporting strategies but also, that it was difficult to create a theory which was totally valid across contexts. Furthermore, that “current policy evaluations should be assessed against future success indicators or these policy studies should be retrospective, because policy evaluation is a dynamic process that is susceptible to fast changes” (De Boscher et al., 2008, p. 21).



Pertinent to my thesis, a recently completed comparison of Canadian and Swedish ice hockey pathways by Ogden and Edwards (2016) is of interest. Ice hockey has some similar characteristics to RL in that relatively few countries play and there is limited opportunity to play as a professional club player, the major league being the National Hockey League (NHL) across North America. The research conducted by Ogden and Edwards found that “Canadian and Swedish hockey systems offer two different approaches to elite player development, resulting in different trajectories regarding international success in the World Junior Championships and in the number of players drafted into the National Hockey League” (Ogden & Edwards, 2016, p. 312). This report offers a number of interesting parallels to my own work and has furnished a useful template for the design and conduct of this element of the thesis.

Building from this template, and to investigate the Australian TDEs more closely, I have spent time there to gather information from those with the responsibility of setting strategy and delivering, participating in programmes. These individuals were players, coaches, NGB leads and club personnel who are responsible for youth development. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to compare the characteristics of TID of the world’s two leading RL systems.

Table 6-3. *A Comparative Summary of the TDE in Both the UK and Australia*

AGE (years)	UK	NSW/AUSTRALIA
12–14	Coach and player development via community clubs. Assessment and monitoring conducted by Academies.	Development Squads at U-12, U-13 and U-14 run by Junior League district clubs. Games played on an ad hoc basis. No formal monitoring of athletes or assessment, beyond game play.
15–16	Selection to Scholarship. These are year round player development programmes with 8 playing opportunities. England Youth – a year round development programme for up to 40 players and 2 test matches versus France	Selection trials begin in September, development programs with a large squad of approximately 40 athletes begin in October/November. Junior representative competitions (9 games + finals) with 25 athletes, begins in February, finishes in April. State of Origin representation (U-16) year round development program within NSW.

AGE (years)	UK	NSW/AUSTRALIA
		Large squad of approximately 45 athletes, holistic program. One game against Queensland in June.
17–20	Academy U-19 competition.  22 game league programme.  England Academy (U-18) programme. A year round programme for up to 40 players, annual test match versus France and 2 test series versus Australia every 2 years.	Club U-18 Junior representative competition (9 games + finals + national final).  State of Origin representation (U-18)- year round development program within NSW.  Approximately 40 athletes, holistic program. One game against Queensland in June.  U-18 test series versus England every 2 years.  National Youth competition (U-20) 24 game regular season. No work/study no play rule. Defined training times and limits on amount of training.

AGE (years)	UK	NSW/AUSTRALIA
		<p>State of Origin representation (U-20) Single game against Queensland in July. Short term preparation, all players are NRL contracted, access is an issue.</p> <p>Junior Kangaroos- single game against New Zealand every year. Traditional performance based selection and short term preparation.</p>
Adult (elite club)	<p>Super League (29 game regular season)</p> <p>Championship 14 team competition</p> <p>League 1. 12 team competition</p> <p>Challenge Cup</p> <p>Reserve team/dual registration</p>	<p>State Based 2<sup>nd</sup> tier competitions.</p> <p>NSW- IntrustSuper Premiership. 12 team competition, includes NZ.</p> <p>QLD- IntrustSuper Championship. 14 team competition, includes PNG.</p> <p>NRL (24 game regular season)</p> <p>Dual registration with state league clubs</p>
Adult (representative)	England Knights	State of Origin (3 game series, NSW V QLD)

AGE (years)	UK	NSW/AUSTRALIA
		Prime Ministers XIII (emerging international programme versus Papua New Guinea)
Adult (international)	England	Australia
	Great Britain	International calendar (see appendix F)
	(see Appendix F)	

## **6.3 Methodology**

This study utilised a mixed methods approach (Yardley & Bishop, 2015). As a feature of using this method, both qualitative and quantitative data were collected, providing a more comprehensive but also transferable picture than might otherwise have been developed.

### **6.3.1 Participants**

#### **6.3.1.1 Qualitative**

In the context of the present study, it was important to be able to solicit the views from key decision makers in the process as well as those at the ‘coal face’ of player development; namely, club leaders and coaches. The participants were selected due to their positions as expert strategic leads for performance and talent development with Governing Bodies, together with their full-time responsibility within clubs for overseeing the development of players aged 16-20 years.

The key individuals interviewed consisted of:

- National Rugby League (NRL) Elite Programmes Manager (EPM)
- New South Wales Rugby League General Manager, Football (GMF, NSWRL)
- Heads of Academy (HOYP) and U-20 Head Coaches (HC) from two NRL clubs
- Group interview of four U-20 players from the same Clubs at the HOYP’s above

Participants were provided with an information sheet and gave signed informed consent prior to data collection (see Appendix G).

#### **6.3.1.2 Quantitative**

The quantitative part of the data collection was conducted with 49 male players aged 17–20 years who were members of two Australian clubs’ National Youth Competition (NYC) squads and 44 male players aged 17–19 years who were members of two English Super League Academies. As mentioned in Chapter 1, much research in TID from a methodological perspective has been retrospective in nature. Specifically, high-achieving elite adult athletes

have been asked to reflect on their athletic careers (Mills, Butt, Maynard & Harwood, 2014). Importantly for this part of the thesis, the use of a questionnaire was felt appropriate because it helped collect data regarding current players experiences within the Talent Pathway. “Research with athletes in situ would seem vital as it may reveal more information about talent development than examining the recalled perspectives of those already at the elite adult level” (Mills et al. 2014, p. 1459). This study conducted by Mills and colleagues (2014) aimed to examine “elite youth football academy players’ perceptions of the quality of their development environment, at a crucial stage in their progression to the professional level.” Since this study is close in nature to the purpose of this Chapter, the method of data collection was considered appropriate.

### 6.3.2 Instrumentation

#### 6.3.2.1 Quantitative Data

To collect these data, the shortened Talent Development Environment Questionnaire (cf. the original TDEQ, Martindale & Collins, 2008) was used. The TDEQ has been developed to evaluate TD across sports. This questionnaire has 28 questions and “measures the experiences of developing athletes in relation to empirically identified key features of talent development environments” (Martindale, Collins, Wang, McNeil, Kok Sonk, Sproule & Westbury, 2010, p. 1209).

This shortened version of the instrument measures five features as described in Table 6-4. The questionnaire can be found in Appendix H.

Table 6-4. *Factors probed in the shortened TDEQ*

Factor		Key features	Related questions
Long	Term	The extent to which developmental	4, 8, 19, 20, 23, 25
Development		programmes are specifically designed to	

Factor	Key features	Related questions
	facilitate athletes' long term success  (e.g., fundamental training and rounded development, ongoing opportunities and de-emphasis of winning).	
Holistic Quality  Preparation	The extent to which intervention programmes are prepared both inside and outside of sports settings (e.g., caring coach, clear guidance mental preparation, and balanced life).	21, 27, 28 Reverse 5, 11, 13, 17
Support  Network	The extent to which a coherent, approachable, and wide-ranging support network is available for the athlete in all areas (e.g. professionals, parents, coaches, and schools).	1, 7, 9, 16, 18,
Communication	The extent to which the coach communicates effectively with the athlete in both formal and informal settings (e.g. development path, rationale for training, and feedback).	6, 15, 22, 24, Reverse 10, 12
Alignment of  Expectations	The extent to which goals for sport development are coherently set and aligned (e.g. goal setting, goal review, and individualised goals).	3, 14, 26, Reverse 2



The full questionnaire's validity was investigated, and the outcome of this investigation indicated towards "robust structural properties and sound ecological validity, allowing the questionnaire to be used with more confidence in applied and research settings" (Martindale, Collins, Douglas & Whike, 2013. p 1). Moreover, the validity of this instrument was demonstrated within a Rugby Union TDE and was therefore considered appropriate for use in this investigation.

#### **6.3.2.2 Qualitative Data**

These qualitative data were collected by semi-structured interviews. An interview guide was developed against the relevance of discussions in previous chapters of this thesis and is presented in Table 6-5.

Table 6-5. *Interview guide*

Question	Probes	Stimuli	Purpose
INTRO: What is your background in the sport and how come you are in this role?			
1. Can you describe the aims of your talent identification and development system  What would be the markers of success?	What are the aims?  What do you believe are the key parts for achieving these aims?	Performance improvement  Continuous improvement in club academies  National Success outcome  Personal progression  Everybody pulling in the same direction  Coach development  Player profiling  Appropriate player development	<b>To what extent</b> were you aware of a need to hold a long term/short-term aims?  <b>How</b> did you decide this/these aim?  <b>Who</b> did you discuss this/these with?  <b>What</b> components did you believe were important for achieving this/these aims?  <b>How</b> did this compare/contrast across stakeholders?
2. Is there any model or approach that your system is based upon?	Model of talent development  Wants and needs of professional clubs, schools and community clubs  Expectations of funders	10,000 hours, LTAD, Early specialisation, SMTD  Commercial interests to generate income	
3. Why do you do it in this way?	Is it the way its' always been done  Fits a calendar		

Question	Probes	Stimuli	Purpose
A whole sport political solution			
4. What are the limitations to implementing your strategy. If so what are they?			
5. Can you tell me about any recent changes you have made to your TD system?	<p>Gaining an understanding of the previous history, culture and customs</p> <p>Gaining an understanding of the problem/challenge</p> <p>Creation of a specified plan</p>	<p>Discussions with the board, national head coach</p> <p>Analysis of performance measures</p> <p>Analysis of process measures</p> <p>Reaction to recent global competitions</p> <p>Expertise of staff in roles</p>	<p><b>To what extent</b> were you aware of a need to carry out certain steps before beginning the process?</p> <p><b>How</b> did you decide upon these steps?</p> <p><b>Who</b> did you discuss these with?</p> <p><b>When</b> did you take these steps?</p> <p><b>How</b> did these compare/contrast across clubs?</p> <p><b>WHY?</b></p>
6. What do you believe are the characteristics of a good TDE?	<p>Multi-disciplinary approach</p> <p>Quality player experience</p> <p>Communication &amp; trust</p>	<p>Parent education</p> <p>Supportive</p> <p>Role clarity</p> <p>Planned</p>	<p>What needs to be present</p> <p>How do you integrate different components</p> <p>Why do you include these</p>
7. What alternatives did you consider?			
8. Tell me what your last innovation was?	<p>Physical testing protocol</p> <p>Profiling tool</p>	<p>Other sport</p> <p>Evidence based research</p>	<p><b>How much</b> were you aware of the need to do this</p>

Question	Probes	Stimuli	Purpose
	Parent workshop		Where did it come from What led you to it <b>How</b> did you do it <b>Who</b> did you take on the journey with you to implement this <b>What</b> resistance did you meet <b>WHY</b>
9. What is your view on the (tier below you) and the way they implement their TID strategies	Clear vision and mission Buy in from leaders Head coach sets out the qualities of a player Their knowledge of TID The environment created	Competence of athlete at national/international level Time spent with players Holistic player development activity Player welfare	What do you believe drives it How (out of 10) would you rate their effectiveness in developing talent Why

The same questions were asked to all participants. The main thrust of the interview guide were questions on their perceptions of the purpose underlying their TD programmes and what elements participants considered needed to be present for the creation of an optimal TDE that met overall aims and objectives for the sport in Australia. Open ended questions starting with “how” or “why” were used to allow the interviewees to explain about their own experiences and provide their opinion.

All interviews were voice recorded in mp3 file format and transcribed verbatim. After this, the data were read to get a full understanding and begin to pick out any emerging themes. Exemplar quotes were also highlighted.

### **6.3.3 Procedure**

#### **6.3.3.1 Qualitative Data**

In order to collect these data, contact was made with the participants via email and telephone. This is consistent in approach to other studies e.g. Mills et al (2014), Ogden and Edwards (2016) and Pehrson et al (2017). This communication provided the prospective interviewee with information about the study and also guided me as to their suitability. A provisional interview was conducted with a RFL colleague who has significant experiences in both club and NGB roles in Australia. The purpose of this interview was to check that the questions were relevant to the desired outcomes, they were understood accordingly and to check for any necessary revisions and/or additions required. Dates, times and venues were agreed in advance and all interviews were conducted face to face at the interviewees’ place of work. Interviews lasted between 9–30 min.

#### **6.3.3.2 Quantitative Data**

Prior to collecting these data, Heads of Academy were contacted by email or telephone to provide an overview of the study purpose and design and to request they act as ‘gatekeeper’ to possible players. Upon agreement a mutually convenient date, time and location was agreed

for all involved. At their home clubs, the players were gathered together and were provided with information regarding the study purpose and proposed procedure. Participants agreeing to take part provided signed consent (see Appendix G). Participants then completed a paper version of the shortened TDEQ in a quiet and private classroom setting under no time restrictions.

#### **6.3.4 Data Analysis**

##### **6.3.4.1 Qualitative Data**

Once recorded, interviews were transcribed and read several times to ensure familiarity with the data. Using the interview guide as a structure, summaries of key points were constructed and organised against each question with exemplar quotes to validate these views. This was applied to all transcripts independently. Next, key points were synthesised for content, acknowledging where applicable, the similarities and differences across participants.

##### **6.3.4.2 Quantitative Data**

Data from the TDEQ were examined by use of five independent t-tests on the scale values obtained from English and Australian participants, with the level of significance set at 0.05. Note that low values signify ‘better’ scores, since “strongly agree” was scored as 1, “agree” as 2, etc.

#### **6.4 Results**

##### **6.4.1 Qualitative Data**

Overall, the markers of success differed according to the role of the participant. At NGB level, the success of senior teams in major competition were key drivers, however, even though success is apparent by Australia some perceived limitations regarding squad contact and preparation time as reported by the EPM who stated that “we prepared the Kangaroos for a test match on two training sessions. From a football point of view this is not ideal” (EPM, NRL).

Despite limitations in time allocated to national preparation, interviewees recognised the high standards of training and performance achieved by domestic players within other competitive structures as enabling positive transfer. Indeed, there is a “perception that playing State of Origin would be the pinnacle of playing rugby league” (EPM, NRL). The image of the Kangaroos is not where it should be (in the eyes of the NRL) because of the status of State of Origin. In terms of a “performance environment”, State of Origin is afforded over 30 days dedicated preparation time in a two-month period (May to July) “where they can build a lot more on what they are trying to achieve” (EPM, NRL). This provision will be examined in more detail later in the chapter.

It is clear that the international programme would not be so successful had it not been for the perceived healthy state of the NRL competition and State of Origin. As far as the NRL is concerned, they are pleased that both NSW and QLD have development programmes that feed this in terms of U-16, U-18 and U-20 representative teams. To supplement this, the NRL has now inserted another tier of representative football between State of Origin and the Kangaroos, aimed at emerging players considered to be 2–4 years away from playing for the Kangaroos. Currently there is an annual fixture between the Australian Prime Ministers XIII and Papua New Guinea and “we will look to expand that and do a tour through the Pacific Islands – the NRL has a big pacific strategy so it fits well with other objectives.”

However, in terms of optimum TDEs, there does appear to be a gap between theory and practical application. At state level, there is an admittance that there has been little attention focused on a systematic process. Whilst NSW has won sixteen of the last eighteen junior SOO games, this has not translated to success for the senior team that has only won one series out of the last eleven. Therefore, moving forward, the aim of the NSW state programme is “to get a larger talent pool available and exposed to high quality coaching in a good environment” (GMF, NSWRL).

However, being able to access a larger talent pool is currently somewhat hampered by a limitation described at State level as “a lack of understanding in the wider game of what player development actually is” (GMF, NSWRL). Historically, State level age banded activity has been about short-term representative teams preparing to play either domestic competition or the annual State of Origin fixture. This view is supported by a U-20 player from Club A, who noticed that throughout U-16 and U-18’s representative programmes coaches were mostly pre-occupied with technical and tactical aspects in order to win games. Coaches and significant others were “confusing winning with development” and, consequently, there has been a tendency to identify current performance rather than develop talent. This approach was, in part, put down to the large numbers of participants where it is very easy just to find the next best to step in.

Consequently, from the point of view held at State level, NRL clubs are selecting players based merely upon physical and technical ability. In the view of NSWRL, “senior leaders (in clubs) are good at communicating what type of player they want – it’s usually the big and fast kid – not the skilful ones with greater potential” (GMF, NSWRL).

Interestingly, players reported that they had learned that psychosocial qualities were pre-determinants of success, with commitment and mental toughness highlighted as two key features. Players pointed to the fact that “you’ve got to be willing to cut out a lot of your social life for it” (Club A) and “If you can’t push through the sessions they don’t want you here” (Club B).

Whilst this plan at state level is still emerging, Club A (domiciled in NSW) has made the strategic decision to actually broaden its approach. Club A made their talent identification programme a lot broader, involved more players at a younger age rather than be too selective at younger age groups (U-14). Four hundred players aged 12–17 have been involved in Club A’s programme. This has resulted in 87% of players selected to Club A’s three age-banded



programmes having come through their development pathways. This has been achieved by having “the support of the General Manager and NRL Head Coach” (HOYP, Club A). This view was supported by the U-20 coach who noticed that a “change of NRL head coach saw more resource allocated to juniors.” One driver for this approach was that “In the past we spent a lot of money on the re-location of kids. We felt that we could use that money wiser and the results we have had in the last two years are the best we’ve had” (HOYP, Club A).

Conversely, Club B has been required to take a different approach. Club B is domiciled in the state of Victoria where RL is considered a “developing” sport. According to the HOYP, the aim of their system is to get a “born and bred Victorian NRL player.” The origins of Club B’s development model emerged out of a necessity to fit in with the rest of Australia so that they could access competition, primarily at U-16 and U-18. However, selective environments are evident at U-12 with a state team. “The first real intense programmes are the Under 12 state programme. We try and get the better athletes into a system that they are starting to be educated to the (Club B) way.” Like Club A, Club B believes that in order to be more successful they must generate a larger playing pool from which to select. However, owing to the fledgling nature of the sport in Victoria, the availability of adequate facilities (e.g. rectangular fields) and “the growth of numbers of players has outgrown the supply of coaches” (HOYP, Club B).

Interestingly in Club B, there appears to be a lack of ‘philosophical congruence’ evident throughout the club. Previous chapters have outlined the impact upon talent development created by the political and financial nature of sports administration. From discussions with both the Head Coach U-20’s and the HOYP, it is clear that the private owners of the club are solely concerned with first grade success and “they don’t see putting half a million dollars into development and running 16s and 18s teams as their brief” (HOYP, Club B).

### 6.4.2 Quantitative Data

Table 6-6. *TDEQ Analysis*

Factor	UK (mean $\pm$ SD)	AUS (mean $\pm$ SD)	t (93)
Long term development focus	2.33 $\pm$ .47	2.35 $\pm$ .49	.17
Holistic, quality preparation	3.17 $\pm$ .63	3.24 $\pm$ .66	.54
Support network	2.13 $\pm$ .50	2.36 $\pm$ .56	2.13*
Communication	2.44 $\pm$ .63	2.54 $\pm$ .83	.64
Alignment of expectation	2.72 $\pm$ .68	2.96 $\pm$ .59	1.82

Note: \* indicates  $p < 0.05$

Only two factors were suggestive of differences within the two samples. As shown in Table 6-6, English players perceived their support network as significantly more effective than their Australian counterparts. In similar fashion, alignment of expectations seemed to be viewed more positively in England, although this effect only approached significance ( $p = 0.07$ ).

## 6.5 Discussion

Whilst at face value the Australian system appears to be bearing fruit (especially where results are concerned), it does lack some validity against empirically researched characteristics of what an optimal TDE should look like, namely long term aims and methods, wide ranging coherent messages and support, emphasising appropriate development not early success and offering appropriate individualised and on-going development (see also Chapter 5).

Indeed, due to phases of early selection, this magnifies the relative age effect. From analysing DOB's of New South Wales state representative teams, there is a relative age bias in both U16 and U18 teams whilst at the adult level this does appear to even out somewhat. There is a similar trend with club teams. These are shown in Figures 6.1 and 6.2 below.

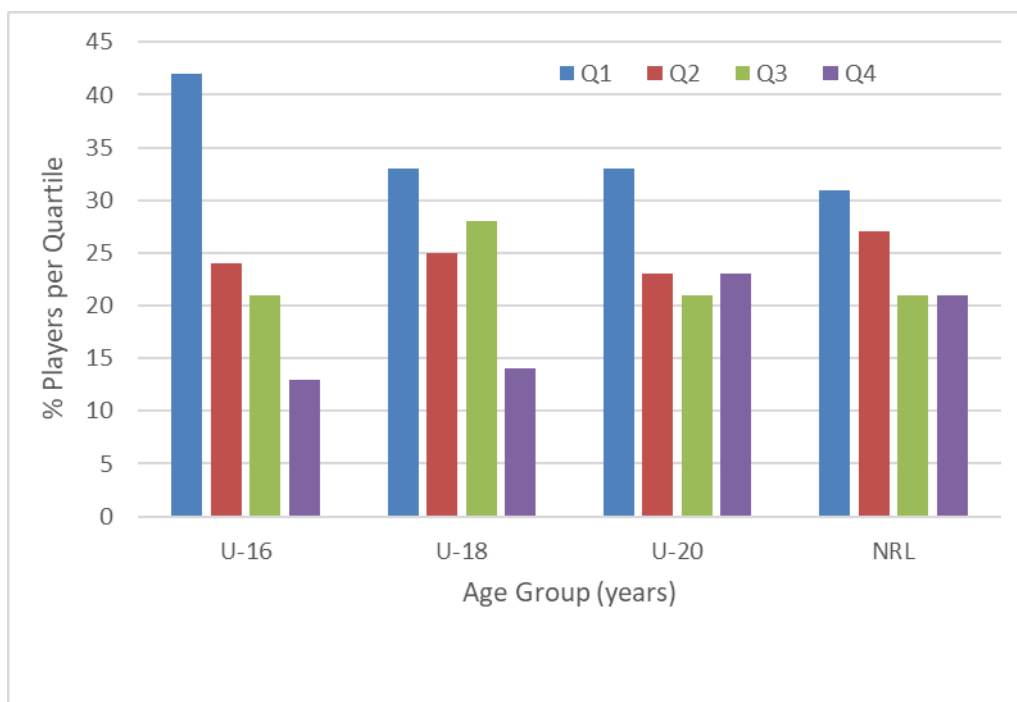


Figure 6-1. Quartile analysis, NSW club programmes 2014

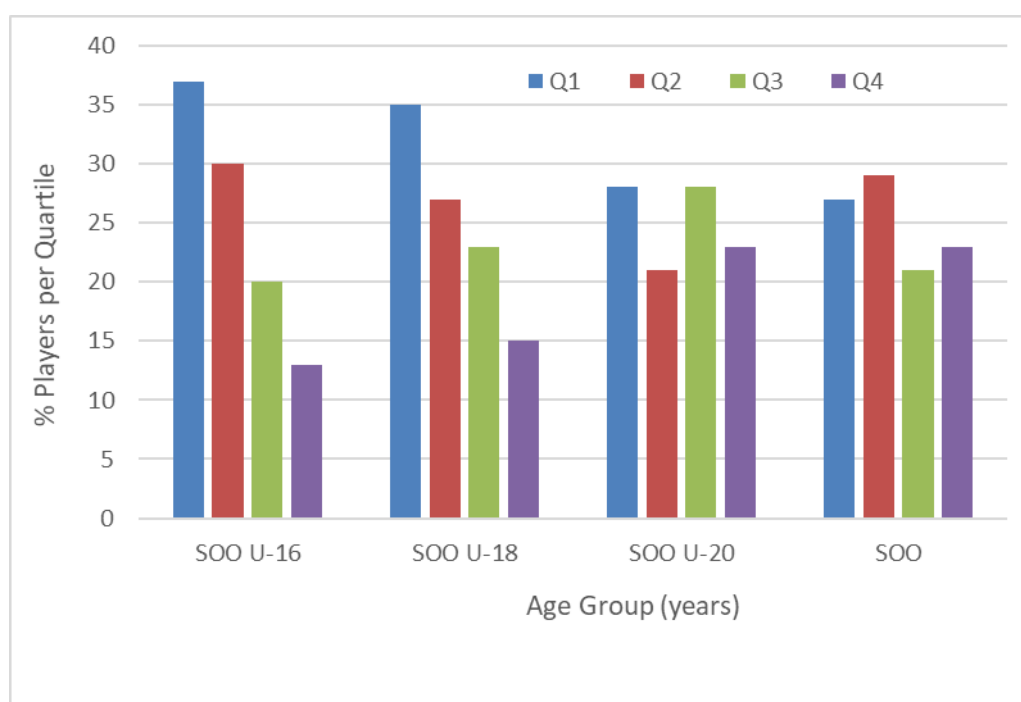


Figure 6-2. Quartile Analysis, NSW State programmes 2014

These data presented are consistent with findings in Chapters 3 and 4 where the same trends are observed in English RL. However, these trends *may* be present due to differing reasons. In England, there is a well-documented scarcity of player supply to satisfy the needs

of all the Super League Club Academies. Therefore, a need to recruit the perceived “better players” at 14 years magnifies this. This often manifests itself in recruiting players on current performance rather than potential and, therefore, due to the nature of the sport, the relatively older players are initially selected for development programmes. This is also compounded by a new ruling (from 2016 onwards) that movement by players between clubs at ages 15 and 16 years is now subject to compensation payment (RFL Operational Rules Tiers 1–3).

In Australia, in contrast, it is the competitive nature of youth programmes through ‘junior reps’ that drives the relative age bias. In the absence of long term development programmes, competition is seen as the predictor of developing talent and largely ignores a holistic model. From interviews with key stakeholders, this development model is clearly based upon the competition structure rather than recognised models of talent development.

One of the main limitations of the Australian system is the learning disposition of the coach. “There is agreement in the literature that dispositions (e.g. values, interests, and attitudes) direct the cognitions of individuals” (Griffiths & Armour, 2013, p. 678). The historical reliance on competition means that administrators and coaches know no different and have yet to be challenged. Although NSW enjoys a huge playing population (almost 50% larger than Queensland), it *could* be accused of massively under-achieving since the senior team has such a poor run of results at SOO level. At age-banded level, NSW are enjoying success on the field, but this appears to be at odds with sound TID principles where long term aims and objectives are compromised by the demands for short term success. Therefore, there is a need to carefully consider the role that competition plays throughout the pathway.

Similarly, in England, a historical over-reliance on competition is prevalent in the community and schools’ game. Chapter 3 detailed how this was having a potentially damaging impact on the size of the playing pool and, despite the RFL’s best efforts to instil a long term player development philosophy, this is compromised by the volume of competitive playing

opportunities that drives a win at all costs mentality in coaches. Again, this contradicts what the research tells us and will require a major shift in philosophy to bring about change (e.g. Galatti et al., 2016, Dale et al., 2016).

RL in the UK has begun to educate coaches and system builders about developing athletes for the long term. Since 2013, there has been a concerted push to educate coaches at the base of the pathway to integrate sound TD principles into their coaching. This has come in the form of a ‘talent development curriculum’ and a series of CPD workshops. The content of the curriculum was derived through a literature review of TID research and applying this in a RL specific context within its current landscape via pilot projects. The philosophy of this programme is to help broaden the talent pool with more athletes aged 12–14 years being able to access good talent coaching. The target coaches who deliver this on behalf of the sport are community club coaches and teachers (mainly UKCC level 2 qualified). However, within their social milieu, there is still prevalent a sub-culture of short-term success being demanded at the expense of long term development. In other words, the curriculum does not meet the needs of the exam. In this context, the exam is an ultra-competitive league or cup match every week which often compromises the sound development principles coaches have learnt.

As described in previous chapters, most of the talent in UK RL is developed through Super League Academies. The relative scarcity of available players and the fact that the majority of Academies serve a very small geographical area means that the search for, and recruitment of, Academy players is of paramount importance. The whole tone of recruitment and development is impacted because the administrative and political backdrop forces clubs to make decisions on players at an early age (e.g. at 14 years). These players will remain in club systems and rarely exit due to a need to succession plan and the fact that compensation is payable should a player move between clubs at age 16.

This political interference in the talent system therefore demands that the ‘development’ function of programmes is of exceptionally high quality. From an NGB point of view, it would rather allocate its financial resource to less Academies. This would mean that its limited funding is not spread so thinly, and higher quality environments can be fostered. This would also be proportional to the numbers of players in the potential ‘talent pool’.

Chapter 7 of this thesis will note a disconnect in the competition offer between age-banded and senior RL in the UK. Consequently, progress through the pathway could be limited according to the club policy that an individual join at age 16. However, the Australian system allows for more competitive playing options post the U-20 age group (see Table 6-3). Accordingly, players can be afforded opportunities at various levels according to their stage of development. This approach is supported by the work of Webb et al (2016) where the “variability throughout the pathway should be tailored to the exact nature of the organisation, its surrounding contexts and the challenge faced” (Webb et al., 2016, p. 6).

At the elite level, there is a marked difference in the competition and training environments afforded to the players in the two systems. A heavy UK competition schedule leaves little room for preparation of the international team, concerns over burnout and potential trade-off decisions to be made regarding their club versus country priority. Conversely in Australia, the domestic club season is shorter and elite players in the SOO system are provided with 30 days of preparation in high performance environments. Whilst the NRL is an intense competition, burnout may not be as significant as in the UK. This then crucially provides a step between club and international competition in a high-pressured environment.

Perhaps one solution for England to learn from Australia is to have more England players playing in the NRL. Nine of the current England squad play for NRL clubs. This would make sense with players in a more intense competitive environment with appropriate rest and recovery through the season. However, more England players who play overseas

would ‘devalue’ the Super League by losing its best talent. The migration of talent could be detrimental to its commercial and broadcast aspirations as the quality of Super League would be diminished by losing its better athletes.

## **6.6 Conclusion**

This chapter has set out to compare the characteristics of TID of the world’s two leading RL systems. It has examined both UK and Australian systems against current research and practice, and in the social milieu within which both systems operate. In any effective TID system, athlete progress is at its most effective when the transition between key points appears seamless. On the face of it, Australia appears to offer a seamless transition between levels of the pathway with progress to the international arena taking a staged approach. However, it is based upon flawed principles and is something that the system builders are seeking to address in a politically sensitive climate. I would suggest that the Australian system is reliant on its history and not fully embracing change to maximise its enormous potential to the full.

In having a much smaller player pool, the UK system must seek to do things differently. The current system exposes flawed selection processes to the pathway at the key ages of 15 and 19 years. At 15 years, the system insists on a small number of athletes (200) being selected for further development via Academies. In a late performance sport such as RL, a huge relative age bias is seen therefore many potential future elite players may remain undetected each year. At 19 years, player progression is somewhat uncertain depending on which club you sign for and its attitude to the competition structure (see Chapter 7).

Both scenarios have been derived from a political and financial standpoint that are brought about the need to protect numbers participating in community RL (age 15–16 years) and the financial cost of development programmes post 19 years old. Therefore, to make further significant progress the UK system must widen the base of the pathway and provide better development opportunities for more athletes by changing the culture and learning

disposition of coaches that operate at community level and those within professional Academies with responsibility for TID. The UK must also have a coherent pathway with consistent messages for athletes' post 19 years. Chapter 7 will show that the current post 19 system has its merits in isolated cases.

One important piece of learning from this chapter is that there are similar challenges being experienced on both sides of the world. However, because Australia is World Champion, England does not necessarily need to copy their system to close the gap. Therefore, in the UK we must create better talent development environments that keep more players playing the sport and in recognised pathways for longer.

The next chapter will explore how within our current framework we use competitive environments at key transition ages that contribute to the talent development processes.



## **CHAPTER 7**

### **INVESTIGATING THE GAP BETWEEN ELITE JUNIOR AND SENIOR COMPETITIVE ENVIRONMENTS: IMPACTS ON PLAYER DEVELOPMENT**

#### **7.1 Background**

As described in Chapters 3, 4 and 5, the identification and development of talented players is of paramount importance to National Sporting Bodies and professional teams. Despite this importance and the multi-millions invested into TID, however, there remains a lack of in-depth research into the transition from elite junior to elite senior sport, particularly with regard to the optimum requirements for competition.

Reflecting the breadth of impact apparent when undergoing transition, Wylleman and Lavallee (2004) noted that athletes making transitions from youth to senior sport experience change in four broad contexts; athletic, psychological, social and financial. Naturally, as athletes grow older, they will be expected to transition towards senior competitive environments, taking the gradual but consistently progressive step away from age-banded competition. Considering the multidimensional impact this can have to an athlete's life, it is unsurprising that such a move represents a significant challenge to almost any athlete (Pehrson, Stambulova & Olsson, 2017). But what is the optimum route to maximise an individual's athletic potential? The purpose of this chapter is to examine the current competition offer (i.e. the availability of appropriate playing opportunities) in Rugby League for those athletes whose careers are sat between age-banded and senior sport and to determine to what extent the competitive environments available to them impacts their development as athletes.

#### **7.2 The current situation in Rugby League**

As with most sports, youth sport competition is determined by age-grouping athletes. Presumably this is done with the intention of equalising competition by providing young

athletes with, at least chronologically, a level playing field. Or it may be done since it can be translated easily from education. Typically, this will be used up to the age of 21 years. Of the major men's team sports, almost all have age group World Championships; for example, Under 19 (Cricket), Under 20 (Football, Rugby Union, Ice Hockey) and Under 21 (Basketball & Volleyball). Elite level domestic club competition is also structured in age groups. For example, football has U-18 and U-21 league structures, with single year age bandings from U-8 to U-16. English RL currently have U-16 and U-19 age group competitions that exist through the professional club Academies.

The Player Pathway in Rugby League can be best summarised in Figure 7.1.

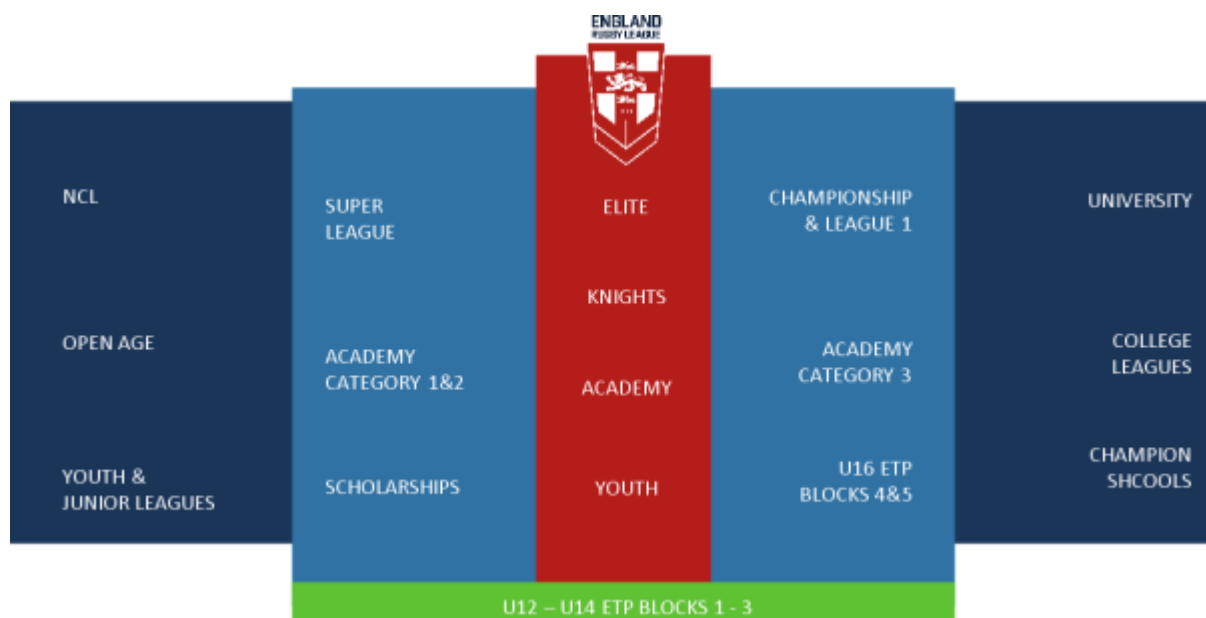


Figure 7-1. RL Talent and Performance Pathway

However, as has already been established by research (Abbott et al., 2005) and in Chapter 4 of this thesis, the development of talent is not a linear process according to chronological age. As can be seen from Figure 7.1, a player can be recruited to be a full-time RL player at either 18 or 19 years of age. Although bestowed the status of 'full-time' athlete, however, it would be an exception rather than the rule that a player becomes a regular first team player at 18 or 19 years. This trend can be seen in Australian Rules Football where

“typically, a transition period of 1 to 4 years occurs during which less experienced recruits play second tier games” (Burgess, Naughton & Norton, 2012, p. 53). During that time, the TDE must equip the athlete with the necessary tools to cope in his/her new world as a professional athlete (cf. Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004; Finn & McKenna, 2010; Bjørndal et al., 2017). Accordingly, it is necessary to provide athletes with the most appropriate competitive environments in which to develop, relative to their biopsychosocial level of development. Indeed, of the current 52 full-time players (registered on full time playing contracts in 2016) in Super League who would be classed in the U-19 and U-20 age group cohorts, only seven can be considered as ‘regular’ first team players (regular being defined as a player that has played over 50% of competitive first team games in the season). So, what happens to the rest; where do they access regular competition?

The financial constraints experienced by some of the Super League clubs led, in 2013 to the removal of the second tier of competition (i.e. U-20s). This was a competitive environment that helped bridge the gap between U-18 age group and senior RL, whilst also allowing over-age players to take part (maximum eight of the matchday 17). This is a real-life example of what was highlighted in Chapter 3 where the TDE is impacted by the political and financial climate of the sport.

Since this enforced change, the competitive offer is now a mix of club reserve teams, dual registrations or loans. Dual registration is where a Super League registered player can play for a ‘partner club’ in the Championship or League 1. This can be done on a weekly ad hoc basis. A loan arrangement is where a player’s registration is loaned to another club for a set period of time with a minimum duration of 28 days. As a result, there is conjecture amongst decision makers in the sport about what is the best path to take in finding the right balance between the financial constraints and optimum player development. Indeed, one *could* argue that an individual’s development has become somewhat of a ‘postcode lottery’, where the

financial stability and culture of the club you join at 16 can have a dramatic effect on an athlete's future development.

Reflecting these concerns, I wanted to investigate the views of the key stakeholder groups in the process, namely club CEOs, Head Coaches (Super League, Championship and League 1), Heads of Youth Performance and players.

## 7.3 Method

### 7.3.1 Participants

Six key stakeholder groups were identified to take part in this study. I required the participants to have a knowledge of elite RL. This was important for the Chapter as I needed to gain an understanding of their approach to the topic. In terms of identifying participants, a similar method was used by Ogden and Edwards (2016) when they investigated the way in which the elite ice hockey pathway is delivered in North America and Europe. Accordingly, participants were purposefully sampled as identified in Table 7-1.

Table 7-1. *Key Stakeholders in the Process*

POSITION HELD	Number	Years in role (mean $\pm$ SD)
Chief Executive Officers (Super League Clubs)	4 out of 12	10 $\pm$ 7.65
Super League Head Coaches	4 out of 12	4 $\pm$ 1.41
Championship head Coaches	4 out of 12	7.25 $\pm$ 7.54
League 1 Head Coaches	2 out of 15	6 $\pm$ 5.65
Heads of Youth Performance	8 out of 14	6.3 $\pm$ 3.42
Professional Players aged 19-23 years	16	NA
NB: eleven who are full-time with Super League clubs and five who came through the Academy system but are now part-time championship level players.		

Aside from the players, these specific groups were targeted since they have the biggest impact upon the development of players. CEOs have the direct responsibility for investment and setting strategy. Heads of Youth Performance (HOYP) are typically the lead officer in a Super League Academy, with overall responsibility for the strategic planning and day to day operation of the clubs' TID programmes. The 'end user' of the Academy system (i.e. the Super League Head Coach) and Head Coaches from outside the Super League were also interviewed since they are in a position of influence through existing dual registration and loan agreements and hence, also have a role to play. The players were aged between 19–23 years and had all been through recognised Academy programmes at Super League clubs. Of the 16, five players were currently registered to a Championship club whilst eleven were registered to Super League clubs.

### **7.3.2 Procedure**

Having identified the stakeholder groups, individuals within those groups were contacted either by telephone call or email in order to gain agreement to participate. Times and venues for interviews were agreed and these took place either over the telephone or at the participant's place of work. Of these, all the players, one Super League Coach and one Championship Coach were interviewed over the phone. The rest were interviewed at their place of work. The differences between interviews in person and over the phone are detailed in Chapter 2. After thoughtful consideration of using both interview methods, it was felt appropriate that they both could be used given my professional connection with the participants.

Participants were provided with an information sheet and gave signed informed consent prior to data collection (see Appendix I).

Before each interview, the purpose of the study was articulated to each participant. It was made clear that the study would be used to inform policy decision and that, consequently,

their views would be expressed and important in shaping policy. When conducting qualitative research, it is important that the interviewer builds rapport. Given my position within the NGB, I possessed a contextual knowledge and was familiar with key terms and current issues within RL (Hayman, Polman, Taylor, Hemmings & Borkoles, 2019). They were reassured, however, that their identities would not be disclosed in any subsequent publications, reports or presentations. Semi-structured interviews were conducted and, following scene setting and introductory discussion, interviews ranged from 20–45 min. All interviews were audio recorded in mp3 file format.

### **7.3.3 Interview Guide**

The interview guide was developed to solicit the views of participants with specific reference to the impact of competition on the development of players within their sporting and cultural context. A pilot interview was used on two colleagues within the NGB to ensure that questions being asked were relevant and easily understood by the participants. The first part of the interview guide allowed participants to articulate the vision and mission of the organisation that they worked for, consequently providing an opportunity to state how these were operationalised.

The second part focused the participant on the reasons for choosing the competition programme that they currently employed to help toward developing players to fulfil their aims as previously stated. This part not only allowed the interviewer to obtain a deeper information of the advantages and disadvantages of their chosen path, but also asked for specific real-life examples to be provided as to the (positive and negative) impact that it was having on the development of players. The interview guide is included as Appendix J.

### **7.3.4 Data Analysis**

Once recorded, interviews were transcribed and read several times to ensure familiarity with the data. Using the interview guide as a structure, summaries of key points were

constructed and organised against each question with exemplar quotes to validate these views. This was applied to all transcripts independently. Next, key points were synthesised for content, acknowledging where applicable, the similarities and differences across participants.

### **7.3.5 Trustworthiness of the Data**

Clearly, trustworthiness is important in any qualitative study. Several steps were taken to ensure this. Firstly, consideration was given to the qualifications and experience of participants who provided informed and influential opinion due to their job role. Secondly, a number of steps were taken to analyse the data as recommended by Pitney (2004). Data were re-read and transcripts compared to field notes taken at the time. A colleague working in the same field as the researcher also listened to the interviews. This provided a further layer of trustworthiness where that individual was in a position of sound knowledge and understanding of the topic. It also provided him an insight of what our key stakeholders were thinking.

‘Member checking’ was also done in that the findings were presented back to the participants. Member checking is a way in which you can check for the validity of results by returning the transcript to the interviewee so that they can “check for accuracy and resonance with their experience” (Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell & Walter, 2016, p 1). I conducted all interviews. I hold a senior position within the sport’s Governing Body and over 20 years have developed a strong rapport with these stakeholders at many levels.

## **7.4 Results**

This section presents results categorised by stakeholder group as detailed in Section 6.2.1. These stakeholders are the main protagonists in the system and hold a strong influence at all levels of the sporting, financial and cultural milieu of the sport.

### **7.4.1 Chief Executive Officers**

CEOs reported that the aim of their talent development system was to produce players for their own clubs, the Super League in general and for the England international team. This

sentiment led to comments such as “we want to produce enough players to field a first team of international standard players” (CEO Club K), whilst Club L reported that “as far as the board is concerned, it is to get 2 full time professional players per cohort. They don’t necessarily have to play for (Club L).”

Despite communicating a common goal, however, there was conjecture amongst CEOs on how best to go about achieving the stated aims as far as competition is concerned. Two clubs (L and F) did not have reserve teams but did have dual registration agreements in place. “We have both Championship and League 1 dual registration arrangements. In a nutshell, our 19 and 20 year olds need to be in League 1 and older players at championship” (CEO, Club L). Club F considered that their U-19 Academy team *was* their reserves and that “we need a dual registration team at the highest possible level in the championship so that players are getting intense competitive games when they play” (CEO club F).

In contrast to Club F, Clubs K and J both opted for a reserve team as well as retaining the right to dual register players to teams in lower leagues. Reasons given for this were that “we believe in a reserve team where we are in control of our own destiny. We want our players playing at our home stadium, our way” (CEO club K).

From a CEO perspective, a determining factor for the construct of the club pathway was the cost. Large variations in how much it costs to have a reserve team were reported, ranging from “approximately £10,000 plus matchday costs” (CEO Club J) through to club L whose CEO stated that “we believe it would cost £80-£100K with our set up.” Conversely, club L’s chosen path being dual registration with clubs in both the championship and League 1 meant that the costs for this were presented as “nil since we have those players anyway” (CEO club L).

CEOs did highlight some limiting factors in their practice. They pointed to the lack of control and influence that, as Super League clubs, they could exercise on team selection at



Championship and League 1 level. This was a factor in Club K's decision to run a reserve team, stating a desire to operate "without the constraints of we don't want him or we'll take him and I'm not playing him" (CEO Club K). Club J pointed to the fact that, in the present system, there were not enough reserve team games and this had led to "receiving emails from parents expressing concerns about their son's development" (CEO Club J).

Whilst holding a common vision for the development of players within the Super League competition and the international game, CEOs differ in their philosophy of how this should be done.

#### **7.4.2 Heads of Youth Performance**

As a group, the HOYPs agreed that, for a TID system to thrive, there must be multiple opportunities to play in a well-structured environment over a prolonged period of time. All HOYPs stated that the aim of their TID system was to produce players, not only for their own clubs but for England and the rest of the sport, whether this be in the professional ranks or as players retained in community sport.

In the eyes of the HOYPs, enforced rule changes to the competitive structure since 2013 had somewhat limited the scope of the TID system, particularly for players aged over 16 years. This had resulted in a situation where "as a late maturation sport we are making decisions too early" (HOYP Club A). The impact was uniformly reported as being felt throughout the Academy system. Within the U-19 squads there are three cohorts of players. This had resulted in situations where it has become "a big ask to put a 16-year-old up against a 19-year-old who has gone through 3 pre-seasons" (HOYP Club H). Similarly, a 19-year-old may not be getting sufficiently challenged by age-group competition but be unable to be provided with the appropriate competitive opportunity to meet his needs. The feeling amongst HOYPs was to re-order the U-19's to become U-18's and make reserve teams compulsory to provide the most appropriate competition offer. The reason for making reserves compulsory was that players

too old for Academy U-19 were experiencing an erratic programme of games: “It’s purely chance that players get to play on DR (dual registration), dependent on what the partner club is looking for on a weekly basis” (HOYP Club A).

By having a reserve team, HOYPs felt that the Super League club would have full control over a player’s development and that there was a dichotomy between desired outcomes for the Super League and the Dual Registration partner. Typically, the HOYP felt that too much was being left to chance. “With having a reserves, it allows all your club’s players to play. If we had DR (dual registration) you’d be lucky to get 3 of them out. We cannot control the minutes they play or the position they play. Ultimately your partner club has its own board of directors, own people it needs to please. From their point of view, they want a bit of consistency too. They may have spent their money on key positions and it’s the same position as you are trying to offer them. They still want to win - its results based for them” (HOYP Club K).

#### **7.4.3 Super League Head Coaches**

Super League is the premier Rugby League club competition in Europe. It comprises of 12 teams with a 29 game regular season. In terms of player development, Head Coaches will work with both the HOYP and CEO to ensure that the needs of the club are met through both player recruitment and retention. All Head Coaches interviewed placed a great emphasis on being able to develop players from within their own club. The Head Coach of club B stated that it was his club’s vision to “build a squad with as many local kids who have come through our system as we possibly can, surrounded with quota players of international calibre.”

Coaches were very aware of the great importance attached to players that were products of their system. This was emphasised by Boards of Directors (who wish to see a return on investment) and supporters who identify greatly with people from the local communities. “From a marketing point of view, everyone wants to see local kids come through” (Head

Coach, Club B). Another Head Coach commented that he “would much rather select a player from our own system than bring someone in” (Head Coach, Club J). Another Head Coach highlighted that there was a will from both himself and the Board of Directors to retain more home-grown players. This was being made slightly easier now that Club E had qualified for the top eight of Super League end of season play offs (in 2016).

Overwhelmingly, Head Coaches reported that there was a logistical problem in being able to co-ordinate appropriate playing and training plans for all professional players, especially those who were not yet considered first team regulars. Of the four Head Coaches spoken to, two have reserve teams and three have dual registration agreements (clubs are permitted both reserve team and dual registration). One club had neither. This presents its challenges because, as a consequence, playing opportunities are not frequent. There are 12 scheduled reserve team games and, where dual registration is concerned, Super League Coaches have little influence on who is selected by the Championship and League 1 clubs since “players offered on dual registration early in the season are rejected because the Championship club has a fully fit squad” (Head Coach, Club L). In the same vein, “some of the players we are making available (to DR club), the coach won’t take because he wants to stay in the division. Why would he take a young kid who’s not yet ready for Super League and push one of his old heads out of the team” (Head Coach, Club L).

Head Coaches reported that, since the removal of compulsory reserve grade competition, there had been severe limitations placed upon the system. An emerging pattern was that, when clubs suffer a run of injuries and suspensions, young players who aren’t quite ready for Super League are required to play. This has seen “players promoted to first team because they have played well in U-19’s – there is no next test” (Head Coach, Club J). This has led to players learning in the “wrong” environment and making mistakes in first grade, and as a consequence, “Super League is getting weaker” (Head Coach, Club E). A similar situation

arose at Club L where “we had a 20-year-old player whose first game of the season was in the first team on Good Friday. On the back of a poor performance he is now on dual registration at League 1. There was no process for his integration to the team at all” (Head Coach, Club L).

Having a reserve team had proved advantageous to club B. Because there were some playing opportunities at reserve team level in the build up to the Easter period, (Super League has full rounds of fixtures on both Good Friday and Easter Monday) it meant that club B “could put players in on Easter Monday and they were ready” (Head Coach, Club B). Similarly, the Head Coach of club J said that “reserves gives me a great view of where players are at and if they are ready for 1<sup>st</sup> grade. I want to see more of it.”

Club L did not have a reserve team and had two dual registration agreements with clubs in the Championship and League 1. The Head Coach reported that “we have players not playing 4 or 5 weeks in a row.” This has “led to them doubling up on training on some days so that they can show the head Coach of the Championship club that they are capable of getting in his team” (Head Coach, Club L).

Club E had neither reserves nor dual registration agreement and “some players we physically cannot get a game for” (Head Coach, Club E). At Club E, the coach “would prefer a reserve team over dual registration because I can keep a close eye on my players. If we could afford it, it’s the route I’d want to take” (Head Coach, Club E).

Concern was expressed regarding the quality of the learning environments within Championship and League 1 clubs. Coaches pointed to a difference in technical and tactical coaching that sent mixed messages. Also, that the lifestyle and attitudes of some League 1 players were not beholden of that of a professional athlete and were perceived as poor role models. Whilst not having a dual registration or reserve team, Club E did have some players ‘on loan’ at various clubs in the Championship. Whilst players were getting a playing

opportunity, however, communication with coaches and availability of video film of games was infrequent meaning that player performance is difficult to effectively monitor.

Furthermore, since Super League fixtures can take place between Thursday and Sunday and Championship and League 1 games are mainly on Sundays, Club L's Head Coach reported that, therefore, contact time between player and coach can be severely limited. The training programmes of dual registration players was compromised owing to different schedules dictated by the day of games in any given week. These players often missed training with the main group; therefore, missing learning at vital times was constraining progress. It was also "difficult for players who are dropped from 1st team to be able to play to improve their deficiencies" (Head Coach, Club L).

Alongside the problems faced for the developing player, concern was raised about the integration of senior players who were returning from long injury layoffs. Clubs L and J recently had senior players having to return to play in the first team rather than reserves. "Players are being forced to go straight back into 1<sup>st</sup> team for eighty minutes rather than playing reserves where it can be managed better" (Head Coach, Club J).

#### **7.4.4 Championship and League 1 Head Coaches**

Championship and League 1 clubs are highly ambitious in their aspirations, with promotion to the next division a common goal. The re-introduction of promotion to Super League (since 2015) has seen an increase in financial investment (from the RFL) at the top of the Championship. "The Championship is improving rapidly so it's not necessarily the best place to put developing players" (Head Coach, Club C). Consequently, players being made available for Dual Registration by Super League were sometimes not selected by the Championship coaches because "they have to be better than the players you are leaving out" (Head Coach, Club N).

Dual Registration was largely welcomed by the Championship and League 1 coaches interviewed. Club C did not have a Dual Registration agreement in place as their philosophy was to build from within and that “culturally we are all seen as rivals due to promotion and relegation” (Head Coach, Club C). Coaches stated they were in a strong position to be able to control, on their terms, which players they receive into the team. “In 2016 it’s been a really light touch. The team has been 95% our players this year. I made it very clear to them at the start of the season if they were playing well, they’d stay in the team” (Head Coach, Club M).

Inevitably, several drawbacks had been experienced. All coaches experiencing Dual Registration were mindful of the impact it made on team cohesion, especially when player movement was not usually finalised until very late in the week; sometimes resulting in a regular player losing his place. This resulted in the Dual Registered player only training once with the Championship/League 1 team. Therefore, “these players need to be quick learners to get up to speed with the way we play” (Head Coach, Club M). Coaches reported that they regularly experienced situations where players were identified earlier in the week for dual registration but were withdrawn later in the week to cover for injuries in the first team squad.

Another issue to arise was that Super League standard players were dropping down two divisions to League 1. Some believed that this compromised the integrity of the League 1 competition but, whilst the rule was there, the Head Coach of Club N would use it to his advantage since it was allowing him to win games but also develop relationships with players who may become players at Championship and League 1 level should they ever be released from Super League. Indeed, even at Championship level this can happen when, on one occasion, four high quality players were dropped back in one week. This was experienced by a leading Championship club when “we came up against a team in the championship last year who ended up with four experienced SL players the day we played them and they had a big impact on the game we lost” (Head Coach, Club C).

Championship and League 1 coaches were very strong in their view that Super League should have a mandated reserve team. The coaches of clubs M, G, C, Q, and P all believed that “the RFL is the governing body and therefore should govern. Reserves should not have been an option” (Head Coach, Club P). Since the Championship standards are improving “young players need to be developing in a viable reserve grade competition” (Head Coach, Club N).

Dual Registration had benefitted two clubs in ways other than just receiving players. As part of Club N’s agreement with their Super League partner, they could access a high standard of training facility. Club Q’s Head Coach reported that both he and his staff (coaching and medical) were always welcome at their partner’s base so that they can observe sessions, get to know players better and take away some valuable professional development opportunities.

#### **7.4.5 Players**

The players commonly responded that the main pre-determinants of elite performance were those related to mental skills and adopting the lifestyle of the 24/7 athlete. Being “*mentally tough*” (Player 2) and the importance of “maintaining a healthy lifestyle” (Player 10), were typical responses. They also stated that they needed to learn to be adaptable between different environments and that the sometimes challenging circumstances meant that they were required “to have a strong mental attitude if you want to get to the level you wish to” (Player 6).

In contrast, there was a mixed response as to whether players felt that the sport had prepared them for the long term. Where a player had experienced a full pathway (i.e., U-19, reserve team, first team) the view was that each stage had given them the knowledge and understanding to progress to the next. “After spending time playing for the 19s and under 20s, I signed a contract with the first team. Then I started pre-season with the first team which was

very intensive and challenging. I would say that gradually building up at each stage has built me as a player and as a person” (Player 2). Player 12 pointed to a lack of playing opportunity and that “a lack of reserves games” was hampering his development.

Players reported that the various environments they experienced were challenging and supportive. The challenges were experienced in terms of having to fit in to new environments and be able to learn new things quickly. “It is not as easy as it sounds. You got to try and fit into your new role, fit into the way your new team play and fit into their structures” (Player 2). Players did believe that their developmental needs were being met in that regular dialogue took place with coaches to ensure that playing opportunities were available. “They did not really want me to be blocked every week and be training and not playing. So, they want me to play” (Player 1).

Having an opportunity to go and play at a Dual Registration club was reported as largely positive towards a player’s development. Players said that the main benefits were getting playing time, being challenged by older, more experienced players, gaining confidence in a lower league and the feeling of being more prepared when they were asked to step up to play in the Super League. “It’s good and gives you the chance to play against good quality opponents every week, playing regular games when you might not get the chance at your home club” (Player 14). Similarly, Player 2 commented that “I think it was positive as it provided me with the opportunity to step up from U-19s level to actually playing against grown men” (Player 2).

However, there were some drawbacks associated with the Dual Registration arrangements. Some players said that training time with their Dual Registration club was very limited, depending largely on whether they would be required for that particular week. “I think it is good and bad really... It is good because as a young player you gain that experience and playtime in a demanding League [Championship]. However, when you come into the dual reg



system you actually join a team and you can't really train with them much...maybe I used to train with them once a week. So, it is difficult to find your role in team” (Player 4). Conversely, where a player did enjoy a longer period of time and a run of games, the experience became more rewarding. “It was a bit tricky at the beginning to get used to it and stuff like that, but I played about nine games and at the end of it I think it was really good. I found my place in the team and I found my role. Certainly, settling yourself in is a main bit” (Player 2).

Dependent upon their age and which club they were currently registered to, meant that experiences of reserve team rugby were very mixed. Older players in the sample had experienced reserve team pre-2014. This was regarded as a valuable learning experience since “I was only 18 years old playing against first grade players, so I was kind of proving myself against older men. I found it very helpful as I had the chance to prove to the coach that I could handle myself against men” (Player 2) and that “playing in reserves was a natural step up” (Player 15).

Under the new system, players appreciated the benefits of playing in a “fast game at reserves and learning to play the same style as the first team was perfect” (Player 13). Reserve teams also provided something for players to aim for in that “when you are a young kid and playing for the academy it gives you something to earn for by moving to the reserves” (Player 5). Another benefit associated with playing reserves was that it “has been a good chance to showcase myself to the first team coaches” (Player 14).

However, players did report some drawbacks to the current system. Because of the club they were currently at, some had yet to experience reserve teams and accordingly were sometimes required to “go from the U-19 team straight to the first team” (Player 1). Players also said that the irregular pattern of the fixture list was not conducive to their development in that “we don’t get to play each week and sometimes get 3 weeks off” (Player 15) and “because there are only a small number of reserve teams we can’t play every week” (Player 8).

Despite reporting many positive features about the current system, players did describe several constraints they were currently experiencing. Some said that they did not get enough game time and that the “lack of games between age 19–21 has impacted on my development” (Player 12) and “you can do the best you can in training but in effect you need to be playing and doing your best in games to become that better player” (Player 1). If a player is domiciled at a club with no reserve team, then “there is nothing in-between U-19s and first team and sometimes it makes it difficult for younger players to find game time and progress” (Player 5). Where game time was found as a dual registration player then this does become problematic since “if you go on dual reg you learn other moves, training routines and you work in a different environment - basically at a different club. Then you come back to play for the [Super League] first team and you are actually learning two different things. If there was a reserve team then you could keep and stick to the same structure from the under 19s team to the reserves and then to the first team” (Player 2).

## **7.5 Discussion**

This research aimed to investigate the impact on player development as reflected by the competitive playing opportunities afforded to developing players on their path towards senior elite status. What clearly emerged is that there is a pragmatic view being taken by Coaches and HOYs which is being countered by the decision makers in the sport, both at club and NGB level.

There was universal agreement among Heads of Youth and Coaches that, at face value, both dual registration and reserve teams serve an important role in providing competitive playing opportunities for the developing player. Players stated how these had aided their transition and provided positive experiences playing against older and more experienced opposition. Whilst there were dual registration agreements and reserve team games in place that are providing playing opportunity, on probing deeper, the feeling from coaches, Heads of

Youth and players was that this was a far from ideal situation in the overall contribution to player development. The main issues centred around:

- Planning training
- The acceptance by Championship coaches of dual registration players
- The perceived lack of quality attributed to some Championship and League 1 environments
- The infrequency of reserve team games

As the results of the interviews have shown, there is a lack of philosophical congruence amongst the key stakeholders in the game. Elements crucial to a talent pathway as identified by Martindale et al. (2005) and Webb et al. (2016) appear to be missing. Taking the key features noted by Martindale and colleagues for an effective TDE, Rugby League (at least at this level of the sport) appears to be somewhat lacking when comparing the theory against the current findings.

Firstly, there is a lack of systematic planning of competition schedules and regular planned training interventions evident from the Super League clubs and the NGB. It is very difficult for the system builders (coaches, HOYs) to be able to provide a long term vision to players who are entering their professional Academy programmes from the age of 16 years. For prospective 16-year-old recruits to professional club Academies, the playing field may not be an equal one in terms of competitive playing opportunities on offer for all that enter the talent pathway at 16 years. For example, in the commercial and broadcast world of professional sports, the elite end of Rugby League is, to a certain extent, at the behest of television broadcasters. This has resulted in Super League fixtures taking place on 4 days of the week (Thursday to Sunday) throughout the season as opposed to the Championship and League 1 who, in most of cases, still play games on Sunday afternoon. This was problematic in being able to effectively plan for individualised player development (for those players involved in

dual registration) in terms of training frequency and intensity and a competitive games programme. Players were having to train in small groups away from the main squad with conditioning staff having to think creatively as to how to simulate the void left by the lack of appropriate competition. This also led to a lack of time that players got with the first team coaching staff and being able to train with the main group where positive role modelling from the experienced professionals is being missed.

Furthermore, diminishing opportunities to train and compete are compounded by changes in financial distributions to championship clubs (central cumulative distribution to Championship clubs has increased from £1.08 million in 2015 to £3.9 million in 2016). This finance means that Championship clubs are better resourced to recruit a better standard of player and therefore rely less on dual registered players from SL. Four Championship clubs (in season 2016) can be classed as ‘full-time’ with serious aspirations about being promoted to Super League within the next 2 years. Accordingly, such clubs do not need to enter into these agreements since they have enough players of quality to meet their needs. Secondly, other Championship clubs have heavily invested in their squads since they too have Boards of Directors and a fan base to satisfy through performances on the field. Such clubs will have recruited key players in certain positions and SL clubs are finding it difficult to place players (especially halves, hookers and fullbacks) since those are the positions in which Championship teams have their best and most expensive assets playing.

The scarcity of opportunity is depicted below in Table 7-2. This shows the number of players dual registered from the Super League to Championship and League 1 clubs at the half way point of the 2016 playing season.

Table 7-2. *Dual Registration from Super League, as of 08/05/2016*

Super League to Championship	Super League to League 1
5 partnerships	5 partnerships

14 players	24 players
Ave 3.2 games per player	Ave 2.04 games per player

These data are an indicator that the Dual Registration system is not providing adequate learning and competitive frequency for this group of players. Players had averaged less than three games in a 13-week period across all environments. This is of concern since the number of players accessing the championship is low (14) yet more have accessed League 1. However, this is concerning since HOYs and Coaches expressed their opinion that the standard of League 1 is unacceptable for the developing player.

So, what of Dual Registration? Is it a ‘finishing school’ where players are provided with a systematic plan and support with regular reviews and goals set that are understood and followed by all in the process? Or, is it merely a ‘gap year’ where everything is left to chance in the hope that the player might get some game time somewhere? Evidence in this Chapter would suggest that Dual Registration is taking an uncertain approach, with playing opportunities afforded to individuals not under the direct control of the Super League club. Indeed, the Super League club has little influence on the Championship or League 1 clubs as to the make-up of their match day squads; hence, they must accept the less than ideal situation they currently find themselves in.

Since 1999, the reserve team of RL clubs’ competition had been age-banded in various ways. However, there is no age restriction now. This de-regulation is regarded as a positive move and meets the needs of all players within the professional game. The requirement to have a reserve team was removed at the end of the 2013 playing season. This was voted for by the Super League clubs because, at the time, they did not feel that the second tier of competition was providing a return on investment. Therefore, all that was available was for clubs to set up Dual Registration agreements. This was then further compromised with the re-introduction of promotion and relegation in 2015. Consequently, some clubs decided that it would suit them

better if they had a reserve team so, from the start of the 2016 season, a programme of matches was set up in a non-mandatory fashion for those clubs that wanted such a programme.

Four Super League clubs currently have a reserve team with each team expecting to play up to twelve matches per year. They are not in a competitive league structure since the philosophy adopted has been to ensure that all professional players can access regular game time, older age-banded Academy players can be tested at the next level and other athletes from outside of Rugby League (e.g. Rugby Union trialists) can be given opportunities.

This chapter has provided strong arguments from participants in all categories (i.e. Super League, Championship and League 1) as to the importance to the sport of a high-quality reserve team programme. The cost of running reserves varied greatly across estimates obtained from SL CEOs. Where a club owns and operates its own facilities, the cost is significantly lower for matchday and training. Significant extra costs were seen in the retention and recruitment of players and medical insurance cover. The cost estimates were £20,000 to £120,000, making the demand on clubs across the leagues somewhat varied.

Most stakeholders spoke positively about the benefit of having a reserve team. CEOs, Head Coaches and Heads of Youth (of those clubs with reserves) were unanimous that having reserves enabled clubs to fully control the holistic development of an individual rather than having to accept situations largely out of their control; especially if the dependency for competition is dual registration. Many believed that currently young players were learning in the ‘wrong environment’ and rather than making mistakes in reserves, players were doing this in first team. Where clubs do not operate reserves, an individual is more often than not required to jump from U-19’s to first team without having to take ‘the next test.’

From a developmental perspective, having the ability to retain players for longer in a talent system will allow more to realise their full potential. HOYs who are considered the individuals within the club setting as the experts in talent identification and development,

strongly believe that making decisions on players' futures at age 19 is too soon. The general consensus of this group was to replace the U-19 Academy with an U-18 Academy and have a non-age graded reserves (over 18 years old). Provision of such a reserves squad therefore allows players to stay in the system for longer. If this was the direction of travel, it would positively impact the U-18 Academy cohort. Since the current Academy is spread over 3 cohorts, HOYs noted that players in the U-17 group are not getting much game time owing to preference being given to older players. They felt that, in many cases, this group of U-17's is at a disadvantage by having to compete against players who in some cases have been through three full pre-season training programmes and that most Academies will carry squads of 30 players. In reality, under the current system a player may only get one playing season in which to demonstrate his worth!

This approach would provide greater support to all individuals throughout the pathway and provide greater flexibility knowing that individuals develop at different rates (cf. Simminton, 1999). Indeed, of the last seven British winners of the 'Man of Steel' award (awarded annually to the individual regarded as Super Leagues' best player) five of the recipients were not signed professional at 16 and only two had represented England at age-grade level. Additionally, players also expressed that they have benefited positively from playing in the reserve grade. They pointed to being able to play in the same system as their first team and this made transition easier when called upon to step up. This is comparable to the transition observed in other sports. For example, in Australian Rules Football (AFL), it was reported that the gap between age banded and senior AFL was being bridged by irregular playing opportunities at 'state league' level. (Burgess, Naughton & Norton, 2012). Consequently, A significant gap between U-18 and professional ranks can lead to longer periods of transition and urgent strategies were "required to fast-track physical and skill development of early recruits at the elite level" (p. 55). A study of player transition in ice

hockey (Pehrson, Stambulova, & Olsson, 2017) produced a validated model, “phases in the junior to senior transition of Swedish ice hockey players” (p. 756). This model lends itself appropriately to RL since it suggests up to 7 years in the system (from age 17 years) to become an established senior player whilst considering all biopsychosocial elements of athlete development.

## **7.6 Conclusion**

There have been many questions posed by all those connected to the sport about how the ‘second tier’ of competition should operate. Indeed, it has been the subject of many hours’ debate in board rooms and received much coverage in the media (television and radio debate, RL trade press). Yet, despite the many expressed opinions, there has not been any evidence collated as to the impact the current competition structure is having.

It is very clear that all professional clubs want to be as competitive as they can within the new league structure. League 1 and Championship clubs have embraced this and are actively seeking to take incremental steps to gain promotion from League 1, consolidate their championship position or seek elevation to the Super League.

Within the Super League there is a strong sense that club owners, directors and Head Coaches have a shared philosophy of wanting to develop Super League and international class players from within their own system. Championship and League 1 clubs have developed strong cultures and philosophy towards growing their clubs and businesses. Whilst they welcome, in part, support from Super League, there is a fine line between creating and maintaining their own identity and this being eroded by their dual registration agreement with Super League.

From the analysis of interviews and centrally held RFL appearance data, it is clear that both reserve team and dual registration can positively contribute to the on-going development of a player towards elite level. This chapter did not set out to prove one system better than the



other. However, respondents expressed their opinion about the advantages and disadvantages of both systems.

For the talent development system to meet the strategic aims of the sport, a degree of change is required in the competitive offer available for potential elite athletes post Academy U-19. Specifically, more regular access to competition and a systematic individualised training programme is required for these athletes, particularly those one and two years post Academy U-19. To do nothing poses the greatest risk to the RFL and Super League set goals of England consistently winning major International tournaments and Super League realising its commercial, spectating and broadcast targets.

Implementing the change that best fits is, of course, a decision for the Super League Executive and RFL Board. However, interviewees were strong in the view that the NGB should govern and implement their recommended direction of travel rather than to make things an option. In their opinion, this has led to a lack of philosophical congruence between those charged with building the system (i.e. Heads of Youth, club coaches) and their leaders, leading to a TDE where there is no long term vision nor coherent philosophies that are clearly understood by athletes, parents, supporters and the media.

## **CHAPTER 8**

### **OPTIMUM COMPETITIVE OPPORTUNITIES FOR 15 AND 16 YEAR OLDS WITHIN THE TALENT PATHWAY**

#### **8.1 Introduction**

Chapters 3 and 5 have described the socio-political landscape that surrounds RL and how it impacts on TID. These chapters highlighted the strong historical emphasis placed upon the role of competition in RL and, therefore, the purpose of this chapter is to investigate the role of competition at the first selective environment of the talent pathway, and the impact this is having on athlete development.

#### **8.2 Background**

Previous competitive environments reflected the SMTD described in Chapter 4 (Bailey & Collins, 2013). In a RL context, this involved selection through Town, Regional and eventually International programmes; all of which included competitive playing opportunities. Traditionally, as with many talent programmes of the day, these competitive environments were used as the main selection tool for who would progress to the next stage.

More recently, however, as investment in the professional game has significantly increased, and with the advent of conditional public funding made available to the NGB, this has made the sport re-think its strategy towards identifying and developing talent. Both initiatives have resulted in more responsibility being placed on the professional clubs (Academies) to be the main source of TID. Naturally, this is in their best interests. Unlike football where there is a vast worldwide supply of talent to professional clubs, RL in the UK must be self-sufficient and able to optimise its TID programmes to progress players to an (ideally higher in standard) elite level.

### **8.3 Competition exposure of talented 15 and 16-year olds**

Responding to both changes in funding and a rapidly growing evidence base for TID, the professional game has been given far greater responsibility for the development of the talent pool in RL. Politically, this transition has been far from straight forward, particularly where gaining access to players below the age of 16 years is concerned.

Comparable to football, the competition amongst clubs to search for, recruit and develop players is fierce. This is compounded by the comparatively low participation base relative to the number of Academies who, geographically, are in very close proximity. Therefore, having the opportunity to work more often with more perceived ‘talented’ players is of huge importance to the Academies because “not only are they sports clubs but financially competitive companies and brands” (Schroepf & Lames, 2018, p. 405). This also includes providing access to appropriate levels of competition relevant to the age and stage of the athlete. However, those 15 and 16-year olds selected to scholarship programmes will “participate with teams in multiple age categories and playing standards simultaneously” (Phibbs et al., 2017, p. 176). This means that in the RL context, a player can compete simultaneously for school, community club, scholarship club and England representative. Furthermore, owing to the way the RL calendar is structured, these high-talent athletes can be exposed to competitive environments for 12 months of the year. Consequently, an excessive focus on early intensive training and competition at young ages rather than skill development can lead to overuse injury and burnout (Di Fiori et al., 2014).

Reflecting these two quotes, the specific role of competition has fallen into question. To understand this better, an explanation of the playing season is offered in Figure 8.1 below.

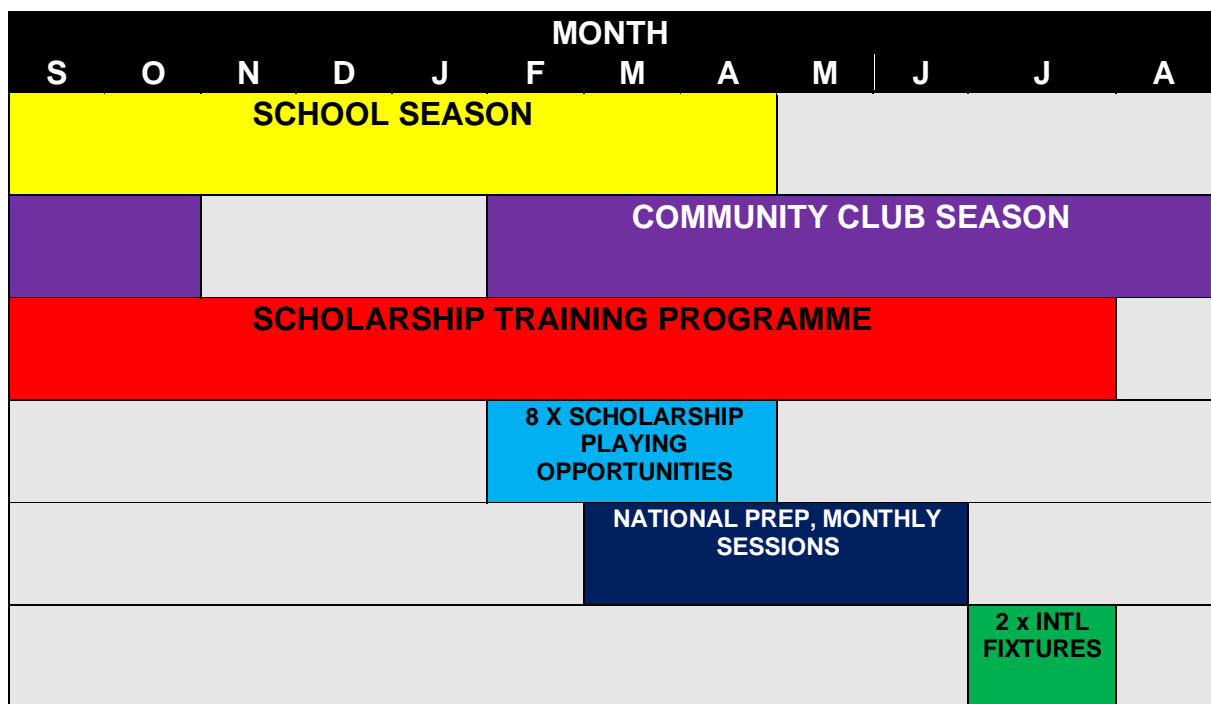


Figure 8-1 Overview of U-15 and U-16 playing and training year

The socio-political background of the sport must also be understood. To arrive at its current position, the sport has embarked on a long and winding journey to find solutions that meet the needs of all stakeholders. One such factor is the age of recruitment. Historically, professional clubs did not start to recruit players until after their sixteenth birthday. Typically, they would be recruited from community clubs and put into Academy under 19 squads. However, since the receipt of monies from Sport England coupled with investment from Super League, this has allowed the talent system to develop. Inevitably, there will be changes of conditions attached to monies and as the expanding body of research further evolves, then change to the TID approach is inevitable. Consequently, the NGB has been required to navigate some politically sensitive waters over the past 9 years (2009–2018). During this time, the NGB has, as would be expected, acted in the best interests to find a “whole sport solution” to satisfy the wants and needs of all stakeholders (cf. Policy Review, 2014). However, in terms of the talent system, was this a whole sport solution or a political solution where stakeholders had to compromise on their preferred position?

For the professional clubs to get access to more players more often, some concessions with the community game were brokered via the RFL Policy Review of 2014. This review of policy concluded that the professional clubs could have more training time and hold the primary registration of the player. This meant that the training and playing load would be managed by the scholarship programme and activities whilst away from the scholarship would be carefully monitored “to help inform appropriate prescription of training to maximise performance and protect the player from injury” (Phibbs et al., 2017, p. 181). Of interest, this regulatory approach is almost unique in the UK context.

Academies were granted the ‘primary registration’ of the scholarship players. This was done in order that the playing and training load of these players could be monitored in such a manner as described above by Phibbs et al. (2017). As can be seen in Figure 8.1, the demands on players to participate in multiple environments is high. To date, however, no formal monitoring and recording of player loads has taken place. At the start of 2016, the RFL and a research partner encouraged Academies to undertake a longitudinal study, as carried out in Rugby Union. This was intended to offer the Academies a means to be able to effectively monitor the activity of their players and provide valuable data and insight back to the NGB so that best practice could be disseminated as a result.

The offer of a research project was proposed in two phases:

Phase 1:

Data collection from retrospective recall of training and playing demands experienced by current players in the Under-16 academies versus Under-17 (‘first year’) in the Under-19 academy programme. This would provide an insight into the mapping of training and playing schedules.

Phase 2:

It was anticipated that players would complete a bespoke online training diary, which would be developed for this study. The depth of data collection and analysis planned was to be split into two parts:

- a) Training load
- b) Match demands

(Taken from a letter from RFL to all Academies, January 2016)

Unfortunately, for reasons unknown, this study did not take place. Reasons may have included the cost (circa £1,000 per club), the extra resource demands or the learning disposition of Academy staff towards research.

Notwithstanding such in-depth data, competitive scholarship games have been played since 2010 and, in their current guise, since 2015. (There is one team selected from across two annually age-grouped cohorts). This activity is evaluated on an annual basis, but only for its' impact on the rest of the RL calendar! The one safeguard against overplaying is the scholarship playing policy. This policy states that players must not play 72 hours before a scholarship game or within 48 hours after (see Appendix K for full policy). This policy exists to alleviate over playing and training that can lead to physical burnout (see also Chapter 4). Evidence suggests that “in adolescent sports, undesirable training responses may present several unique challenges to normal adolescent growth and maturation, talented athlete development, and optimal participation in sport and physical activity” (Hartwig, Naughton & Searle, 2009, p. 1087).

Importantly, the contribution to talent development of competitive matches has yet to be fully understood. Figure 8.1 depicts the competitive season for scholarship games. Under current rules (agreed by all stakeholders), there are eight fixtures for each club. These are termed as ‘friendly’ games with no league competition. These games typically take place in a window between mid-February and the end of April. Of the squad of 40 registered players, up

to 20 will take part on a matchday. Matches are played under the RFL operational rules and are full 13 a-side games with two halves of 35 minutes. This inevitably means that some players (particularly the U-15 cohort) do not get much game time. Conversely, owing to the nature of the competitive season, players may be overplayed resulting in physical and emotional ‘burnout’ as discussed in Chapter 4.

Three times per year, the RFL holds a ‘Heads of Youth Meeting’ where talent development matters are discussed. Much time in these meetings has been devoted to the position in the calendar of the games. Increasingly, the validity of the playing opportunities as a true talent development tool has polarised opinion amongst the group. Indeed, at the meeting in May 2018, it was decided by the group to continue with eight fixtures per club and have two central ‘festival’ days. However, when prompted, the group could not agree a position of what the main purpose of the competitive games was.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to understand key stakeholders’ views (i.e. Academy Heads of Youth Performance and NGB staff responsible for leading the talent development system and programmes) on the impact that competitive playing opportunities are having on player learning and development.

## **8.4 Methodology – Practitioner interviews**

### **8.4.1 Participants**

To fully understand the role of competition within this part of the talent continuum, key stakeholders were identified and interviewed. Specifically, the following individuals were interviewed:

Heads of Youth Performance (HOYP). Those individuals at the Club Academy with the responsibility for talent identification and development. Heads of Youth were selected based upon their role and providing a good geographical spread so to be representative of the demographic. In total, seven of the 10 Super League Academy HOYP were interviewed.

HOYP were contacted by email and/or telephone and asked if they would be willing to take part.

RFL National Player Development Manager. This individual is responsible for ensuring the continuous improvement of the club Academy system so that it is aligned to the Super League and England strategic plans.

RFL National Academy Manager. This individual is responsible for the National age group programmes at U-16 and U-18.

The latter two individuals are work colleagues of the author.

Participants were provided with an information sheet and gave signed informed consent prior to data collection (see Appendix L).

Table 8-1. *Participant Profiles*

Label	Age	Years involved in TD	Years in current role
HOY A	52	18	15
HOY B	46	8	4
HOY C	36	10	6
HOY D	55	12	8
HOY E	40	14	8
HOY F	48	16	10
HOY G	39	9	6
NPDM	48	20	1
NAM	47	18	8
Group Mean $\pm$ SD	45 $\pm$ 6.2	13 $\pm$ 4.4	7.3 $\pm$ 3.9

#### 8.4.2 Interview Design

The study was qualitative in approach which was considered appropriate because it is a “process of systematic inquiry into the meanings which people employ to make sense of and guide their actions.” (McLeod, 1999, p. 117). Conducting interviews aimed to ensure enough depth and breadth of data at this exploratory stage.



Qualitative data were collected by semi-structured interviews. Interview guides (see Tables 8-2 and 8-3) were developed to explore issues and findings relevant to this thesis so far, but also reflecting the present political climate of the sport. Probes and stimuli were used to be able to gain a deeper response and to clarify any key points. A pilot interview was conducted with a suitably experienced member of RFL staff. This pilot confirmed the interview schedule to be appropriate. Each question was open ended which allowed personalised responses.

Table 8-2. *HOYP Interview guide*

QUESTION	PROBES	STUMULI	PURPOSE
1. What do you believe to be the purpose of scholarship games?	<p>What are the aims?</p> <p>What are the key elements for achieving this?</p> <p>How does performance in scholarship matches affect your retention decisions at 16?</p>	<p>Performance improvement</p> <p>Formal assessment</p>	<p><b>To what extent</b> is this of importance within the whole programme?</p> <p><b>How did you decide</b> your approach to competition...</p> <p><b>Who</b> do you decide this with</p>
2. How do you prepare the players for the competitive games phase?	<p>When does this take place?</p>	<p>How do you manage the coaches and their expectations</p>	<p>To what extent does their focus change, if any?</p>
3. How do training sessions differ when approaching/during the games phase?	<p>Do the coaches coach the big picture?</p>	<p>What differences do you observe in the approach taken?</p>	<p>How do you decide on content of session?</p>
4. What is your approach to team selection for games?	<p>Who plays and why?</p> <p>How does selection to/performance in competitive matches integrate with the individual's development plan?</p>	<p>Why do you do it in this way</p> <p>Do you have a written policy shared with players and parents? How do you manage those players not selected?</p>	<p>Who do you involve in these decisions?</p>
5. Do you liaise with the players community club and school about playing loads?		<p>Is the overall playing load recorded and monitored? If so, how and is it shared?</p>	<p>What might be overcome with better communication between club/school/Academy?</p>
6. How important are results of games?	<p>Do different groups (players, coaches) hold a different view?</p>	<p>Do results matter for image of the Academy?</p>	

QUESTION	PROBES	STUMULI	PURPOSE
7. Have you considered any other approaches to providing playing opportunity?	What could you do differently?	What could the sport do differently?	

Table 8-3. *NPDM and NAM Interview Guide*

QUESTION	PROBES	STUMULI	PURPOSE
1. What do you believe to be the purpose of scholarship games?	<p>What are the aims?</p> <p>What are the key elements for achieving this?</p> <p>How does performance in scholarship matches affect retention decisions at 16?</p>	<p>Performance improvement</p> <p>Formal assessment</p>	<p>To what extent is this of importance within the whole programme?</p> <p>How did you decide your approach to competition...</p> <p>Who do you decide this with?</p>
2. How do think clubs prepare teams to play in scholarship games?	<p>When does this take place?</p> <p>What are the advantages/disadvantages of this approach?</p>		
3. What do you notice about how training time is used during the competition phase?			
4. What do you consider is the clubs approach to team selection?	<p>Who plays and why</p> <p>How does selection to/performance in competitive</p>	<p>Do clubs have a written policy shared with players and parents? How do you think</p>	<p>Who do you involve in these decisions?</p>

QUESTION	PROBES	STUMULI	PURPOSE
	matches integrate with the individuals development plan?	players are managed that are not selected?	
5. How does this approach impact National Programmes?	Is the overall playing load recorded and monitored? If so, how and is it shared?	Is it feedback and will they change?	
6. How important are the results of games to the clubs?	Do different groups (players, coaches, parents) hold a different view?	Do results matter for image of the Academy?	
7. Have you considered any other approaches to providing playing opportunity?	What could you do differently? What could the sport do differently?		

### **8.4.3 Procedure**

All participants were recruited by direct contact either by telephone or email. Semi-structured interviews ( $M_{\text{duration}} = 15 \text{ min}$ ) were completed either at the participant's place of work or, as was the case for three of the interviews, conducted by Skype. A digital means such as Skype empowers "participants to share their lived experiences in their own way, regarding time, space, and response fashion" (Cheng, 2017, p. 1). All interviews were recorded on an Olympus VN-712PC digital voice recorder in mp3 format and transcribed verbatim.

### **8.4.4 Data Analysis**

Once recorded, interviews were transcribed verbatim and read several times to ensure familiarity with the data. Using the interview guide as a structure, summaries of key points were constructed and organised against each question with exemplar quotes to validate these views. This was applied to all transcripts independently. Next, key points were synthesised for content, acknowledging where applicable, the similarities and differences across participants. A summary of exemplar quotes can be found in Appendix M.

## **8.5 Results**

All participants were unanimous in the view that the competitive scholarship games were a means of testing the players to a higher level than they are normally used to. Many saw the games as "an extension of our training regime" (HOY D) in that as part of the holistic development programme, "they're getting a taste of what it feels like and looks like to be a professional player longer term" (HOY G).

### **8.5.1 Community RL**

Of concern was the general poor quality of community matches, referred to by HOY B as "looking like a different sport," and the in-frequency of games, particularly at U-16 level in the North West of England. This is hindering the progress of individuals, and when probed, HOY E observed that some of their players "will have only played 4 games [of community

rugby] and if it wasn't for playing 7 games of scholarship rugby they'll have had 4 games in an under 16's year and then in theory they're leading in to playing under 19's 12 months later."

### **8.5.2 Purpose of playing opportunities**

The HOYs also saw the games as an opportunity to plan, do and review. This was important in that players were working towards individual action plans, and match performance provided an opportunity to be able to monitor progress, provide performance feedback and self-reflection on the part of the players.

Whilst there was overall agreement on the general purpose of the games, there were differences across clubs in the way in which they perceived the function to meet their specific programme aims. At the end of the scholarship programme (age 16), a formal assessment will be made about a player as to whether to offer him a professional contract. Consequently, performance in games may influence that decision. However, many HOYs stated that match performance was not the sole deciding factor as to whether a player graduated to the next stage. HOY D stated that "we don't use the games as a performance indicator in terms of are we keeping or letting a player go, we see the players over 40 weeks, 80 sessions and the games we play are a small part of that." However, Club E had a policy of making "our retention decisions based on how they play for us."

HOYs A and G stated that they used the games as a reward for positive behaviours displayed by players throughout the programme. Of note, Club G regarded the presence of mental skills as a pre-determinant of elite performance. Accordingly, HOY G stated that they "use them [games] to reward players who show the mental traits that we look for in a player; so, the ones that are committed to the programme the ones that show hard work the ones that show coachability that want to be there - they'll play."

For the season in question (2018), eight scholarship matches were scheduled to take place from February through to the end of April. A common theme that ran through all

responses was that the requirement to prepare a team for a game “starts to go a little bit away from developing” (HOY A). Furthermore, HOY C commented that “the short-term nature of the games and the competitive nature of the games, I think contradicts the long term aims of any programme.” The view from both the NPDM and NAM was that, during this phase, clubs went away from developing skill and fundamentals and focused too much on team structure and how they would play against other teams.

### **8.5.3 Short term success versus long term development**

The HOYs could see the bigger picture of not deviating from the end goal (i.e. long term player development) but managing the expectations of the coaches was a challenge to them. There is still a winning mentality amongst coaches and sometimes this was clouding judgement in terms of individualising learning opportunities for players. Indeed, the NPDM observed that there is a real danger that clubs spend a disproportionate amount of time on their “most obvious talents at that moment. You may be less prepared to experiment and do some different things of trying people in different positions or different roles in a team.”

The HOYs did state that training differs during the competitive phase of the season and does become focused upon more team specific and positional specific sessions. What this allows is an opportunity for players to properly review their performance in that “it’s a different experience that players are not necessarily use to coming from a community environment” (HOY C). An underlying trend was the feeling that the culture of the sport (i.e. expectations of players and parents) demanded that the competition phase focused upon improvements in team performance to win the next game. HOY C added that he felt it was the duty of all HOY to “try and educate those players and parents that actually, and through our actions as well, that whatever happens in these games isn’t going to dictate, you know, your long term future.” Being able to manage coaches’ expectations was highlighted by HOY F who stated that “our challenge is to ensure that those coaches stick to our plan in regards to skills development

things like that, but it's not perfect. I'll be honest the focus changes. Take the games out, simple."

#### **8.5.4 Selection policies**

There were some differences of opinion in the selection policy for games. Clubs A and E stated that they primarily select the older players since they are the ones who will be eligible for a professional contract at the end of the season. Clubs B and C selection decisions were made based upon the players they considered had earned the right through hard work and commitment to the programme. Clubs D and F attempted to provide "equal game time" to the entire scholarship group. Club G took a different approach and based selection on their player profile, rewarding those that are making progress against their individual targets. This varied approach was also observed by the NPDM who noted that there would be "a variance from club to club."

#### **8.5.5 Impact of results**

HOYs were unanimous that results of games did not matter in the big picture of player development but "learning how to win and learning how to get out of difficult situations is important" (HOY E). However, the motives of some coaches and parents were questioned "because that's what it is at their community club, they're all about winning so that's their mentality" (HOY G). In the knowledge of this, two HOYs claimed that some professional clubs did use results as a means of recruitment over others. HOY C suggested that recruitment for programmes was being somewhat dictated by results and "there are huge amounts of players that aren't being given opportunities to gain access to professional clubs because those players won't necessarily help win games at under 16's." This trend was also observed by NPDM who suggested that "it leads towards more physically mature players likely to be picked on programmes because you know they're going to be potentially playing."



### **8.5.6 Liaison with significant others**

Reflecting comments earlier in the chapter, little liaison with schools and community clubs is evident. Only one club, who benefit from a significant partnership with a HEI, does some data capture of the volume of physical activity being done by its players. All HOYs noted that players are playing RL and other sports in multiple environments. HOY D pointed towards parents being the barometer for “energy levels, and you see them 24/7 we see them twice a week, you know what their workload is, and we ask them to communicate that in to us.” Indeed, the relationship between professional clubs and schools and community clubs appear strained and that communicating about a player’s workload “wouldn’t be valued at their end whether it be a community coach or a school” (HOY G).

### **8.5.7 Alternative approaches**

When asked about what other approaches may be taken, this ranged from not having any games to playing more games. HOY A (who has been a HOY for 15 years), recalled when similar programmes did not have playing opportunities “and we’ve still produced a lot of players.” From a National need point of view, the NAM advocated not having scholarship games since “the focus of scholarship clubs should be to just develop skilled players that they need in their environment.” This contrasts with HOY E, who advocated more games because “community rugby doesn’t prepare the best players for the professional game with the challenges that it’s going to provide consistent playing opportunities for the most talented players is what we desperately need.”

Other playing opportunity formats were suggested. Some HOYs were advocates of “central festivals” where modified games could be held and not focus so much on the traditional full-sided fixtures. HOY B suggested that in future they would “arrange some opposed training sessions during the winter against another Academy.” HOY D was happy with the number of playing opportunities but suggested dispersing them across a longer period of the season would

suit better. This view was supported by HOY E who stated that “I don’t really like having seven or eight games in an 8 or 9-week period, alongside everything else that they do with school games and community games it doesn’t give us enough time to do proper review.”

## **8.6 Discussion**

It is evident from the results that there is not a uniform approach by the clubs as to the approach to competition. Indeed, the presence of competition *may* be having a damaging effect upon long term player development. The position of the games programme in the calendar does to a large extent dictate the type of training activities that takes place between January and April. Most HOYs observed that the motive of their coaches was something that they needed to keep in check and to educate them better about the required outcomes of the programme.

Reflecting the above, both the competency of the coach and their motives must be questioned. “A definition of coaching effectiveness should consider the “interaction of a coaches’ knowledge and athletes’ outcomes in specific coaching contexts” (Côté & Gilbert, 2009, p. 309). From the responses of the participants, coaches are struggling to understand the context in which they are operating. In this scholarship environment, it is of great importance that the system leaders clearly articulate the goals of the programme so that coaches use their knowledge to meet the needs of the players with the specific end goal in mind.

Pertinent to this chapter is a recent paper by Schroepf and Lame (2018) who investigated career trajectories of German age-group footballers. This study confirms the thinking of some of the participants that initial selection for scholarship programmes and selection for match day is based upon the need to win games and fill the squad with the correct numbers of players to have a balance of numbers by playing position. Indeed, Schroepf and Lame observe that “since there is no valid early testing of the potential of a player, it is common that talent is identified by just looking at the current performance level rather than taking the

performance perspective or psychological prerequisites into account.” (Schroepf & Lame, 2018, p. 406).

Reflecting upon the motives of some coaches, Schroepf and Lame (2018) go on to point out that “coaches are led into temptation of nominating the momentary best players that might not be the players with the best perspectives in order to act in their own interest” (p. 406). This was evident from some HOYs who felt that lesser experienced coaches and particularly parents were conditioned into thinking that a successful programme was reflected in the teams’ win ratio. This was also noted by the NAM and NPDM who, from the position they hold within the NGB and wearing an England ‘hat’, felt that a disproportionate amount of time was being put into too few players within any one squad during the competition phase. This is also evident in English soccer Academies where, according to Wilson (2017, p. 74), “Academies would field their strongest team each week resulting in other players at a loss of game experience.” However, two RL HOY’s did state that their philosophy was to reward those players who showed greater all-round commitment and were showing progress against their player profile. This is reflective of the outcomes of the RFL KTP as described in Chapter 5 which brought to the fore the PCDEs in the scholarship setting.

This assertion warrants further investigation and is something that again is observed by Schroepf and Lame (2018). They found that there was a high turnover of players that participated in Youth Football Academies and that of those players who made it through to National age-group representation, 37.9% only lasted 1 year in a programme. Consequently, this should be a lesson learnt in RL since the same issues are present in football, namely, the reliance on competition and presence of a relative age effect. Like in RL, the RAE in German football levels off as players get older but at younger ages it remains heavily dominated by athletes born in the first and second quartiles of the selection year.

The research in this Chapter indicated that the predominantly older players are selected for games. However, by not selecting them at times may act as a more valuable learning experience. These perceived better players are no doubt the ‘star’ players of community club and school teams and will rarely experience defeat, not being selected, getting dropped or even acting as a substitute. As all participants described, one of the purposes of the scholarship programme is to ready the players for the transition to life as a professional player. As they transition upwards, they need to be equipped with the coping strategies when things do not always go their way, or natural challenges are encountered. These scenarios can be carefully planned in the scholarship environment. This is an approach noted by Savage, Collins and Cruickshank (2017) whereby “traumas, or memorable challenges that disrupt a performer’s development, play an important part in the development of talent” (p. 103). By way of example, this cohort of scholarship players are the ones eligible to be selected for England Under 16. Annually, a squad of 24 players is selected to play two international fixtures versus France. Only 17 players are selected for the match day squad. For those outside of that 17, it is common that this is the first occasion in their life that they have been ‘left out’ of a team. Psychologically at least, this can be regarded as a ‘good’ learning experience and is a real-life example of the ‘rocky road’ (McCarthy & Collins, 2014).

Schools and community clubs play an important part in the fabric of RL. As described earlier, as well as being an identified talented player at an Academy, players also participate at school and club. Often, this leads to conflict, particularly when training and playing clash. This has, in part, been due to the fiercely competitive nature of community and school sport (as described throughout this thesis) where each environment wants access to its best players to win games. This closely relates to findings of Pankhurst et al. (2013) where parents disregarded TID research and supporting principles and leaned towards ‘existing practice’ and that in some sports, notably tennis, there was still a significant emphasis placed upon ‘underage

competitive performance' within TID programmes. The same can be said of RL where the main schools playing offer is a NGB led National knockout cup and local community leagues and cups.

The apparent cognitive dissonance between stakeholders is of concern. Reflecting the findings of Pankhurst et al. (2013) and Côté and Gilbert (2009), there appears to be a lack of philosophical congruence even between key individuals within the same club (i.e. Head of Youth and coaches). Consequently, such stances have made communications difficult at both a national and local level. Despite policies being in place, evidence offered by participants suggests that common ground still cannot be sought to provide "an optimal balance between training, school, and emotional loads and regeneration and recovery" (Moen, Federici & Abrahamsen, 2015, p. 44). This is of course a concern and, in a bid to 'please' everyone, young players are faced with the risk of physical and mental burnout which may lead to (worse case of all) them leaving the sport completely.

From a NGB leadership point of view, some of these approaches may be due to the relatively small window of opportunity that exists at the next level up in order to 'convert' 16-year-olds into professional players. Consequently, Academies are 'cramming' in learning between the ages of 15–19 years and relating this closely to what the world of senior professional RL looks like. This position is highlighted by Burgess and Naughton (2010) who found that "expectations of training responses and performances in junior athletes should not be determined by adult standards" (p. 107). Therefore, we may be better advised that "effective pathways may be best served by a more patient approach, by first quantifying the gap between elite junior and elite senior performers, and progressively training toward closing it" (Burgess & Naughton, 2010, p 107).

## **8.7 Conclusion**

Despite there being a strong belief that competitive games are of benefit to the TID process, it appears that some unintended consequences of competition are detracting from the overall aims of programmes. Therefore, I would offer the following broad statements:

- Competition is an important test for players
- Individualised development should be a priority over ‘team’ strategy
- All stakeholders should put the needs of the player above their own self interest
- Academy leaders and coaches must improve their knowledge and understanding of the specific athlete needs for the context in which they are working in and the aim of the programme
- Parents need to be guided towards a better understanding of TID and the role of competition.

## **CHAPTER 9**

### **PEOPLE CHANGEABILITY**

So far throughout this thesis it has become apparent that, since its formation in 1895, RL has been deeply influenced by many socioeconomic factors. RL's breakaway from the RFU in 1895 was done as a matter of principle of equal opportunity for all so that "everyone should be allowed to play rugby to the highest level of their ability, regardless of their school, their status or their social background" (Collins, 2015, p. 2). This breakaway by the then Northern Union allowed for the clubs to pay the players, initially to compensate them from losing wages. This principle has influenced the direction of the sport, leading to a competitive DNA since the 1895 breakaway, as well as allowing players to be paid, it also paved the way for competitive league and cup competitions with the first RL Challenge Cup held in 1897. Since then, it should be noted that RL has led the way in being innovative in sport which in my opinion, has been undoubtedly fuelled from the games' competitive edge. RL was, after soccer, the second major team sport to have a World Cup (1954). RL also introduced to the sporting world substitutes, the video referee and the sin bin. Consequently, this has influenced behaviours displayed by individuals and groups within the sport. These behaviours could be driven by club administrations looking to gain a competitive edge in terms of purchasing players from other clubs and offering to pay more. This has evolved into what is now a salary capped sport. Or, at a more basic level, the deeply engrained norm of RL in having league and cup competition from as young as 12 years has influenced some undesirable touchline behaviours in youth RL.

Up to now, this thesis has offered several ideas to inform the talent and performance pathway. I have studied what other sports are doing (Chapter 5), looked at our major RL competitor, Australia (Chapter 6), and searched within RL (Chapters 7 & 8). This is my basis for change. However, it must be acknowledged that implementing change is difficult.

Consequently, the purpose of this chapter is threefold:

1. Summarise and identify the main discrepancies between what the talent development literature recommends and what is happening in current RL;
2. Understand how to reduce the gap by bringing about change;
3. Explain what steps have been taken to reduce the identified discrepancies.

## **9.1 What the TID literature says**

Throughout this thesis TID literature has informed my evaluation of current practice within RL. The model shown in Figure 9.1 is an appropriate way of contextualising the literature for the purposes of this chapter. This model provides an overview of important aspects that impact on athlete development but more specifically, it focuses on the micro level (an athletes immediate surroundings), the meso level ( e.g. coaches & parents) and the macro level, i.e. the context in which the individual surroundings are embedded and the organisational culture of the sports club or NGB programme in which the athlete is involved. (cf Henriksen, 2010).

Reflecting the three macro categories; milieu, individuals and provisions, this model is consistent with topics investigated in previous chapters.



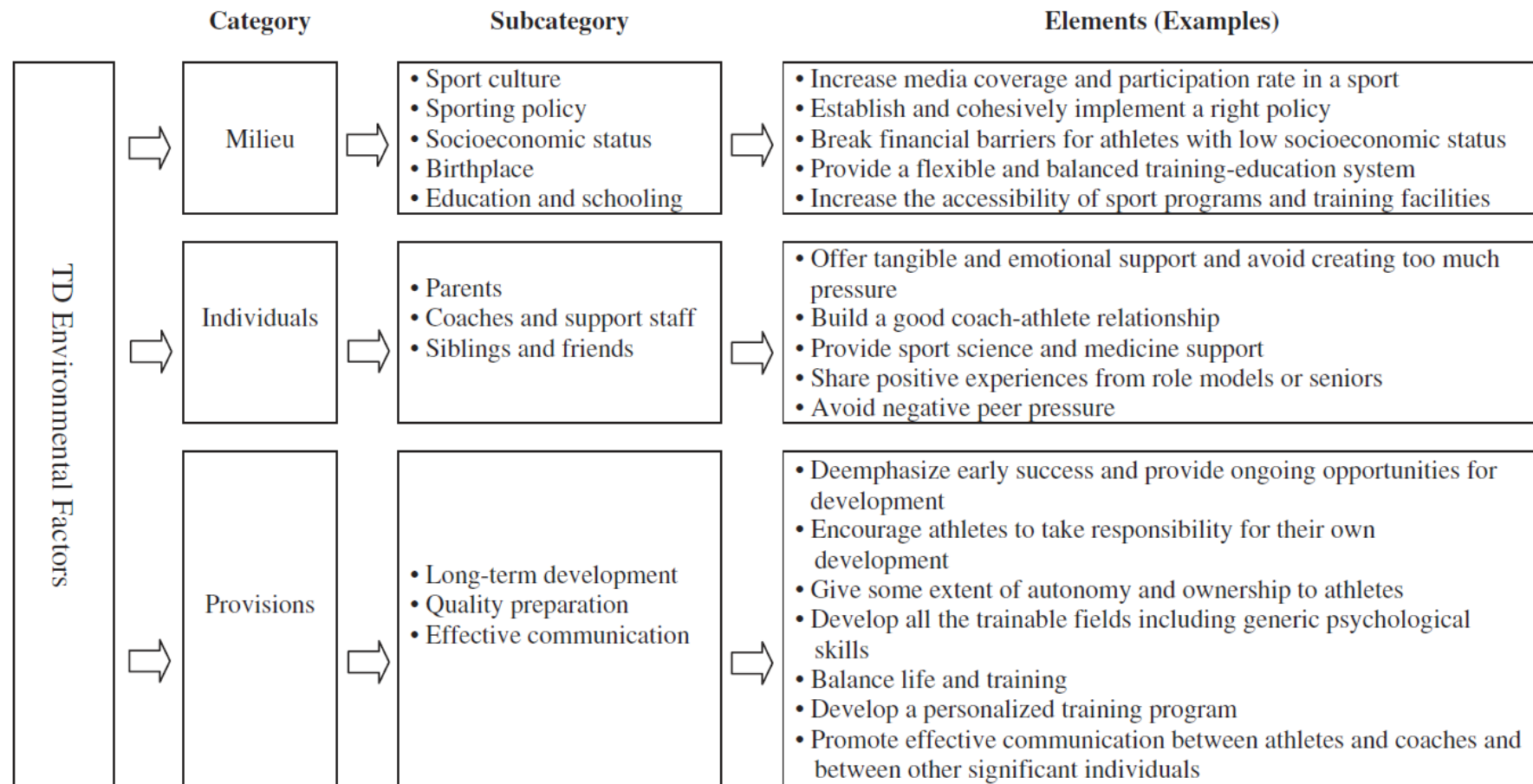


Figure 9-1. Taxonomic classification of the TD Environmental factors (Li, Wang & Pyun., 2014)

## **9.2 The RL context**

In Chapters 3, 4 and 5 I investigated challenges to RL (e.g. myths and traditions, sport and RL policy) and in chapters 6, 7 and 8 I have looked at some topical issues that are directly impacting the talent and performance pathway such as the competition provision and a comparison with England's major international competitor, Australia. Some of the key points in Figure 9.1 are presented in Table 9-1 within a RL context pertinent to this thesis.

Table 9-1. *Identified Environmental Factors within this Thesis*

Category	Sub-category	Examples	Section where found
Milieu	Sporting Policy	The Sporting Landscape of TID in RL	2.1
	Birthplace	Birth Place Effect and Social Environment	
	Culture	Governmental influence – Funding and the wider national sporting agenda for talent and participation	2.1.1
		Influence of Key Internal Sporting Stakeholders	2.1.2, 4.1, 4.2 2.1.4
Individuals	Parents	Transition to elite performance	Ch 5 & 6
	Coaching and support staff	Optimum competitive opportunities for 15 and 16 year olds within the Talent Pathway	Ch 7
Provisions	Long term development	Myths of TID	3.2
	Quality preparation	Mores of TID	3.3
	Communication	Half Truths	3.4
		Impact of competition	Ch 6 & 7

### **9.3 Discrepancies between the literature and what is actually happening**

By using the model presented in Table 9-1 and Figure 9.1, I will provide an overview of the discrepancies between what literature tells us and what is actually happening in RL. In a sporting context, Pankhurst and Collins (2013) investigated the coherence between research, systems and process within tennis TID. Their findings concluded that “differences exist between research theory and reality in terms of outcomes for practice in athlete development” (Pankurst & Collins, 2013. p. 83). This thesis has, in my opinion, proved this claim to be correct within a different, RL, context. Therefore, by using the categories shown in Table 9-1, I will now exemplify these differences referenced against some of the elements highlighted in Figure 9.1.

#### **9.3.1 Milieu**

As highlighted in Chapter 3, the majority of RL players and their clubs are domiciled in the North of England across the North West and Yorkshire. For these players at least, there is ample opportunity to be able to participate and excel due to the proximity of a community club and a professional club Academy (e.g. birthplace effect). But, as Chapter 5 showed us when comparing the numbers of participants to the number of Academies, there is a discrepancy for RL in that there may be too many of these Academies in relation to both the playing population and the recruitment need of the Super League teams. By means of an example drawn from the model, participation rates in RL have ‘flatlined’ over the last 4 years. Consequently, the Academies are recruiting players from a pool of approximately 2,000 participants at age 16 years.

Owing to the pressures of identifying and recruiting players for a professional contract at age 16 years, policies decided by both Super League (Europe) and the RFL are forcing the game to make erroneous decisions on the identification and development of potential future high performers. Clearly, the identification, selection and recruitment of young athletes to TID

programmes is of huge importance to NGBs and professional sporting organisations (e.g. Morris, 2000; Reilly, Williams, Nevill & Franks, 2000). This was highlighted in Chapter 8 where competitive playing opportunities were seen by many to influence recruitment decisions.

However, because RL is a ‘late performance sport’ (i.e. elite performance manifests itself when athletes are generally in their mid to late twenties), when selection and elite performance are chronologically further apart, the efficacy of those selection decisions are questionable. Chapter 5 provided an example where the relative age effect seemed to be reversed by the end of the development process. In this instance, there was a higher number of quartile 1 and 2 players initially identified but the data showed that by the end of the developmental process, a higher percentage of quartile 3 and 4 players were retained as elite Super League players.

Here, it could be argued that those responsible for the selection decisions did so based on current performance (Robert da Silva, Dias de Freitas, Poerschke Vieira, Pinheiro Ferrari, Grebogg, & Luiz Cardoso, 2018, Baker et al., 2012) or the TD model employed at the time, the standard model of talent development (Bailey & Collins, 2013) magnified the RAE by its pyramidal ‘de-selection’ characteristics. In this instance, an assumption is being made that junior performance will lead to adult success. However, an analysis of junior and adult performances across sport, and data held within RL, indicate that transition from elite junior to elite adult performance is questionable (Moesch, Elbe, Hauge, & Wikman, 2011) and this is even more questionable in team sports (Vaeyens, Lenoir, Williams & Philippaerts, 2008).

### **9.3.2 Individuals**

Throughout the TD process, there are broadly three key stakeholders that impact most on the athletes, namely, the NGB (or club), coaches and parents. Reflecting some of the examples highlighted in Figure 9.1, (e.g. positive experiences) the success and positive experience for athletes lies with “each of these stakeholders deploying their specific skills,

having a commonality of knowledge of athlete development and an understanding of the TID process itself” (Pankhurst & Collins, 2013, p. 91).

In RL, the role of the NGB is to work with the clubs and their Academies to be able to deliver a TID system that meets the needs of all concerned. In this case the RFL wants to deliver a successful England team (thus demonstrating athlete progression to our main funder, Sport England) whilst the clubs, who are primarily concerned with delivering world class sporting entertainment, want to be able to recruit and develop the best available talent. Inevitably, this will involve developing relationships with athletes and their parents from a relatively young age. This is done so that in the competitive world of recruitment already discussed, Academies put themselves in the best possible place to reach their targets. However as previously pointed out earlier in this section, in pursuit of this, some erroneous methods are being used.

An example from the model that is important to RL is the coach-athlete relationship. The RFL, working with the deployers of coaches (i.e. the clubs) has the responsibility of setting standards and regulation for coach education and development. Where coaches within RL Academies are concerned, the background of many coaches is often that of a former player at the club. Of the 12 Academy U-19 years Head Coaches for season 2019, seven are recently retired players in the last 3 years. Research and experience tell us that the ability of the athlete can be highly influenced by the competence of the coach (Cushion et al 2003, Lynch & Mallett, 2009, Santos, 2011). Within elite sport, both the RFL and Super League clubs are challenged with performance related outcomes (e.g. England win RLWC, improve quality of Super League competition) and being able to demonstrate a return on and growth of financial investment (e.g. in the Academy system). Research by Rynne (2014) highlighted that former elite athletes progress is expedited to high performance coaching roles. However, high performance roles are often held by experts who have developed their experience over a long period of time

whereas the fast tracking of former athletes suggests less experiential learning taking place. (Sherwin, Campbell & MacIntyre, 2017).

Moreover, this type of appointment will become more prevalent in RL and as such there are several advantages and disadvantages associated with it that we need to be aware of. One of the main advantages is that retiring players show a compatibility for the job almost immediately since they have familiarity with the surroundings, club culture and the people within. There will also be a high degree of trust that has been formed by the retiree and senior staff within the club.

Where disadvantages are concerned, there may be a lack of fresh ideas to evolve since these coaches are conditioned somewhat into the way they did it as a player and not fully understanding inter-individually different developmental pathways. Also, there may be issues with re-defining inter-personal relationships when the player transitions to becoming a staff member and the relationship with the Head Coach/CEO and other players becomes very different. This was confirmed to me by some of the Heads of Youth Performance in Chapter 8 where they stated that some coaches did not fully understand their role in the developmental process and educating them was a work in progress.

Mindful that there is much choice of sporting activity on offer, NGBs and clubs must ensure that parents are closely linked to the process. This is of importance to TID programmes owing to the extra commitment required from both athlete and parent. Of relevance to RL is the parent understanding of the talent pathway and what each stage is ultimately trying to achieve.

Bloom (1985) noted “that the parents interest and participation in the child’s learning contributed significantly to his or her achievement in the field” (p. 476), Consequently, if this is the case, it makes sense that parents are informed on how they can add value to the process. An example of this is what I discovered in netball (Chapter 5). In discussing elements of the

England Netball pathway with two key members of staff, an innovative approach via ‘webinars’ has been used to educate parents of athletes on the talent pathway in areas of injury prevention and nutrition.

As with coaches, parents in RL are socialised into thinking that a good programme (or coach for that matter) is reflected in its win/loss ratio (see Chapter 8). Reflecting comments from Pankhurst and Collins (2013), not enough is currently being done in RL to educate parents in what the elements of a high-quality environment are, and what effective coaching should look like.

### **9.3.3 Provisions**

On the journey to elite performance, athletes require varying challenge and developmentally appropriate activity according to their age and stage of development e.g. Côté, Lidor & Hackfort (2009), Bloom (1985), and Bompa & Haff (2009). Chapter 8 investigated the training environment for talented 15 and 16-year-old rugby league players. What this demonstrated was there was too much emphasis based on preparation for short term success (i.e. win games) and replicating what is happening in the adult version of the game. The general consensus of those interviewed was that learning to be an elite athlete was being compromised by too much focus upon competitive outcomes, and time used in the ‘over’ preparation for matches could be better spent on other critical areas of performance that athletes are required to learn, such as. a greater emphasis on developing mental skills or better understanding how to apply skill in the context of the position they play. This is in contradiction of the work by Martindale and Collins (2005) where they highlighted the important characteristics of a TDE and the model presented in Figure 9.1 where an example of a key provision was the de-emphasis of early success and to provide athletes with more appropriate development opportunities.



Another example of provision expressed in the taxonomic model is an individualised approach to training. This is of interest in RL since talented 15 and 16-year-olds can be accessing up to 4 different environments (i.e. National programme, professional club, community club and school) let alone other sports! The monitoring of this is vital and the associated issues were highlighted in chapter 8.

So, in terms of individualisation, more work needs to be done to establish an accurate picture of the demands being placed upon this group of players. In short, we know they train and play but we are unsure of what they are doing and the long term impact it is having. This also links to the previous section (individuals) where negative pressure is being applied to these ‘best players’ to please everyone in what is rapidly becoming a 12-month playing season (see also Figure 8.1).

Another example of system provision that warrants further investigation in this section is the development of “all the trainable fields including generic psychological skills” (Li et al, 2014). In section 2.1.3, I outlined the role played by a KTP in developing RL’s knowledge and understanding of the role of psychology in the sport. Although coaches and Heads of Youth Performance stated that mental skills were important pre-determinants of elite performance, the project revealed a lack of knowledge of what these were and how to deliver them. Once these became established, the project then focused upon how these could be delivered to system builders and coaches in order that players could learn these vital skills. Indeed, up to now coaching in talent and age-group environments tends to focus on technical, tactical and physical elements. However, as described in Chapter 4, because coaches sometimes unwittingly mistake ability for technical and physical prowess at a young age, crucial psychological characteristics fail to be developed. This is a short coming of the RL system where not enough attention is given to mental skills in both formal and informal coach education.

## **9.4 How do we reduce the gap via behaviour change?**

### **9.4.1 Literature on Behaviour Change – How might it work?**

Having highlighted the main discrepancies between research and practice in RL, this section will focus on some specific examples of how to reduce that gap by bringing about behaviour changes by key stakeholders. Behaviour change has been extensively researched in the fields of health and business, in relation to lifestyle changes (e.g. Arnautovska, O’Callaghan, & Hamilton, 2017), for example, and culture change in the corporate world (e.g. Stranburg, 2017). An important feature of this literature is the type of behaviours aimed to address and the outcomes desired. Effective behaviour change in this sense seeks to bring about long term permanent reform. Here, I will explore several exemplars from within this domain and their application.

### **9.4.2 Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB)**

The Theory of Planned Behaviour (cf. Ajzen, 1991) aims to explain the relationship between psychosocial factors and behaviours. Its main explanatory focus is on how strongly individuals will be motivated to behave in a certain way (i.e., their intention) based on their pre-existing attitudes, perceptions that they can do what is required from the change and the social environment. An individual's decision to engage in a behaviour is based on the outcomes the individual expects will come as a result of performing the behaviour, thus providing “an account of behaviour that emphasises individual readiness and motivation to act” (Paquin & Keating, 2017, p. 48) as opposed to implementing change itself. This is best illustrated in Figure 9.2.

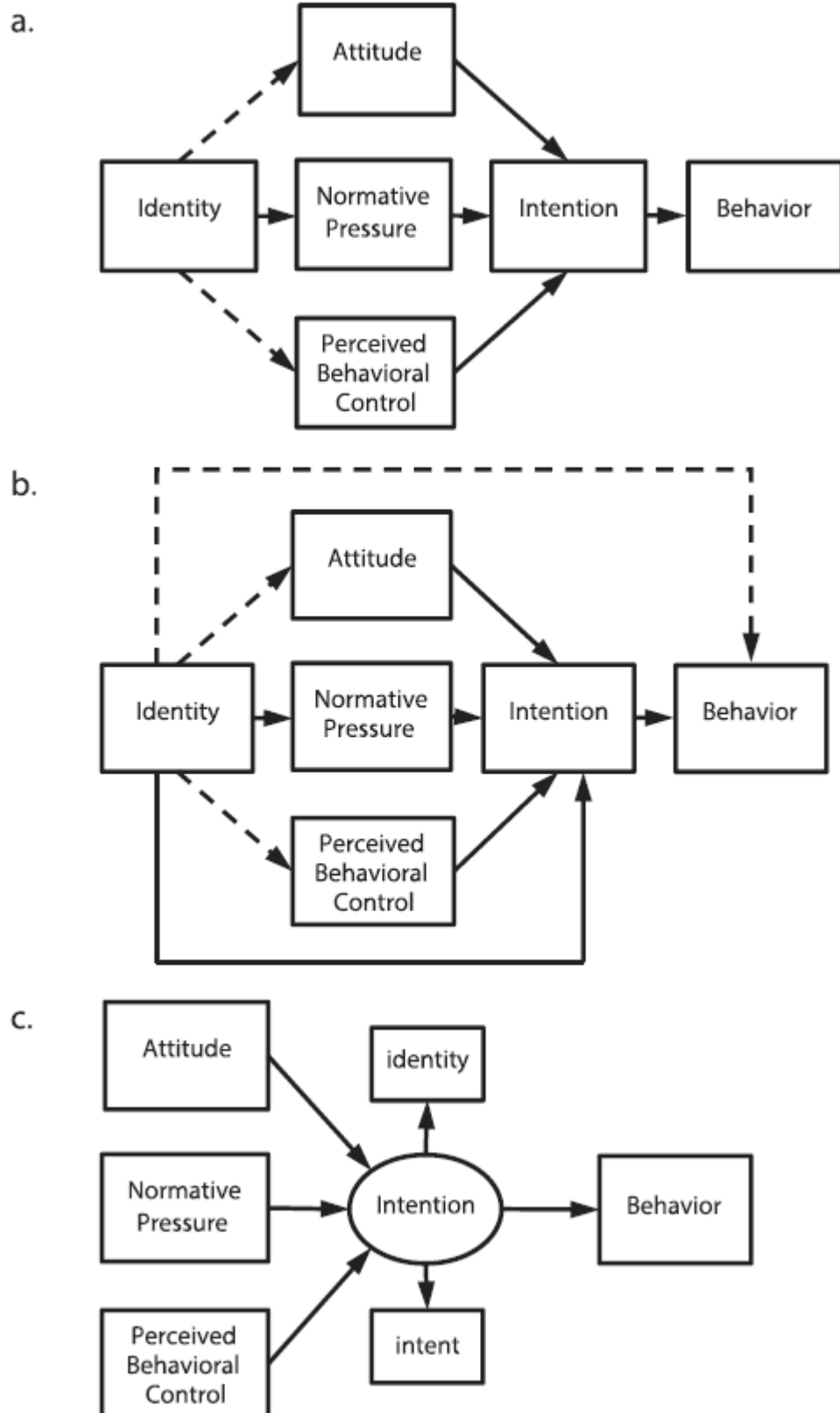


Figure 9-2. Path diagrams of the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Paquin & Keating, 2017. p

50)

Figure 9.2a is showing that identity has no direct effect on intention or behaviour, whilst 8.2b (an augmented view) shows a direct impact of identity on intention and a possible impact upon behaviour. Path 8.2c describes how identity and intention measures are indicators of a single factor. The model can be summed up in that “intention is a function of a person’s overall evaluation of performing the behaviour (i.e. attitude), the social pressure that is anticipated in relation to performing it (i.e. normative pressure), and the extent to which the behaviour is believed to be under one’s control (i.e. perceived behavioural control)” (Paquin & Keating, 2017, p. 48).

This model of planned behaviour is observable in coaching. As referenced in Chapter 4, much of the competitive opportunities for 12-18-year olds in RL is via league and cup games. Evidence presented via the RFL ‘12-18 review’ and my own observations in my capacity of coaching lead for the RFL are summarised in Table 9-2 below.

Table 9-2. *Example of the TPB in RL Coaching*

COACH INTENTION			
Attitude	Normative pressure	Perceived control (PBC)	behavioural
Coach develops a willingness to learn about long term player development	Social pressure from clubs and parents to win at all costs and conform to ‘a way of doing things’	Exhibited behaviour is out of the individual’s control.	

In bringing Table 9-2 to life, I point towards the RFL coach education programme and CPD offer for those coaching players age 12-18 years. These programmes (both formal qualifications and continuous professional development) have always advocated a long term developmental approach to coaching and player development with underpinning philosophies and appropriate age specific technical and tactical resources. At the start of the journey the coach develops a positive attitude towards the learning. However, evidence points towards

social pressure being applied in the club environment consisting “of the beliefs of significant others and the extent that one wishes, or is motivated, to comply with these people’s beliefs” (Papadopoulos, Vlouthou & Terzoglou, 2008, p. 134). Despite the new knowledge the coach has received, they are not able to use the learning effectively because of the perceived need to behave in a different way. Consequently, coaches perceive their control over their actions as being low either because of social pressure (e.g. from parents) or they do not know how to do it.

Evolving from the RL 12-18 years review, I asked an experienced coach educator and developer for his opinion on coaches and their attitudes towards applying learning. He stated: “Typically, coaches on [formal qualification] courses outline their philosophy as coaching for fun and player development, but it appears the reality from what I have observed at games and through social media posts is that there is still a great emphasis on winning for the 12-16 age group.”

The same person is working as a coach developer, meaning that he is supporting coaches ‘in the field’. Those coaches who have engaged in the coach developer programme and been willing to accept the support “have generally had a more player-centred philosophy probably related to their willingness to develop themselves as coaches.” Using the theory to explain and predict likely behaviour may, however, be a useful method for identifying particular influences on behaviour that could be targeted for change.

#### **9.4.3 Trans theoretical model (TTM)**

Widely used across many domains (particularly health studies) is the trans theoretical model of behaviour change (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1992), which goes beyond the TPB in explaining the likelihood of performing a behaviour. This model purports that individuals engaging in any form of behaviour change, “move through a series of stages of change” (Motlagh, Hidarnia, Kaveh, & Kojuri, 2017, p. 1). These 5 stages are shown in Table 9-3.

However, these stages are not regarded as linear but rather ‘spiral’, accounting for individual relapse along the way. This does not necessarily mean the relapse sends them back to the start, but simply regress to an earlier stage (Prochaska, DiClemente & Norcross, 1992); an important consideration in that individuals may find themselves trapped whereby it is often more difficult to stop change than it already is to go through with it.

Table 9-3. *Trans Theoretical model of behaviour change (adapted from Prochaska, DiClemente & Norcross, 1992)*

Stage	Name	Characteristics	Exemplar processes
1	Pre-contemplation	Unaware of the problem. No intention to change.	Focus is on the cons of changing
2	Contemplation	Aware of the problem and of the desired change. Thinking about making a change.	Self-re-evaluation
3	Preparation	Intends to take action. Sampling what change might look like.	Self-liberation
4	Action	Practices the desired behaviour.	Stimulus control
5	Maintenance	Works to sustain the change.	Reinforcement management

Setting apart the TTM from others is that this implies change over a given period, whilst other behaviour change theories define change as an event (e.g. smoking cessation). Reflecting Table 9-3, Stage 1 can be regarded as stage where people are ‘not ready’ to make change since they are uninformed about the consequences of their behaviours and there is no motivation to reform. This can be related back to coaches mentioned in the previous section, unaware of the consequences of their ‘win at all costs’ mentality and no drivers to force change upon the coach.

The contemplation stage (Stage 2) is regarded as the point where people are thinking about whether they need to change and what that might be. They are very aware of the advantages of making change but are still sceptical about making change; very much a weighing up of pros versus cons process. Consequently, people may stay at this stage for a

significant period until a significant ‘tipping point’ is reached. This can be illustrated in Chapter 8, where HOYP are acutely aware of the ‘pros’ to changing the competitive structure of scholarship playing opportunities but are procrastinating in making a bold step to begin the change process to try something different. This delay in making change could be put down to three reasons. They may feel unsupported in that they haven’t been given enough information to understand the reasons why change could be important. Secondly, they may feel that they do not have the resources to make a significant change as this would require the re-writing of their development programme and re-education of key members of staff. Thirdly, any potential change may well be met with a degree of negativity from stakeholders (e.g. players, parents, their own staff), therefore making change may not be considered worthwhile due to the anticipated resistance.

Stage 3 can be regarded as the point where individuals are ‘ready’ to take action. This is where people are intending to make change and begin taking small steps to move in that direction as they begin to believe that changing their behaviour can lead to a more positive place. In terms of behaviour change towards issues pertinent to this thesis, these individuals are the ones that can be key influencers (e.g. club CEOs referred to in Chapter 7 who are ready to support the move to reinstate reserve grade).

Stage 4, action, is where changing behaviours are observed. An example of this from the thesis is where a club or a coach has committed to learning more about mental skills (e.g. the KTP) and has implemented a system within their coaching over a period of time. To get to this stage would have meant the coach going through the first three stages as for many, this was a new concept. The initial research showed us that coaches and system builders felt that mental skills were an important pre-requisite for elite performance but their lack of knowledge and understanding of its application meant that there was some resistance to implementing it.

On reflection, when we first introduced the concept of mental skills and specifically PCDEs, the stages of behaviour change outlined in the TTM were observed.

Stage 5 is where individuals intend to maintain the behaviour change going forward and work to prevent relapse to earlier stages. Here, there is still a possibility of relapse back into their ‘old ways’; however, the longer this period lasts without relapse and people grow in confidence, the more likely the positive difference will last.

An example of this is a discussion with a coach who had been through our ‘England Talent Pathway’ coach CPD. This CPD provides coaches with a holistic approach of talent development with a long term view and integrates all aspects of performance not solely concentrating on technical and tactical elements. Before receiving the learning, the coach was conforming to the ‘norm’ of coaching his team to win; often focusing on results as opposed to developing all players with a long term focus in mind. By adopting a more rounded view with a group of under 13 years players, he found that the players enjoyed the game more, improved their competence and self-esteem and stayed longer in the sport. For the coach, this brought about a re-evaluation of his coaching philosophy and he made what he believed a positive change to his coaching behaviours.

#### **9.4.4 The 4E’s Model**

The 4E’s model focuses upon individual behaviour and advocates change in four categories namely; enable, encourage, engage and exemplify. Of relevance to RL and this thesis, the model also purports the need for leaders (in this context NSOs & NGBs) to act as a catalyst, particularly where behaviours are engrained or repeated constantly. Since behaviours and attitudes are at the centre of the 4E’s model, the interventions (see Figure 9.3) are mainly the provision of information, education and the incentivisation and reward for positive behaviour. In a sporting context, it also purports to bring about behaviour change by means of



leading by example (e.g. as a NGB) and community action which can also influence behaviour change via social pressure.

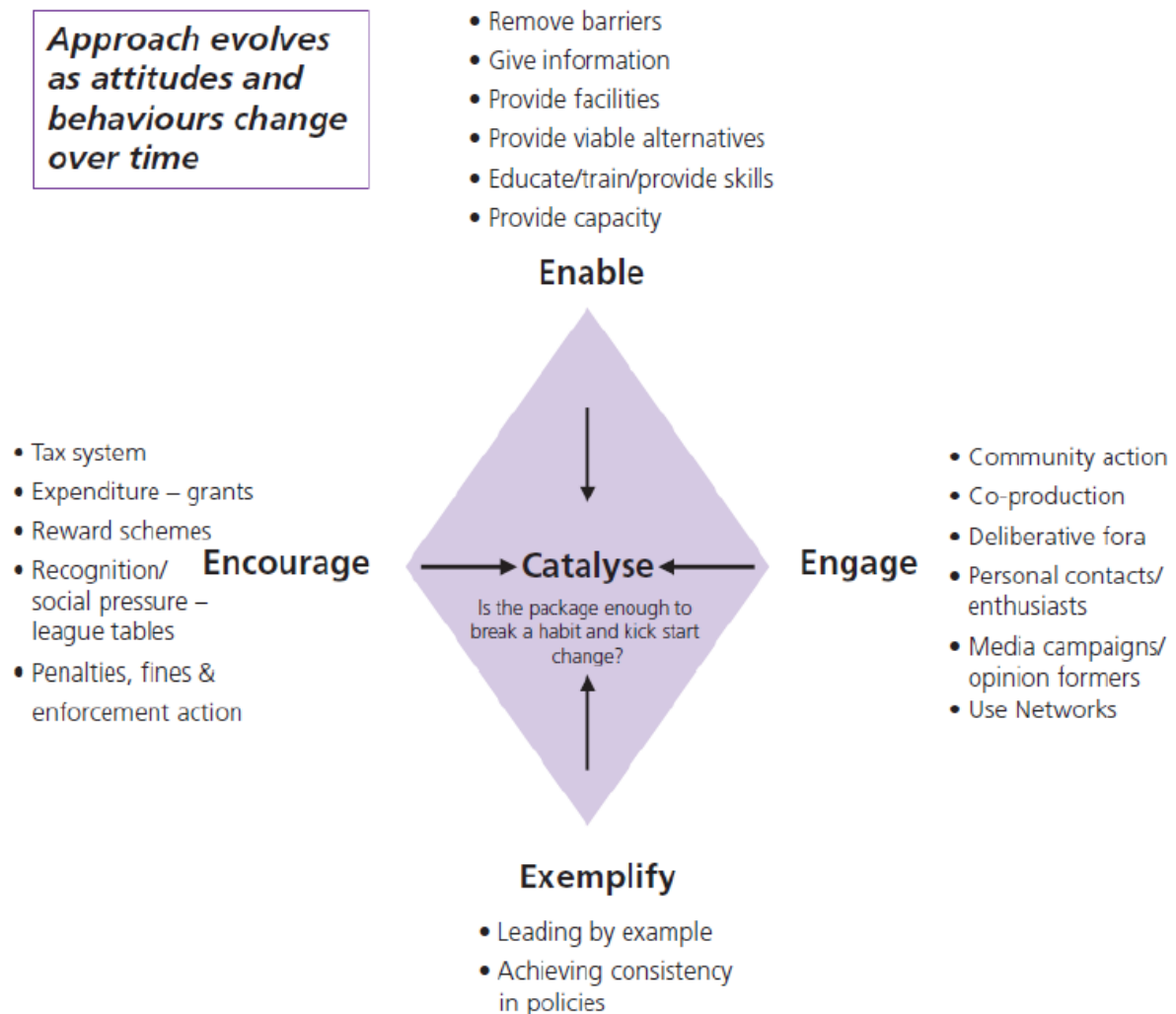


Figure 9-3. 4E's model (HM Government, 2005)

## 9.5 Synthesising the Behaviour Change Literature – What Lessons can be Learnt?

The RFL has in 2019, set out its strategy for the next 3 years, culminating with the home 2021 Rugby League World Cup. To achieve the targets set within this strategy requires both strong leadership from the NGB and behaviour change from stakeholders. The key targets are shown in Figure 9.4.



Figure 9-4. RFL Strategy, 2019-2021

### 9.5.1 What needs to be done?

From my perspective as the Coaching and talent lead for the RFL, I am directly involved with two of these corporate targets; England winning and more players playing the game. Clearly, there are huge benefits to reaching and exceeding these targets in that we will be satisfying our biggest customer - Sport England and by winning a major world sporting trophy will propel the game from the back pages of newspapers to the front page.

### 9.5.2 Target for impact?

To reach these targets requires the RFL to be an agent of change at many levels. Within all of this, to reach these goals the RFL has given itself some opportunities that, if capitalised upon, will help deliver these targets. Specifically, the opportunities to maximise are the RLWC 2021, the 12–18 review and ‘Enjoy the Game’ campaign. All three of these at their core is an opportunity to bring about behaviour change to improve the sport and by synthesising the

behaviour change literature, helps provide a backdrop for implementing change to meet the strategic goals.

#### **9.5.2.1 RLWC 2021**

The RLWC is a unique world event for RL in England to capitalise upon. In 2021, this will be the only major sporting world championship to be held that year. As with all major sporting championships, it aims to leave a legacy of participation and an improvement in the sports facilities via its legacy fund known as inspirationALL.

The inspirationALL programme is aimed at improving the environments where RL takes place; giving people more and better opportunities to engage with the game and to get active. This will involve investment in facilities and equipment that create environments that are accessible, welcoming and build a legacy of the 2021 tournament in local communities. In awarding any legacy funding, there is an expectation that this will also develop the skills and capacity of the volunteer workforce within the community game. Inevitably, to develop these skills will require a degree of behaviour change from the recipients. Reflecting the 4E's model, RLWC is acting as a catalyst for change by acting as an 'encourager and enabler' of change.

#### **9.5.2.2 The 12-18 Review**

In 2018, the RFL launched a review of 12–18 years RL in order to identify and address challenges and barriers to supporting as many 12-18-year olds to start, stay and succeed in RL. From a previous lapsed players report in 2015, and literature received from colleagues in Queensland RL (QRL lapsed players, 2016) we are aware that young people leave RL when they could progress to a level that is right for them, as well as enjoying the wider physical and mental wellbeing benefits team sport in general can offer.

The key findings from this review showed that children enjoyed the game and being able to play sport with their friends. Parents commented that they saw their children enjoying

themselves and making progress. However, parents, players and volunteers pointed towards poor touchline behaviours (from coaches and parents), an over emphasis on winning and game governance as obstacles to progress.

These negative behaviours are seen as getting in the way of progress and directly impacting upon RL's ability to reaching its strategic goals as outlined in Figure 9.4. In considering the behaviour change literature, the observed behaviours can be explained via the theory of planned behaviour. Coaches feel that they need to behave in a way that fits a social norm; for example, an over emphasis on winning and displaying disrespect to match officials. What the TPB does is provide us a useful method for identifying particular influences on behaviour that could be targeted for change.

The 12-18 review allowed the RFL to interrogate further the issues affecting participation and player progress. I chaired a working group that focused upon the 'win at all costs mentality' that is prevalent in the community game. Members of this group were drawn from teaching, community club coaching, coach development, match officiating and a person from another large team sport NGB. On further exploration with these stakeholders, these influences of behaviour can be distilled down into coaching, club leadership and game governance.

For example, if coaches' touchline behaviour is considered an issue, then education can be put in place for coaches to learn from; clearly explain to them the consequences of their actions and suggest change that will make the player experience more conducive to learning and enjoyment. This behaviour change will also be seen in the TTM with coaches within this group being at various stages of the model.

### **9.5.2.3 Enjoy the Game Campaign**

In 2018, the RFL launched a 're-brand' of its respect policy that had been in place since 2005. This was done in the form of a campaign entitled 'Enjoy The Game.' This was a cross-

game campaign that focuses upon players, coaches, match officials and spectators. It received good coverage when it launched in October 2018 via promotional videos and prominent digital advertising in stadia during the 3 match England versus New Zealand test series.

The aim of this campaign is to “sustain positive surroundings to create fun, safe and inclusive environments for all players, spectators, match officials, volunteers and coaches involved in Rugby League” (RFL, 2018). Rather than being a strict set of guidelines, Enjoy the Game is a campaign aimed at fostering a general atmosphere of manners and sensible conduct both on the pitch, in the stands and behind the scenes.

Clearly, evidence presented in this chapter points towards a degree of required behaviour change of stakeholders within the sport. Rather than simply punishing those people who use bad language and aggression to get their message across, this campaign is aimed at gradually modifying behaviour through education. A challenge for the RFL is to measure the effectiveness of the campaign. Drawing parallels from football after the Football Association launched its respect campaign in 2008, in the first year it was reported that assaults on match officials actually rose. However, via education and recognising and rewarding good behaviours, the numbers of incidents has come down and the number of match officials is increasing.

## **9.6 Bringing about change in RL – what we are doing and need to do more of to reduce the discrepancies**

In the social and cultural milieu of RL, I have described throughout the thesis how change is required to meet the modern-day consumer of the sport and to adjust to the socio-political environment created by the expectations of RL clubs and National Sporting Organisations. (NSOs).

In Chapter 7, I suggested how change could be operationalised to help the transition between age banded and senior RL. What emerged from that Chapter was the decision makers

in the process were focused upon the political and financial impact rather than that of player development and performance. Despite this stance, change has begun to happen during the year 2019. This could be partly down to the evidence generated from this thesis presented to Super League club CEOs over the last 2 years.

By convincing and selling this evidence, generated by themselves, key staff and the players, coupled with ‘peer pressure’ from those CEOs who are in favour of the return of a second tier of competition, 2020 will see the return of the second tier of competition. Let’s relate this to the model presented in Figure 9.3.

Firstly, from the RFL we have exemplified the rationale for change by presenting evidence to support the need for this change. Alongside this, we have engaged with the clubs away from meetings and by using professional relationships within the clubs (i.e. coaches, Heads of Youth) and presented the case in such a way as to suggest that it is their ideas (i.e. perceived behavioural control).

Next, in our role as the NGB, we have been required to enable this change to happen through our regulatory powers. Indeed, within the RFL operational rules, we have removed some barriers to make it easier for clubs (and players) to be able to manage the transition to this second tier of competition.

Clearly encouragement to do this was at the forefront of the process. From the evidence provided in chapter 7, it became apparent that this enforced hiatus was impacting the on-field product that is Super League. Therefore, the quality of product on the field is dependent upon the performance level of the players. Consequently, a long term vision to player development and providing the appropriate playing opportunities for players will impact the quality of Super League. Therefore, by having a systematic and well planned development system, this will raise standards and help SL provide a more compelling case to broadcast and commercial partners.

Applying this to the trans-theoretical model of behaviour change (Figure 9.2), the key decision makers in the process have been made aware of the consequences of their decisions and have been persuaded to change. They have been supported to take appropriate action and, from the NGB, we are in a position to facilitate the change. Of importance in the maintenance of this behaviour change therefore going forward, constant reinforcement and regular reviews are required.

Chapters 3 and 5 of the thesis highlighted some of the social history of RL which is deeply engrained to this day. However, to progress and meet the sports strategic objectives, a degree of further change is required. This is particularly pertinent in community RL where a recent review of 12–18 years RL highlighted some key issues; touchline behaviour, pathway politics, competition logistics and NGB control. The purpose of this review was to investigate whether the provision for this age group was maximising participation and progress.

One of the clear messages arising from the review was that of the need for culture change at this level, since the ‘poor culture’ was resulting in a drop off in participation and players not fulfilling their potential. Culture change is highly dependent on key stakeholders’ perception of the need for change. Whilst a NGB may wish to implement change for very good reason, cumulative agreement will be required to bring about positive change (Cruickshank & Collins, 2013).

So how do we bring about that change? At this juncture, it is worthwhile defining this much used word, culture. In its simplest terms, culture can refer to ideas, customs and social behaviours of either people or communities. One element of culture that warrants further investigation in this context is that of organisational culture. This offers a more rounded view of what we are investigating here. Organisational culture can be defined as “all people who are working in an organisation may have common beliefs, ideas and values (Fadaei & Dalfard,

2010, p. 1362) or “as the shared values, beliefs, or perceptions held by employees within an organisation or organisational unit” (Robbins & Coulter, 2005 cited in Tsai, 2011, p. 1).

Reflecting the 12-18 RL review, there are several deeply held beliefs and perceptions that stakeholders have highlighted as being barriers to progress. The biggest reference to ‘culture’ was evident where the matter of touchline behaviours was concerned. This culture of poor behaviours (which has been apparent for decades), is seen as one that is driving players (and parents making a choice) away from the game. Where a positive culture exists, is in an environment that enjoys strong leadership from club committees.

As described in Section 9.5.2.3 the recent (2018) re-brand of the RFL ‘Respect Campaign’, re-named ‘Enjoy the Game’ will no doubt gain momentum. This campaign is designed to change behaviour, aimed at making all RL environments to be welcoming, inclusive and ones where people can thrive and get great experiences from the sport. Although in its infancy, this campaign, is a synthesis of the TTM and 4E’s model. The campaign highlights the desired positive behaviours and their benefits to the sport. In turn, this will make individuals reflect on their behaviour and adjust accordingly (e.g. TTM). Where the 4E’s model is concerned, the RFL has engaged with stakeholders to seek their views (i.e. 12-18 review and Open Age review) and has acted as an enabler to educate as to why behaviour change is important.

The Enjoy the Game campaign is stressing why behaviour change is important and highlighting the impact upon individuals and the whole sport if this happens. Naturally, there may be some resistance at first. However, since as a NGB we are uniquely placed to engage stakeholders in the decision making process, then these concepts from the 4E’s model can be readily applied.



## **9.7 Conclusion**

The aim of this Chapter was to identify the main discrepancies between the TID literature and what is currently happening, understand how to bridge that gap and explain what steps are being taken to reduce those discrepancies. From an applied perspective, I have highlighted issues that can be monitored, controlled and addressed through raising an awareness of the implications of them and set about creating a behavioural change in stakeholders to help create better RL environments at all levels.

There are several discrepancies that have been highlighted where on reflection, behaviour change tactics from the RFL has resulted in improving environments namely the return of a second tier (reserve grade) competition in Super League for 2020. This is an example of both TTM and the 4E's model working to bring about behavioural change in order for high level decisions to be made in order to provide a more conducive environment for long term player development in the Super League setting.

Importantly, these discrepancies have been examined with a thorough background knowledge and understanding of the cultural, political and performance landscape of RL. Reflecting the work of Cruickshank and Collins (2014), this backdrop acts as a 'barometer' to gauge the entire sport so that the RFL as leaders can set about prioritising delivering upon its strategic objectives.

## **CHAPTER 10**

### **CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY**

#### **10.1 Introduction**

This thesis set out to consider the challenges facing TID in RL against the backdrop of the social, financial and political context of the sport. Secondly, it has sought to highlight common assumptions that have influenced TID policy and practice within RL and compared this to up to date research in TID throughout. Thirdly, the thesis has investigated some specific issues within the sport (Chapters 6, 7, 8 & 9), and by interviewing, surveying and debating with the ‘key players’ highlighted in Chapter 1, a contribution to the knowledge base of RL has been achieved.

#### **10.2 Conclusions and Take Home Messages from the Thesis**

##### **10.2.1 The Social Setting for RL**

In Chapters 3 and 5, I investigated the highly complex nature of the context in which RL operates and where the TID system fits within the intricate social milieu. This has highlighted the complexity of TID relating to the previous history and traditions of the sport but also looking into the ‘new world’ of satisfying public funding expectations (e.g. Sport England) and also the wants and needs of the professional clubs that make a significant investment into the sport via their funding of Academies.

As well as satisfying the wants and needs of those who fund TID and are the end users, the interface with the Community arm of the game requires a huge amount of relationship management. Community sport is considered a vital part of the talent pathway. However, as has been described in Chapters 3, 5, 8 and 9, some of the governance, attitudes, beliefs and actions of stakeholders is getting in the way of both progress in TD and retention within the

sport. This all feeds into a very complex governance structure of the game which in my new role of RFL Interim Chief On-Field Officer (as of June 2019), I am in the centre of the decision-making process. I will return to this later in this Chapter.

### **10.2.2 Discrepancies in theory and practice and impact on current issues**

Chapter 4 has provided an overview of literature pertinent to the rest of the thesis. This looked through the lens of common myths associated with TID, traditions (the way things have always been done) and what can be considered ‘half-truths’. Despite the volume of research available, what this did show me (and ultimately the sport of RL), was some of our previous and current practices were, and are, erroneous. Specifically, the RL attitude towards long term development as opposed to short term success is being compromised on so many levels across both the community and professional game.

In the community game, long term player development is compromised on a weekly basis due to the overly competitive nature of intense league and cup competitions, stemming from the historical origins of the sport. However, on further investigation (Chapter 8) this is also prevalent within the recognised talent pathway within the club scholarship programme and provides an example to us the RFL and the clubs that what they say they do does not fully manifest itself in practice.

Clearly, the product of any TD system is the emergence of elite athletes who are supported by appropriately resources environments in which to thrive. Within the thesis, I have referenced strategic goals of RL (whether that be RFL or SLE) and those of the RFL’s biggest ‘customer’, Sport England. The ‘big picture’ for RFL as the NGB is to deliver sustained World Cup success for England. This lends itself to Sport England’s talent objectives of athlete progression through the pathway and inclusion (cf. Talent Plan for England, 2018). Heading into the 2021 home RLWC, we are demonstrating gradual improvement against our major competitors (England has won 10 out of its last 12 games, see also Figure 3.1) and can evidence

athlete progression through RFL TD programmes. For example, 13 England Knights players (those players considered 2–4 years from elite) have progressed to the England elite squad over the last 2 years (2018 & 2019).

This gives Sport England confidence that their investment is seeing a return and growth. However, this public funding is awarded in 4-year cycles and consequently, we are trying to achieve long term aims with short term funding. The current cycle finishes in March 2021, and the level and conditions of future funding remains unclear. Part of my role as Chief On-Field Officer is to be the senior member of staff responsible for the relationship with Sport England. Undertaking this doctorate level of study has equipped me with further knowledge and understanding of complex issues affecting our sport and how these can be ‘played in’ to discussions and future submissions for government funding via Sport England.

One relationship within the sport that has significantly changed over the course of writing this thesis is between RFL and SLE. In September 2018, the 12 Super League Clubs effectively went their own way by appointing a CEO and key staff that predominantly work in marketing, commercial and digital. Ultimately, it is they (i.e. the 12 clubs) who generate broadcast rights that finances a large part of the sport. Indeed, the vast majority of investment into TID is via the club Academy system, of which SLE contributes £1.8 million annually with as much again being contributed by the clubs themselves.

Where the TD system is concerned, a complication has arisen since we, the RFL, still retain the Governance of the sport, yet where the Academies are concerned, they are funded by SLE.

The Academies are licenced, and these licences are due for renewal at the end of the current broadcast deal, due to expire at the end of 2021. Therefore, from my perspective as the talent lead, the mechanism to renew these licences must begin no later than the end of 2019. However, so far there has been a reluctance from SLE to engage in any meaningful

conversations about their continued financing going forward, with much scrutiny being placed upon funded Academies whose club is outside of the current Super League. In my position as talent lead, the intimation that SL will only fund their ‘own’ is of concern. From the outset, the purpose of Academies is to produce high quality players for England and the Super League. It would be very short sighted of SLE to cut off funding to clubs outside of the twelve in SL since current funded clubs are in areas of strategic significance to the sport in the North East of England and London. As described in Chapter 6, the majority of SL clubs, domiciled in Yorkshire and North West England are selecting players from a very small player pool. To turn their backs on developing regions where there is a large population, and in London’s case a strong track record of producing quality players, would be a concern to the RFL. In my position, I sometimes feel isolated in being allowed to make decisions owing to the current sensitive political nature of the sport at present (July 2019). Promotion and relegation to and from Super League should not impact upon Academies, provided that they maintain standards. I have suggested as part of the new licence criteria that relegated clubs should be supported for 3 years, and if they haven’t got back up then a discussion needs to be had about their ability to realistically meet the aims of the Academies. Similarly, if a club is promoted to SL, they must sustain their position for 3 years before the privilege of an Academy is afforded to them.

### **10.2.3 Making Change**

When I initially enrolled on this programme of study, the programme set out for candidates to achieve one or more of the following, shown in Figure 10.1.

# The Professional Doctorate in Elite Performance (D.Prof.EP)

## A New Award offered by the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan)

The DProf is designed to exactly fit the essentials of each candidate's personal profile and professional challenge. Throughout the programme, students work with a range of specialist staff, from the University and their own professional field. The Professional Doctorate in Elite Performance is an exciting and original initiative, capable of providing a high level, vocationally focussed award to a broad range of professionals, including, but not limited to, coaches (in sport and business), scientists in support roles, medical/paramedical practitioners, military and other structured service providers, and all those involved in the performing arts. It is available by full-time or part-time study. To sum up the overall aim of the programme:

*"The Professional Doctorates need to be seen and treated as research degrees that produce doctoral thinkers and doers in specified areas of professional practice and by different means."*  
(Powell & Long, 2005, p.27)

The programme provides a means for practitioners to achieve one or more of the following:

- A recognition of their professional practice and capacity for innovation
- An opportunity to research and solve specific challenges in their professional domain
- A way to develop thinking and analytical skills to the highest (doctoral) level, through work in their own area of expertise
- The opportunity to redefine best practice in their domains through combining practical knowledge with scientific awareness and insight
- To become recognised as leaders and innovators in their chosen domain
- To be the first professionally trained practitioner/scientists in their domain
- A way to demonstrate transferable skills sets, as a precursor to changing role, career or performance domain

Figure 10-1. Aims of Professional Doctorate in Elite Performance. (UCLan, 2014)

This programme has given me the opportunity to investigate further issues of interest within RL. By researching current issues (e.g. Chapters 7 & 8), this has not only provided valuable insight for the game, but by involving the key stakeholders in the process they feel as though they have been consulted and have made valid contributions to any decisions made.

By means of example, Chapter 7 focused on the competitive gap between age banded and senior RL. Arising from the Chapter was a recommendation to the game that a second tier (i.e. reserves team for SL clubs) should be mandatory. This recommendation was reached after a wide-ranging consultation that considered the implications and alternatives.

Clearly, given the current governance of the sport, this recommendation needed to be coherently presented to the RFL and Super League boards. Reflecting the aims of the DProf programme, this course of study has allowed me an opportunity to research and solve specific challenges and to redefine best practice through combining practical knowledge with scientific

awareness and insight. After following due process and governance, RL is now able to move forward and re-introduce reserve teams from the start of the 2020 season. Within my newly defined (albeit interim) role, this announcement was timely since the news was positively received in the sport by coaches, players and supporters. The way in which the RFL press release was written, made this look that I had made a positive impact almost straight away in the role! The press release can be found in Appendix N.

### **10.3 Future perspectives for research**

On reflection of the thesis, there are two areas that I feel the talent system of RL will find of benefit if it were to investigate further. They are talent inclusion and the professional development disposition of leaders and coaches.

#### **10.3.1 Talent Inclusion**

At this moment in time, talent inclusion is of great importance to Sport England so that athletes can access TD opportunities “regardless of background or circumstance” (Sport England, 2018, p. 12). This thesis has constantly reinforced the strategic drivers of both RFL and SL to develop high quality athletes to improve England’s RLWC chances and for SL to have a high-quality sporting entertainment package.

This has prompted my team to evaluate the demographics of our talent and performance pathway with some interesting observations. In 2019, England seniors and England Knights announced their squad members. Of the 64 SL players across both squads, 12% were of a Black, Asian, and minority ethnic background (BAME). Upon further investigation, it was found that 13% of the 221 England eligible Super League players were also BAME. However, these figures are much higher than the talent pathway and community game which are show only 5% of participants are from BAME backgrounds.

Thanks to Sport England’s drive for inclusion in talent pathways, RFL has engaged with them in a pilot study to find out the barriers to BAME athletes participating in RL. In the

communities RL serves, there are large BAME populations who are not accessing community sport nor being picked up in the pathway. This represents opportunity for RL on two levels. It will help expand our talent and participation footprint and bring with us our Academies who will ultimately be the key beneficiary of any new recruits. Politically, this gets us closer to Sport England by engaging in one of their key pieces of work, we can further demonstrate our 'worth', particularly approaching the end of the current funding cycle.

### **10.3.2 People Development**

Chapters 8 and 9 brought together the thesis in highlighting the need for behaviour change of people for RL to make sustained progress within the talent pathway. A specific area where research will inform a developmental need is that of both people's attitudes to their professional development and the gaps in knowledge and understanding of what it is, they are actually aiming to do. This was clearly evident in Chapter 8 where HOYPs noted that coaches did not fully understand player development in the specific context of the Academy scholarship programme. In a similar vein, Chapter 9 noted the number of retiring players entering the coaching ranks for the first time within the talent pathway. This provides potential areas of research for two reasons. Firstly, why do clubs choose to employ them and what qualities do they bring and where are their gaps in knowledge and understanding? This will inform future 'on the job' training needs. At a practical level, we can go to their employers (i.e. the clubs) to seek their assistance to create time and resource to put towards the training of their most valuable assets – players!

Future research could also be aimed at the exacting requirements of leaders within the talent and performance pathway. The role of a HOYP requires the individual to be in the middle of some complex and unpredictable situations in a pressurised environment. At present as compared to other sports (notably Rugby Union and Football) RL has no formal qualification or CPD for leaders in the talent system yet we want them to be experts in domains such as



athlete development, coach development, player welfare, strategic planning, budget planning and managing a multi-disciplinary team.

#### **10.4 Limitations, Delimitations and Assumptions**

Limitations affecting this research revolve around my role as the Head of Coaching and Talent. These issues are my own biases, sample size and the way in which participants were recruited (Chapters 5, 6, 7 & 8). Chapter 6 was conducted with coaches and leaders from our major international RL rival, Australia. There may have been a reluctance to divulge information to me, given my position within a direct competitors NGB. However, since those interviews, I have collaborated with one of their senior members of staff to contribute a chapter in the Routledge Handbook of Elite Sport Performance (Collins, Cruickshank & Jordet, 2019) entitled ‘The transition to elite performance. Societal contrasts in the same sport.’

Chapters 7 and 8 were written based on interviews with people whom I either work alongside in the NGB or are key stakeholders in the professional clubs (i.e. CEOs, Head Coaches and Heads of Youth Performance). In these instances, the same size (particularly in Chapter 7) was only approximately 33% of each population. However, I would consider this sample to be providing a fair representation of each group and I deliberately chose individuals who, through my knowledge of their stance on each issue, represented a fair balance. For example, it was public knowledge of the disdain for Reserve Grade (Chapter 7) of two of the four Super League CEOs interviewed.

In terms of delimitations (i.e. boundaries I have set for the scope of the study), I chose to focus the study on the talent pathway specific to the Super League as the premier elite competition and Elite England Men’s team. Whilst I have referenced the 3 Rugby League World Cups in 2021, the Women’s and Wheelchair talent pathway are out of the scope of this study.

It is assumed that all interviewees in Chapters 5, 6, 7 and 8 and players completing the questionnaire in Chapter 6, have responded both truthfully and accurately. To make the participant feel as though they could do this, prior to any such intervention their permission was sought, the purpose of the interview clearly articulated, and their anonymity and confidentiality assured.

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## **APPENDICIES**



## APPENDIX A: RUGBY LEAGUE TALENT MEASURES 2017-2021 (SPORT ENGLAND)

Measure	Baseline	Indicators		Jun-18		2017-18 Target	4-year Target
				Number	Percentage		
Players progressing into Elite Performance squad from Knights	3	Produce at least 3 players per year from the England Knights programme that progress into the Elite Performance Squad for each year, from 2018		2		3	12
Stage1 England Talent Pathway - players engaged. Measured as a % of the registered playing population of each age group.	25%	Number and percentage of registered participants in community clubs (age U12 to U14) that attend development days held by Player Development Partners or are registered to an accredited 'player development club'	U12	403	17.60%	35.0%	50.0%
			U13	254	11.20%	35.0%	50.0%
			U14	509	21.70%	35.0%	50.0%
			Total	1166	7.3%	35.0%	50.0%
Stage1 England Talent Pathway - coaches delivering on Development Days who are ETP trained	60%	Percentage of coaches who are currently delivering in approved Player Development partner development days are ETP trained.			tbc	70.0	100.0
England Academy % of players that graduate to Super League club debut	70%	Percentage of members of the England Academy squad making a Super League debut			tbc	75.0%	77.0%
England Youth and Academy - % increase in the number of players meeting greater than 65% of the player profile at each stage of the player pathway	55%	Percentage of current cohorts of Youth and Academy players meeting 65% of the player profile			tbc	60.0	75.0
England Women- players attending regional and national hubs	Zero	New programme looking to engage with the youth sector of the Womens game and create a pathway.		144		80	120

## APPENDIX B: KEY ELEMENTS REVIEW. RUGBY LEAGUE 2016



### **Key Element Review - Assessment Document** **Rugby League - 26 January 2016**

#### **Assessment Criteria**

	<b>Key Element</b>	<b>Assessment Criteria</b>	<b>Evidence</b>	<b>Assessment</b>
1	<b>Vision and Evidence</b>	Vision and strategy are in place and communicated	4 key stakeholders - SL, Semi Pro Leagues, Community Game, England. All have strategic plan. Published and available.	3
		Strategy is underpinned by insight and evidence from the pathway development plan; Coaches insight and intel is also given value and weight.	Five key strategic objectives across the stakeholders. Also a performance strategy. Linked to Stakeholder objectives all the way through to SE Talent outcome measures. Ranked 3 in world and data suggests the gap is closing. 2015-21 - developing.	2
		Talent pathway development plan is in place and reviewed regularly. Most important priorities are identified and shared.	Evidence gathered, case studies and anecdotal. Well prepared for review. Talent Pathway academies have their own four year development plans.	3

	Key Element	Assessment Criteria	Evidence	Assessment
		Actions from the last review have been completed	First KER.	1
		Talent measures and data are tracked and recorded from each tier, and demonstrate the effectiveness of the pathway	Senior gap closing .On track to deliver all outcomes for 15/16. Scholarship numbers back up again after 2 years missed targets.	2
		Transition data into ETP from community and into senior/WC from ETP is recorded and tracked	Clear tracking systems in place for last couple of years.	3
		Evidence shows that pathway athletes are improving at the required rate	Targets being exceeded for this, plus evidence from SL debuts and National Team appearances. Evidence gap is closing vs S Hemisphere teams, but still a way to go. Independent reviews of academies.	2
				<b>76.1904762</b>
2	<b>Leadership</b>	Clear roles have been identified to lead and manage the entire England talent pathway	Roles to cover the key areas of influence. Both in RFL and in Community. Pathway very well staffed for its size.	3
		Roles are effectively resourced	Same director now for Development and Performance. Many clear roles. Links in to SL Board.	3

	Key Element	Assessment Criteria	Evidence	Assessment
		Ownership clearly in place for links between ETP and community sport and ETP and senior / WC programmes; effective engagement processes support these links	Role clarity for all pathway roles - remits are not that large given level of resourcing. Many transitions and interfaces in the pathway - difficult to ensure all interfaces effectively managed and resourced.	2
		Clear commitment to continuous improvement is evident	Very well prepared for the KER, but little questioning of the panel - focus more on show and tell rather than exploring what else could be. Feedback gathered from each tier of pathway. Players are now selecting academies on the basis of the talent development environment. External independent review process.	2
		Review and objective setting system is in place for key staff, coaches and support personnel. This is linked to talent pathway objectives	Heads of Youth starting to develop as a community of practice, but work to be done to focus this team on continuous improvement and going beyond the Academy ratings. Is this tier of personnel shaped correctly for the next period? Reward as well as recognition funding for Academies. Considering including an element of development rather than achievement. Also some	1

	Key Element	Assessment Criteria	Evidence	Assessment
			work to develop the newly emerging team of Embed the Pathway coaches.	
				<b>73.3333333</b>
3	<b>Operational Model</b>	Clearly defined, mapped and published operational model for the entire talent pathway is in place	Complex environment with many players and stakeholders leads to extremely complex pathway mapping. Difficult for the outsider to visualise and see a way through - relying on online tools. Pathway has evolved so works in collaboration with other partners to deliver what is right for the players and their development at each stage. Key is to align the philosophy of the coaching teams.	1
		Effective pathway exists between grass roots community sport and senior elite or World Class programmes	Pathway from community clubs, embed the pathway, through scholarship and academy programmes to Knights and senior level. Academies . Atmosphere developing in terms of relationships between academies. Online booklet. Complex but linked with education package. environments vs Pathway stages. Online resource launching now.	2

	Key Element	Assessment Criteria	Evidence	Assessment
		Evidence demonstrates required quality and quantity of athletes are in place at each tier	Short on some specific positions - seems to vary with time. Data shows gap to S hemisphere teams is closing. Players all monitored and tracked. Players all profiled and clubs open about it. Player development pathways are all tracked. Some positional days to try to tackle gaps. 6, 7 ,9 and 1s previously and now Centres. Encouraging clubs to develop players. Player Ladders are really showing progress.	2
		Clarity exists on contact with and support to athletes at each tier; expectations are clear	All academies have to have 4 yr dev plans to get cat 1 status - cpd into Heads of youth. Contained within the online resource. Need to check back how this is landing.	2
				<b>58.3333333</b>
4	<b>Integration</b>	The vision for your talent system is effectively integrated with club and community sport	Clear vision to integrate with community sector via Embed the Pathway. Aligning talent development and community rugby allowing players to develop in their own community environments	3

	Key Element	Assessment Criteria	Evidence	Assessment
		The vision for your talent system is effectively integrated with school sport and the education sector	Some geographical challenges but progress being made on the School strand of Embed the pathway.	2
		Clear responsibility in place for integration with each sector	Roles resourced in RFL and linked to stakeholders. Clear links and regular comms systems between all leaders of the sectors based on quality of environments.	2
		Role models and advocacy programmes are used to promote and recognise talent and development systems	Embed the Pathway - each pro club has an ambassador - both in person and on social media. Many SL players coach on SL scholarship. Some clubs and regional academy linking with new players at inductions.	3
		All key pathway partners are identified and relationships defined	Partners are all identified and collaboration and partnership working is developing well. Breakthroughs made with SL for their academies which are delivering. Neds to be monitored to ensure this works across such a complex operational model.	2
				80

	Key Element	Assessment Criteria	Evidence	Assessment
5	<b>Athlete Profiles and Talent Development Curriculum</b>	Progressive, evidence based profiles are in place for each tier of the pathway	Profile wheel being used as a development process rather than assessment. Education aspect. Profiling driven by the coaches desire to tackle all areas in holistic fashion. Couple of years in place now. Online brings coach and player together.	3
		All required controllable areas, both technical and non-technical are identified and detailed	Key controllables are Movement, Game, Mental and Coachability. Good benchmarking for tiers above. Developing video clips of what good looks like as best in England. Could adapt this to develop a view of Worlds best in 3-5 years time.	2
		Deal makers have been identified and are in place in the lower tiers of the pathway	Feedback from upper tiers of what needed - EG focus on movement skills. Coachability is critical and actually increases time in the curriculum. Curriculum exists and coaching sessions and plans, but no absolute clarity on the critical deal makers at lower level.	1
		There is appropriate access to required expertise for all controllable areas	Developed by Heads of Youth. Fine. Good educational input and style.	3



	Key Element	Assessment Criteria	Evidence	Assessment
		Curriculum is based on the athlete profiles	Develops session plans based to enable coaches to deliver the skill sets. An instructional approach with session plans already pre-written for the coaches. Unsure how this fits with the variability of athletes.	2
		Resources required at each tier can be articulated and are in place	Online resources developing. Good coaching resources	2
		Data tracking and management system is in place for all tiers; it meets all data analysis and manipulation needs	Tracking via the wheel. Small group. Starting to develop into newer environments. Put into school settings now. KS3 and KS4 resources now in place.	2
		Goal setting and priority setting processes are in place and appropriate for all pathway athletes	Players own their online wheel and upload data and pix.	2
		Late developers and talent transfer athletes can be accommodated by the curriculum	Backfill curriculum. Examples given.	2
				<b>70.3703704</b>
6	<b>Talent Recruitment and Selection</b>	Sufficient athletes of required standard are sourced to meet all disciplines within the pathway	Some challenge with centres presently and need to increase ball handling skills at lower level.	2

	Key Element	Assessment Criteria	Evidence	Assessment
		Talent recognition and talent transfer systems recruit athletes with appropriate potential from outside the sport	Beginning to reach via school and satellite development days into new markets. Need to do more. Embed opportunities in schools and relative age effect follow through into selective environments. Opportunities to target specific groups of athletes - eg - Afro Caribbean?	1
		Inclusion opportunities are offered to all demographic groups - social, geographic, socioeconomic, and racial populations.	Underepresented groups are still minority. Schools seen as the way forward. Traditional background, heartland and demographic. Tass and developing scholarships and development days are trying to access new talent pools. Later need to develop the competition for these groups. Opportunities to target specific groups of athletes - eg - Afro Caribbean? Current Hashtag - Wall of White is a real concern.	1
		Systems are in place to tackle relative age effect and late developers?	Population reflects Q1 and Q2. As does pathway population. Tackled by open access - development days - anyone can turn up - not based on selection. Need	1

	Key Element	Assessment Criteria	Evidence	Assessment
			to ensure this feeds through into selective environments. Emerging.	
		Recruitment systems identify and select the full range of athletes required by the pathway	Beginning to stretch with new development days. Tackling relative age effect. Player ladders show progress but gaps keep appearing.	2
		Selection policies and processes ensure the correct athletes progress between tiers	Open access to development days. Selection - readiness, attributes, long term view. Clubs approached and nominate players.	3
		Selection processes are published and transparent	Some selections have to be match specific. Selections not published but made by selectors and in contact with HOYs. Selection is appropriate, just not transparent. Pathway athletes understand - probabaly harder for those not in the pathway to understand.	2
				<b>57.1428571</b>
7	<b>Athlete Journey</b>	Induction processes are in place for all athletes joining the pathway	Focus on parents and online induction. In place at screening days and induction days. Parents also included.	3
		Holistic development plans in place for each athlete, appropriate to age and stage	Holistic approach via the wheel. Wheel for players 12-14 and non scholars up to 16. club scholarships have their own	2

	Key Element	Assessment Criteria	Evidence	Assessment
			style, reviewed up to 4 times per year. Player welfare manager in each club. Some overplaying of the top emerging players is an issue.	
		Athlete reviews or case conferences are held regularly to enhance skill development	Profile 3 times per year by coach and club. Just in the England programme. Info gathered from diff parties and then recorded. Clubs give their players PDPs. Could engage more effectively with players lower in the pathway to develop their self development.	2
		Training diaries are in place for pathway athletes	Wheel and own club style.	2
		Feedback on the programmes is regularly sought from the athletes. Mystery shoppers.	Survey monkey of parents and players to get feedback on programmes.	3
		Athlete attrition is understood and addressed	All tracked and aim to support back to club. Eg, leave for uni and no sources, or get a job. Anecdotal rather than robust data. Clubs measured on this.	2
		Systems are in place to support athletes progressing between tiers, or to exit back to community sport	Much based on relatively new profiling wheel and you can see it is live. Otherwise academy specific.	2

	Key Element	Assessment Criteria	Evidence	Assessment
		Pathway is open and accessible at each development tier	All the way through - E.g. Salford SL example.	3
		Effective and innovative methods of communication in place with all key stakeholders on the athlete journey	Online booklet and significant parental engagement as part of triangle of club, coach and parent around the players. Want to develop world class parents	3
				<b>81.4814815</b>
8	<b>Coaching and Workforce</b>	Ideal quantity and quality of coaches for each tier of the pathway are known and deployed	Breadth at base of pathway developing - need to raise coaching standard further in top tiers. Have created a desire for CPD and learning. No need to increase numbers any. Enough coaches at each level, need to further upskill. Up to 200 coaches on Embed the Pathway. Plan to drive via Accredited Coach Programme.	2
		Coaching and workforce development plans are linked to the athlete development plan	Based on player frame work. Trying to further influence what is wanted versus what is needed. Shift to what is needed driven by the embed the pathway cpd. Need to develop and further embed.	2
		Coach development pathway is in place, known and modelled on the most effective coaches	Plan is for coaches to move up with the players. Based on UKCC levels programmes.	2

	Key Element	Assessment Criteria	Evidence	Assessment
		Talent development curriculum drives CPD and qualifications both for coaches and the non-technical support workforce	Clear curriculum and learning resources based on the profiles and the wheel. Developing against the newly identified pool of coaches and becoming embedded. Challenge is to develop the pro clubs to develop the coaches in their community area. Area to address.	2
		Succession plan is in place for key roles	Tracking just beginning, based on understanding the player framework and coaches getting relevant info to players. Developing good insight - shows hunger for cpd. Coaching Academy being developed to put succession plan in place for key England roles.	2
		Effective programmes are in place to recruit, develop and deploy all required roles within the Coach Development Workforce	Research done to understand the coaches. Now beginning to track coaches to know ages and teams. Need to bring online and target more effectively. Perhaps lack of clarity on specifics of coach development? Versus developing resources and courses?	2
		Strategy is in place to engage and utilise all potential workforce resources to maximise capacity	Strong engagement with parents - help understanding rather than educate. Links available via You Tube.	3

	Key Element	Assessment Criteria	Evidence	Assessment
				<b>71.4285714</b>
9	<b>Competition</b>	Competition calendar is published, appropriate for each tier, is utilised to enhance skill development, with priority events clearly identified	Age and stage appropriate. Linked with community. Top end opportunities in scarce supply.	2
		High quality domestic and international competition opportunities are available where needed	Lack of sufficient high quality comp opps for upper tiers of pathway. Problem for England youth - some progress with France but still in development. 18s and 16s. Knights don't have games. 10 year plan in place for Youth Academy and Youth levels. Possibility to solve domestically but a slow burn.	1
		Competition formats incentivise skill development and technical mastery	Plenty of competition but many games are not quality competition experience.	2
		The School Games is effectively integrated into the competition pathway at appropriate levels	Just into Year 1 pilot for SG. Tier 2 national comp; only for Embed the Pathway accredited schools. Need to deliver on Yr 1 pilot in c 6 locations. Levels 2 and 3.	1
		Appropriate balance exists between competition and training time for athletes at each tier	Best lads get played too much - club, school, academy. Perhaps an opportunity via safeguarding? Best players average 50+ games per year.	1

	Key Element	Assessment Criteria	Evidence	Assessment
			Playing just one year group at school would help. Research opportunity?	
				46.6666667
10	<b>Athlete Learning Environments</b>	Clear standards are in place and enforced to support the required culture at each stage of the pathway to enable athletes to develop a sporting habit for life	Link to strategic plans; reinforced via talent pathway, linked to Stakeholders. Two team mentality at England level. Comfortable in an uncomfortable environment. Man on the Moon philosophy.	2
		Facilities and equipment at each tier meet the required standards for athlete development	Variety of facilities. Progressive. Challenge of competition.	2
		Talented athletes follow long term, stable development plans	Run by clubs and Embed the Pathway. Need to link with developing profile wheel.	2
		Talented athletes are linked with the most effective coaches and specialists for that stage of the pathway	Age and stage appropriate. Coaches developing at Embed the Pathway - need to ensure all drive home the development.	2
		Contact time with each athlete is sufficient to enable progression	Sufficient.	2
		Rest and recovery phases are inherent in athletes' plans	Over playing of key players but some time blocked out.	1



	Key Element	Assessment Criteria	Evidence	Assessment
		The learning environment develops decision making ability in each individual athlete	Training with elite squad supports this.	2
		The learning environment is predicated upon and promotes a growth mindset in which athletes attribute their performance to their effort and factors in their control	Focus on learning environment through HOYs.	2
		Athletes are supported to develop an effective support network	Strong focus on parental support. Based on Team You Concept.	3
		A variety of environments are available for the athletes to be exposed to	Variety.	2
v4.1				66.6666667
				<b>68.161</b>

## APPENDIX C: SUMMARY OF KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER PARTNERSHIP

### SUMMARY OF KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER PARTNERSHIP

Partnership: KTP009317

### KNOWLEDGE BASE PARTNER

**Institution name:** University of Central Lancashire  
**Department:** School of Sports, Tourism & the Outdoors

**Lead academic**

**Name:** Prof David Collins  
**Address 1:** Brook Building  
**Address 2:**  
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**Town:** Preston  
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**Other academics**

**1**

**Title:** Dr  
**Name:** Aine MacNamara

### COMPANY PARTNER

**Company name:** Rugby Football League Limited  
**Parent group name:** N/A  
**Company contact:** Mr John Roberts  
**Address 1:** Red Hall  
**Address 2:** Red Hall Lane  
**Address 3:**  
**Town:** Leeds  
**Postcode:** LS17 8NB  
**Telephone:** 0113 237 5537  
**Company size (or Group if applicable):** M

### ASSOCIATES

**Associate 1:** Mr Mark Adamoulas

All information provided through this form will be treated in confidence.

IF NECESSARY CONFIDENTIAL REPORTS ON BEHALF OF INDIVIDUAL PARTIES MAY BE SUBMITTED SEPARATELY.

The completed form must be received within one month of the end of the Knowledge Transfer Partnership.

## SUMMARY OF THE KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER PARTNERSHIP

THIS SECTION TO BE COMPLETED JOINTLY BY THE COMPANY PARTNER AND THE KNOWLEDGE BASE PARTNER

### 1. Please give an overall account of the Partnership, setting out

- a. its original aims (as stated on the Application Form)
- b. the rationale behind it
- c. the main events and achievements for both Partners and for the Associate(s), including problems encountered and solutions adopted.

There is no need to duplicate here details given on subsequent pages - this section should be used to highlight any other points considered important. It is therefore suggested that you complete this question after you have completed the rest of the form.

- a) The original aim was to design and develop a curriculum and delivery methodology to optimise physical, mental, technical and tactical abilities of players to create revenue opportunities and cost savings.
- b) RFL must improve the quality of players entering into elite level pathways. This will improve the quality of teams in the elite competition, which will lead to greater commercial gain and improved international performance. This will have a direct impact on revenue generation streams to the game from both commercial and exchequer funding via Sport England. This is key to RFL as it looks to become self-sustaining financially in the current economic environment.
- c) The KTP allowed RFL to show more overtly a sports science discipline that is very much underrepresented in sports coaching and wider talent identification and development.

The design, development and deployment of a bespoke package of training methods has provided coaches with an integrated method to develop psychological characteristics of excellence, through their normal work practice, as opposed to through a separate intervention. The project addressed one of the specific gaps identified and provided coaches with a structure, system and content for the development of game-specific psychological skills and behaviours. The endorsement of these skills by senior elite players was significant in 'selling' the ideas into the sport; especially as early research demonstrated the comparative ignorance of such factors in the target audience.

Through the research, several high profile individuals were interviewed and their insights to mental skills sought. This ensured that the content of the project was both relevant and held 'street credibility' with the coaches and athletes. The KTP received coverage through an article in Rugby League World and the Associate appeared on Rugby League TV show and presented at a Talent Development Symposium held at Leeds Beckett University. RFL with UCLan held a one day conference to launch the project to the Super League Academies. Bringing together all key stakeholders, created better knowledge and understanding enabling the project to be implemented within the Club environment. Positive feedback has been received from the England Head Coach. Many of the characteristics investigated during the project were evident when England won a test series against New Zealand in November 2015.

The Associate's work via the Advanced Apprenticeship in Sporting Excellence (AASE) meant that he could very quickly develop positive working relationships with key stakeholders in the project i.e. Club Academies.

To support growth and sustainability within the professional club environment. The

internal capacity and capability within RFL's workforce has been greatly enhanced.

The KTP raised the profile of RFL with other Sporting Organisations. This was achieved by the Associate visiting other key Sports to deliver to athletes on their AASE Programme (eg. England Hockey, England Netball and England Athletics). RFL also gained praise from Sport England for engaging in such innovative work to enhance its Talent System. This involvement has also led to enquires from other Governing Bodies about the project and KTP as the vehicle to be able to access specialist knowledge.

**2. Did the aims of the Partnership, as stated above, change during the course of the Project(s), and if so, how?**

The aims of the partnership became more refined.

The area of Sports Science is multi-disciplinary and, ideally, interdisciplinary whereby different disciplines work together to address thematic issues within the sport. From the outset, the RFL felt that it was lacking in two areas; sports psychology and sport nutrition. As the application process unfolded, however, it was clear that the maximum gain would be from a partnership that was based upon sports psychology in a talent development setting. Reflecting the interdisciplinary approach, this would enable links with other existing science support projects but also, most significantly, offer a substantial tie in to coaching process and education. This approach suited the needs of the RFL and was also complemented by the presence of world leading academics in these fields (performance psychology and coaching) at UCLan.

Based on this refined aim, a specific research strand was initiated, so that the current state of play on matters psychological could be assessed. Feedback from this confirmed the RFL view that a psychological thrust would yield the greatest benefits through the closest fit to an existing challenge but also a close tie in to the coach development focus of RFL as a National Governing Bodies (NGB).

As a result of this refinement, coupled with the full integration of the Associate in Academies and a close working relationship with RFL coach educators, the eventual 'product' offers a bespoke solution, nested within existing coach development schemes. Plans to cascade the ideas into earlier stages of the performance pathway are already underway.

## RESULTS FOR THE COMPANY PARTNER

Partnership: KTP009317

Partners: University of Central Lancashire, Rugby Football League Limited

## RESULTS FOR THE COMPANY PARTNER

THIS SECTION TO BE COMPLETED BY THE COMPANY PARTNER

### **3. What is the Company's and (if appropriate) the Group's business? Has this changed as a result of the Knowledge Transfer Partnership?**

The Rugby Football League Limited ("RFL") organises and promotes competitions to maximise returns to members and is the governing body for the game of Rugby Football League; it fosters, governs, develops, organises and manages the game of Rugby League in respect of all age groups, at all levels, for both sexes in Great Britain and Ireland.

RFL's main funding source is the selling of the sports commercial rights - television and sponsorship. Other significant sources are major match receipts such as the Challenge Cup Final and international matches as well as funding received from Sport England. This funding is regularly dispersed to fulfil the aims and objectives of the sport.

Since the start of the KTP a new strategy (2015-2021) has been published. The strategy is very commercially driven and will ultimately succeed by having more and better quality athletes at the highest level of international and professional Rugby League with the ultimate strategic goal of winning World Cups in both 2017 and 2021.

### **4. How has the Knowledge Transfer Partnership contributed to the Company's and (if appropriate) the Group's strategy?**

From an evidence-base, it is widely accepted that a key determinant of elite sporting performance is the presence of mental skills. By making mental skills more overt this has provided RFL, Academy Coaches and Academy Leaders the knowledge and understanding to be able to implement mental skills throughout their coaching programmes.

The KTP has worked with two distinct groups:

1. Talented athletes age 17-19 are players in professional Club Academies identified as having the potential to make full-time Rugby League a realistic career goal. RFL has set itself a target to win the Rugby League World Cup in 2017 and 2021 and increase its turnover by 20%. Players aged 17-19 will undoubtedly play their part. It is important that RFL is seen leading the way by providing opportunities to engage in evidence-based research and its application to the work place.

2. Heads of Academy/Academy U-19 Head Coaches are key stakeholders in the talent development process. Research suggests they are the most pivotal external contributor to a player's transition to elite performer status. They play a key role in the detection, selection, identification and development of future Rugby League talent.

The Associate delivered bespoke training packages to each Super League Academy. Coaches now have the confidence to integrate mental skills in their delivery. In turn Players have been able to apply mental skills more effectively. An example of this is where a Club now communicates session content in advance allowing Players to set goals and reflect on past performance.

### **5. Describe how the external factors arising during the period of the Knowledge Transfer Partnership have impacted on the Company's and (if appropriate) the Group's strategy. Have these external factors impacted on the Knowledge Transfer Partnership?**

During the KTP participation in the Sport declined towards the end of 2014. As a result, Sport England withheld circa £500,000 from its Whole Sport Plan monies. This was taken away from the National Governing Bodies (NGB) control and invested back into the Sport through other providers.

RFL lost some Sport England funding however funding was re-commissioned to other Rugby League delivery partners (eg charitable foundations). This allowed the overarching strategy to remain unaffected. This did not impact on the KTP.

The sport's Academy system underwent an overhaul during 2015. Several changes have been made to the way that the Academies are governed and financed. The Academies are now more accountable to the NGB and are rewarded on results for producing better quality athletes for the next tier of competition. It is in the Club's interest to engage fully with the KTP to improve the holistic development of its Players.

In 2015, the apprentice minimum wage was raised 20% by the Government. The result, less apprentices were taken on by the Sport due to spiralling salary costs.

England also won its first test series for seven years defeating the world's No 1, New Zealand. Also, Kevin Sinfield came 2nd in the prestigious BBC Sports Personality of the Year. This was the first time a RL Player was a finalist and provided a very high profile for the Sport on an international occasion. This will impact tremendously on the KTP-content as Kevin highlighted his "mental skills" as being the most important.

## **6. What specific business opportunity or need of the Company has the Knowledge Transfer Partnership addressed?**

Mental skills for potentially talented athletes is very much under represented discipline within sports coaching and talent development, yet it is seen by many as the most important pre determinant of elite performance.

The KTP has enabled RFL to complete an audit of the required mental skills specific to the sport and once this was established, set about developing an education package to provide the Talent Development workforce with the necessary knowledge and understanding to be able to teach young players how to best apply and use these in their own context.

The KTP provided an opportunity to engage with stakeholders in the Rugby League Academies and be able to provide a new knowledge base and understanding to leaders, coaches and players of what are the mental skills and how to go about optimising their development in the Academy setting.

The KTP has enabled the RFL staff to be able to work closely with academics from UCLan in expanding their evidence base so that they too could immerse themselves fully into the project and its delivery. It has provided some excellent CPD for staff over the last 2 years.

This Partnership enabled RFL to engage with a World Leading Expert in the field of Talent Development. This enabled RFL to develop a longer term relationship with UCLan rather than ad-hoc dialogue with the academics which has previously been the case. The KTP has provided mutual benefits between business and academia with a far greater reach than initially expected.

## **7. What new knowledge and capabilities have the Company and its staff acquired as a result of the Knowledge Transfer Partnership?**

The RFL and its member club Academy staff have acquired new knowledge in:

- Mental Skills and the psychosocial characteristics of developing excellence
- The extent to which mental skills has been used by athletes and coaches previously at different stages of the talent pathway from 16 years to full international.
- The pre-determinants of elite performance in Rugby League



- How to create a club specific plan for the implementation of mental skills training
- Helping coaches and the multi-disciplinary team integrate mental skills training into all sessions

The need for this was summed up by Kevin Sinfield. Kevin was (in 2015) the first Rugby League player to be nominated for the BBC Sports Personality of the Year. He came runner up. In his interview he stated that to get to the top:

"I was aware of my weaknesses, I wasn't the strongest, the fastest, the most skilful, the fittest. But I was also aware of my strengths. There was one area where I knew I could stand out, and that was by being the most committed."

He also spoke of Rugby League's moral values:

Hard work, but also, how you treat people. It's so important in a team sport: how you go about your business, how you interact, and the relationships you build.

RFL staff have improved both knowledge and understanding of how to develop Coaches in their delivery of mental skills specific to 16-19 year olds. Within the Talent Development Team there is a dedicated member of staff for Coach Development. The package of learning materials created by the Associate will be delivered to Coaches of 16-19 year olds on a regular basis. In addition, Coaches have been provided with the training and the necessary "toolkit" to be able to equip players with these important mental attributes.

RFL also now has the capability to further adapt these materials for other sports. These will be marketed via Rugby League Learning which is the commercial arm of RFL selling educational products and services.

**8. Describe how the new knowledge and capabilities acquired through the Knowledge Transfer Partnership has been embedded into the business e.g. preparation of Process instructions, staff training.**

The new knowledge generated by the KTP has transformed into a bespoke training package for the delivery of coach education interventions.

It has been tailored to a very narrow but deep focus aimed at talented players in academies aged 16-19. This is an area of high investment for both the RFL and Super League Europe and this investment must be protected but above all, grown.

A one day conference was held at UCLan accessed by Academy staff. This was aimed at providing both underpinning knowledge and strategies by which mental skills training can be implemented to the Club setting.

The Associate has also provided bespoke workshop packages to individual clubs so that:

- They are able to confidently implement club specific strategies.
- The multi-disciplinary staff improve their knowledge base and understanding

RFL are now in a position where the new knowledge and understanding gained will be embedded in formal United Kingdom Coaching Certificate Level 3 and 4 qualifications. RFL will also enhance this with the provision of continuous professional development in the subject matter.

Additionally, the interventions by the Associate and Academics has enabled RFL staff to be more confident with their delivery of the underpinning theories when dealing with key stakeholders.

The Head of Talent Development has begun a DProf with UCLan in a related subject area.

Note. The information provided in questions 9-19 contributes to the government's understanding of the effectiveness of the KTP programme and its contribution to improving the productivity of UK business and contribution to the UK Economy. It is essential that these questions are

answered in full.

**9. Please provide below a summary of company performance whether or not related to Knowledge Transfer Partnership**

	Year prior to commencement of KTP (from application form)	Most recent annual figure
Sales Turnover	£27043,000	£18673,000
Exports, by sales value	£0,000	£0,000
Profit before tax	£97,000	£100,000
Number of employees	208	160
Percentage market share	0	100

**10. Please provide below information on the change in the Company's competitive position resulting from the Knowledge Transfer Partnership.**

**Sales Turnover**

Quantity in £ the change in **current** annual sales turnover directly attributable to your Knowledge Transfer Partnership:

£0,000

Quantity in £ the change in annual sales turnover expected **in three years' time** resulting from your Knowledge Transfer Partnership:

£9,495,000

Explain how the turnover is being / will be affected by the Knowledge Transfer Partnership:

The turnover of the RFL will be positively affected by the KTP in that it will produce elite players of a higher quality.

These professional players will therefore raise the standard of both the Super League (premier club competition) and the England team hence providing a better marketable product that will contribute to the RFL and Super league Europe Strategy (2015-2021) which states:

- Increase joint turnover (RFL & Super League Europe) from £118 million to £146 million
- Increase annual spectators from 2.3 million to 3 million
- Increase 1V viewers from 17 million to 22 million
- Increase in Commercial Sponsors and Events is circa £500,000
- England to win World Cup in 2017

**Exports**

Quantity in £ the change in **current** annual export s directly attributable to your Knowledge Transfer Partnership:

£0,000

Quantity in £ the change in annual exports expected **in three years' time** resulting from your Knowledge Transfer Partnership:

£0,000

Explain how exports is being/ will be affected by the Knowledge Transfer Partnership:

N/A

**Profit**



Quantity in £ the change in **current** annual profit before tax directly attributable to your Knowledge Transfer Partnership:

£0,000

Quantity in £ the change in annual profit before tax expected in **three years' time** resulting from your Knowledge Transfer Partnership:

£1,422,800,000

Explain how this change has arisen/ will arise (eg through reduction in stock or work in progress or increased sales or reduced costs):

This raise in profits is due to increased commercial income and income generated from Super League main events such as Magic Weekend, Super League Grand Final and Play Offs Series

There are other contributing factors that impact on Profit, see section below.

Please refer to the forecast given in question 3.2 of your Grant Application and Proposal Form. If the changes in the current and/ or expected annual profit before tax directly attributable to the Knowledge Transfer Partnership reported above differ from the figures you gave in 3.2, please elaborate and explain below what has led to this difference.

Profit will be driven by:

Future higher value broadcast contracts.

Broadcast deal circa to £141m resulting in an increase of £6m over 5 years. The KTP is responsible for 20% = £1.2m

Commercial Sponsors and Events

Profit generated by Super League Europe and redistributed to member Clubs is circa £500,000 per year. KTP responsible for 20% = £100k per year

Consultancy Fee savings - Advanced apprenticeship in Sporting Excellence.

By upskilling club staff in mental skills delivery, the money saved for the sport will be up to £108,000 per annum (assuming 200 apprentices on programme in any given academic year).

Coach Education Resource Development

Based upon 500 units sold at £10 each, with a profit margin of 20% = £1,000 per annum

Social Value

The KTP will add social value to participants. If players are better coached then they are more likely to have better experiences that will make them a lifelong consumer of Rugby League as a spectator, administrator and player.

The KTP will contribute to growth in all club environments. Expected growth in 3 years is £338,000.

If the KTP is responsible for 1% then £33,800

Overall profit 3 years post KTP is £1,442,800

**11. Summarise how any increase in annual profits shown above relate to the following.**

New markets for existing products	0%
New products in existing markets	35%
New products for new markets	5%

Improved production or operational efficiency 30% Improved quality

100%

**12. Has the Knowledge Transfer Partnership improved the Company's operation in other ways, eg by changing company culture?**

The KTP has allowed the RFL to be able to deliver a more bespoke mental skills package to the players enrolled on the Advanced Apprenticeship in Sporting Excellence.

The Associate has been hands on working with individual players in clubs (circa 90) in order to provide a more rugby league specific training package rather than a general one that in the past was delivered by practitioners who, whilst competent sports psychologists had little knowledge of the sport of rugby league and its requirements.

The KTP has also enabled the RFL performance and coaching department the opportunity to expand their own knowledge, understanding and application of mental skills in an elite sports setting.

The KTP has proved to be a driver for change in some Academies in terms of their daily practices and the impact that this has had on both athletes, coaches and the wider multi disciplinary team. Academies have been able to re-align their vision for the development of talent and this is now widely understood and implemented by all stakeholders in the athlete journey.

**13a. Please indicate any areas in which social and/or cultural benefits have or will be achieved as a result of this Knowledge Transfer Partnership.**

Recreational (sport and leisure)	
Cultural (music, theatre and arts)	
Heritage (historical, architectural and built environment)	
Health and well-being of the community (physical and mental)	✓
Educational (extending the knowledge, skills and expertise of individuals within the community)	✓
Social inclusion (disadvantaged, marginalized and at-risk groups)	
Environmental (land, water and air)	
Other	

**13b. Please assess the nature and significance of the impact on your activities achieved through the KTP below. Please describe and, if possible, quantify each impact.**

Impact	None	Low	Med	High	Describe the nature of the impact and quantify its extent relative to the pre-KTP position
Increased breadth of information or extent of dissemination				✓	Provided cutting edge evidence- based knowledge and understanding to a whole sport talent system.
Increased number of individuals benefiting			✓		Whilst all Academies were given equal opportunity to access the services of

Increased benefit per individual affected	✓	the KTP. Some chose not to engage. This is difficult to measure given that the KTP has been aimed at working with developing players.
Improved customer or stakeholder satisfaction	✓	Verbal and written feedback from individual apprentices and leaders of academies have praised the intervention of the KTP.
Improved efficiency or productivity	✓	RFL is more efficient in its apprenticeship deliver saving c£18k per year on consultant psychologist costs.
Other		

14. Please describe and quantify any investments the company has made or will make to implement the results of the Knowledge Transfer Partnership. In the case of future investments, please indicate the likely timescales.

<p><b>In plant and machinery</b></p> <p><b>Description:</b> None</p> <p><b>Total plant and machinery investment:</b> £0,000</p>
<p><b>In training existing staff</b></p> <p><b>Description of training:</b> CPD Programme to 50 Coaches per year over the next three years</p> <p><b>Total staff trained (No. of staff):</b> 150</p>
<p><b>In employing new staff (other than the KTP Associate(s))</b></p> <p><b>Description of functions:</b> New member of staff recruited to the Performance and Coaching Department to continue to roll-out the resources from the KTP.</p> <p><b>Total staff trained (No. of staff):</b> 1</p>

<p><b>Other</b></p> <p><b>Description:</b> N/A</p> <p><b>Total (Quantify):</b></p>
--

15. Describe and quantify any investment the company has made or will make in Research and Development to exploit the outcomes of the Knowledge Transfer Partnership. In the case of future investments, please indicate the likely timescales.

**Research and Development**

**Description:**

Will research the improvement on player performance based upon baseline profiling of individual players who have benefited directly from interventions caused by the KTP.

Will research the 12-16 age group to investigate retention and progression rates.

These will be projects that will last for 3 years

**Total:**

£50,000

16. Looking into the future, what further impact are the outcomes of the Knowledge Transfer Partnership expected to have on the Company's performance?

RFL must always be looking to improve the quality of player entering into elite level pathways. This in turn will improve the quality of teams in the elite competition, which will lead to greater commercial gain and improved international performance with the ultimate aim of England consistently winning World Cups every four years.

This will have a direct impact on revenue generation streams to the game from both commercial and exchequer funding via Sport England.

The partnership has enabled the RFL to draw on specific expertise that will enable the business to develop internal capacity and capability within its current workforce to support growth and sustainability within the professional club environment with reference to developing coaches who are expert in the delivery of all aspects of performance, especially mental skills training.

The KTP has developed and embedded a unique delivery and service provision model based on cutting-edge sport science innovations. This has enabled RFL to improve the level of player performance by applying evidence-based research across the talent pathway.

17. Overall, how significant do you believe are the results of the Knowledge Transfer Partnership to:

The Company's present performance?

Medium

The Company's future performance?

High

**18. How has your experience of involvement in a Knowledge Transfer Partnership matched up to your expectations?**

Met in the main

**Please explain in what way it has exceeded or failed to meet your expectations:**

The KTP has allowed the RFL to further cement relationships with UCLan and be in a position to enhance and re-invigorate their player development and coach development programmes by new underpinning knowledge and understanding of mental skills.

The level of service received from UCLan KTP manager Ruth Slater has been excellent. Similarly, Jon Dean has guided throughout the process and has been an excellent mentor to the Associate.

The KTP has allowed RFL to be able to examine in detail a discipline of sports science where they had large gaps in the knowledge of themselves and their stakeholders.

The processes of application, induction and review do seem to be very repetitive and bureaucratic.

**19. Overall, which of the following in your view best describes the contribution that the Knowledge Transfer Partnership has made to the Company's business.**

Overall contribution

Definitely wouldn't be making similar progress

**If 'None of these' is selected then please describe below:**

**CP1. If you are willing, please provide a sentence or two on your experience of the Knowledge Transfer Partnership that can be used in KTP promotional material.**

Being afforded the opportunity to undertake this KTP has allowed our knowledge to be grown in an area of sports sciences that previously we had found difficult to apply research theory to practice. As a result of the KTP our professional club Academies are more confident to be able to equip young athletes with the necessary mental skills they need in order to make the transition from youth, to senior professional Rugby League.

**Please name the person who is responsible for the wording provided above.**

Dave Rotheram

## RESULTS FOR THE COMPANY PARTNER

**Partnership: KTP009317**

**Partners: University of Central Lancashire, Rugby Football League Limited**

## RESULTS FOR THE KNOWLEDGE BASE PARTNER

THIS SECTION TO BE COMPLETED BY THE KNOWLEDGE BASE PARTNER

### **20. How has the Knowledge Transfer Partnership contributed to the development of the institution's staff?**

In an applied discipline such as sport science, regular and 'deep' contact with consumers is crucial. Such a contact helps to keep the discipline 'grounded', helping to ensure that student provision is less 'airy fairy' and more real-world. Such a focus is already an important feature and focus of the School, in contrast to many other, more academic institutions across the UK. Reflecting this focus, the KTP enabled the Academics to build on an existing strong relationship with the RFL, resulting in mutual benefit. As a particular example, staff thinking in the design of future research was more focused towards performance-related topics. From the Institutional perspective, the fruits of this improved relationship are ongoing through interactions on a variety of levels.

**How important would you rate this effect?**

High

### **21. What effect has the Knowledge Transfer Partnership had on the institution's teaching (e.g. in terms of curriculum development, case studies material)?**

Case study material has already been used in UG Coaching Science programmes and with taught PG courses for serving Coaches. Reflecting comments above, there are benefits to both students and staff in such a 'translational' thrust, offering examples of real-world application and encouraging all to think along applied lines. This is particularly relevant to an applied science such as the disciplines in our School. Coaching Science and Sport Science are particularly relevant to this description and, hopefully but certainly not universally, approach.

**How important would you rate this effect?**

High

### **22. How has the Knowledge Transfer Partnership benefited the institution's research?**

Pressures of completing the project and associated work commitments have limited realisation of the research benefits. These are clear, however three papers in applied journals are expected within the year, as the Associate completes his higher degree work. The ideas form part of a wider and ongoing programme of work in Talent Development. The project has specifically fed into two other projects; one focussed on academy work in football and the other into a pathway management scheme currently involving British Cycling (through an erstwhile employee of the RFL). There is also the potential for a project which extends the current ideas to earlier stages of the RFL pathway.

It is worth mentioning the impetus and valuable support that KTPs offer to performance focused research. Juxtaposition of performance and participation has led, perhaps understandably, to a shift in the balance of attention due to greater funding opportunities in exercise. Notably, however, performance is also an important source of wealth generation, employment and national pride. At present, funding for performance is almost non-existent, so sources such as KTPs enable retention or even expansion of this important area, whilst also offering a direct

business benefit to major organisations and structures. In this regard, government perceptions of, and claims for, the benefits of sporting success should not be ignored. If the 2012 Olympics offered a boost to exercise, then so should sporting success in other domains. In short, KTPs in sport would seem to be consistent with policy across a variety of areas.

**How important would you rate this effect?**

High

**23. How many students research projects have been established as a result of the Knowledge Transfer Partnership?**

Undergraduate: 0

Postgraduate: 3

**24. Has the IPR agreement been established between the Knowledge Transfer Partners?**

YES

**25. If 'Yes', is it anticipated that any commercial benefits to either party will result in the agreement?**

NO

**Please describe and quantify the benefits to the institution:**

**Total Benefit:**

£, 000

**26. What other benefits have been gained by the institution and its staff as a result of the Knowledge Transfer Partnership?**

In addition to the significant relational and research benefits, the Academics have enjoyed very positive publicity and reputational gains. The RFL were strongly represented at a Talent Development Conference held by the University, which attracted over 400 delegates from across the sporting landscape. We also subsequently conducted a smaller bespoke conference for RFL Academies. This also attracted positive publicity and was attended by over 40 delegates.

Such occasions represent one of the best methods for dissemination of research outputs, as highly committed coaches' search for the next edge in performance.

Furthermore, and as already alluded to earlier, applied interactions help to keep staff and students focussed on applied matters; crucial in an applied domain such as this. Accordingly, applied interactions have a general 'energising' impact on University Departments.

**27. Have your expectations of the KTP Programme been...**

Fully met

**Please explain in what way KTP has exceeded or failed to meet your expectations:**

The strong working relationship with the RFL resulted in challenging goals. These have been fully met.

**28. Overall, which of the following in your view best describes the contribution that the Knowledge Transfer Partnership has made to the development of the institution?**

Fully met

**If 'None of these' is selected then please describe below:**

**KBP1. If you are willing, please provide a sentence or two on your experience of the Knowledge Transfer Partnership that can be used in KTP promotional material.**

An excellent Scheme, bringing together knowledge generators and consumers. Just what it says on the tin!

**Please name the person who is responsible for the wording provided above.**

Professor Dave Collins



## RESULTS FOR THE KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER PARTNERSHIP ASSOCIATE(S)

Partnership: KTP009317

Partners: University of Central Lancashire, Rugby Football League Limited

## RESULTS FOR THE KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER PARTNERSHIP ASSOCIATE(S)

THIS SECTION TO BE COMPLETED BY THE KNOWLEDGE BASE PARTNER

- 30. Which of the Associates employed on the Knowledge Transfer Partnership have completed their NVQ Level 4 / Diploma in Management Level 5?**

Mark Adamoulas

- 31. Which of the Associates employed on the Knowledge Transfer Partnership have received higher degrees directly as a result of their work? (if no degree has been received then please leave this question blank)**

Mark Adamoulas      MSc    MBA    MPhil    PhD    Other

- 32. How many more higher degrees are expected to be awarded to Associates as a result of the Knowledge Transfer Partnership?**

1

- 33. Which of the Associates employed on the Knowledge Transfer Partnership were offered continuing employment by the Company Partner?**

Mark Adamoulas

- 34. Which of the Associates offered employment above have accepted the Company partner's offer?**

Mark Adamoulas

- 35. What are the main job functions of the KTP Associates offered continuing employment by the Company Partner, if applicable?**

Mark Adamoulas

- 36. Of the Associates not employed by the Company Partner, how many were employed in each of the following fields?**

Industry

Education

Other                      1

Don't know

**If 'Other', please specify here**

Professional Football

- 37. How many Associates left the Knowledge Transfer Partnership three months or more before the end of their contracts?**

None

## MANAGEMENT OF THE KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER PARTNERSHIP

THIS SECTION TO BE COMPLETED BY THE COMPANY PARTNER AND THE KNOWLEDGE BASE PARTNER

**38. Give details of any changes in Company partner, Knowledge Base partner and Associate personnel directly involved in the Knowledge Transfer Partnership during its lifetime.**

Company Partner                      The role of the original Partnership Facilitator changed within RFL and therefore was unable to proceed. It was agreed that the role would be taken on by the Company Supervisor.

Knowledge Base Partner              One of the academic s on the originally academic team was replaced due to maternity leave.

Associate(s)                          None. The original appointment completed the project.

**39. How many LMC meetings have been held to manage the Knowledge Transfer Partnership?**

7

**40. Explain any difficulties encountered in managing the Knowledge Transfer Partnership, their effects on the results, and solutions adopted.**

None encountered. Close working relationship, facilitated by the KTP Associate.

**41. To what extent has the LMC helped in determining the solutions adopted above?**

No difficulties were encountered. However, the LMC process has provided a very useful check and balance on progress, enabling critical but supportive review of the various decision points.

**42. Give details of any changes in the value or duration of the Knowledge Transfer Partnership and explain their circumstances.**

A revision request was submitted and approved to transfer £1,000 from the consumables budget to travel and subsistence. This would fund additional travel required by the KTP Associate to roll-out and evaluate the pilot phase of the KTP project.

**43. Please give your views on the support provided to the Knowledge Transfer Partnership by the TSB and its Advisers and by the KTP Offices/Centres, and how this support might be improved.**

Strong and positive support. The Adviser was genuinely interested in the processes, different perhaps to the usual run of KTPs. The briefing day provided a firm base. No other suggestion on improvement, unless it is for a slightly lower level of meeting expectation for both the KTP Associate and Staff.

**44. How might the KTP Programme be improved from the user's point of view?**

The project has been well supported throughout. Perhaps the initial bidding and decision making process could be streamlined slightly?

## PUBLICATIONS

THIS SECTION TO BE COMPLETED JOINTLY BY THE COMPANY PARTNER AND THE KNOWLEDGE BASE PARTNER

**45. How many papers on the results of the Knowledge Transfer Partnership have been published in, or submitted to, refereed journals by:**

KTP Supervisors	0
KTP Associates	0
Jointly	0

**46. How many papers on the results of the Knowledge Transfer Partnership are in preparation for submission to refereed journals by:**

KTP Supervisors	0
KTP Associates	0
Jointly	3

**47. How many other publications have arisen from the Knowledge Transfer Partnership, written by:**

KTP Supervisors	0
KTP Associates	0
Jointly	0

**48. How many other publications arising from the Knowledge Transfer Partnership are being prepared by:**

KTP Supervisors	1
KTP Associates	0
Jointly	0

**49. What other steps have been taken or are planned to disseminate the results of the Knowledge Transfer Partnership?**

With the approval of the RFL, exemplars from the project will be jointly presented at forthcoming Talent Development Conferences.

The KTP Associate presented at a Talent Development Symposium held at Leeds Beckett University. Through the Advanced Apprenticeship in Sporting Excellence programme the KTP Associate also raised the profile of RFL and the KTP Project.

RFL and UCLan held a joint one day Conference to launch the project with the Super League Academies with over 40 delegates attending.

UCLan also held a Talent Development Conference at which RFL was strongly represented and attracted over 400 delegates.

Further coverage of the KTP Project has been undertaken with an article in Rugby League World and the KTP Associate appearing on Rugby League TV show.

**50. Are you willing for the results of this Knowledge Transfer Partnership to be published as a Case Study (subject to protecting commercial interests)?**

YES

**Please provide any additional comments to support your answer, if you wish.**

## FUTURE PROSPECTS

THIS SECTION TO BE COMPLETED JOINTLY BY THE COMPANY PARTNER AND THE KNOWLEDGE  
BASE PARTNER

### 51. Do the Partners have any other plans for further cooperation?

YES

**If 'Yes', please describe below. Please include continued joint working as well as continued participation in KTP of individual Partners.**

The RFL and UCLan will continue to have a formal partnership through coach development at UKCC levels 3 and 4.

UCLan's Institute of Coaching and Performance will still remain a close partner through the supervision of a DProf being undertaken by the Head of Talent Development. This DProf is investigating the effectiveness of the whole of the talent development pathway by identifying and applying the characteristics of an effective whole sport talent development system to improve performance at senior level in the English game.

## STATEMENT OF GRANT EXPENDITURE

Partnership: KTP009317

Partners: University of Central Lancashire, Rugby Football League Limited

## STATEMENT OF GRANT EXPENDITURE

THIS SECTION TO BE COMPLETED BY THE KNOWLEDGE BASE PARTNER

### Full Economic Cost (fEC) Budget

Please give an account of expenditure on the Knowledge Transfer Partnership. All figures are for the KTP contribution and exclude industrial contributions against each heading. These figures will inform the assessment process and, if necessary may be indicative only. Precise final figures are required when completing Schedule 3, which must accompany the final claim. If the "grant provisions" are incorrect, please contact the KTP Programme Office.

	KTP GRANT PROVISION (£)	KTP EXPENDITURE
Associate(s) Employment Costs	41540	41540
Associate(s) Development	2680	2382
Associate(s) Travel & Subsistence	3685	3665
Consumables	1340	1289
<b>TOTAL DIRECTLY INCURRED COSTS</b>	<b>49245</b>	<b>48876</b>
Knowledge Base Supervisor	7842	7842
Associate(s) Estate Costs	0	0
Mentoring Support	0	0
<b>TOTAL DIRECTLY ALLOCATED COSTS</b>	<b>7842</b>	<b>7842</b>
<b>IN DIRECT COSTS</b>	<b>32695</b>	<b>31695</b>
Additional Associate Support		
<b>GRAND TOTAL</b>	<b>89782</b>	<b>88413</b>

## DECLARATION BY PARTNERS

Please print and sign this page

On behalf of the partners, we declare that the Final Report submitted for Knowledge Transfer Partnership KTP009317 on 01-Mar-2016 is an accurate account of the Partnership.

**Knowledge Base Lead  
Academic or Supervisor**

**Company Facilitator or  
Supervisor**

**Name**

Professor David Collins

**Name**

Dr David Rotheram

**Signature**



**Signature**



**Position in the KTP**

Academic Supervisor

**Position in the KTP**

Company Supervisor

**Date**

1 March 2016

**Date**

1 March 2016

After signing this page, you must provide a copy of it to the KTP Team at the Technology Strategy Board, by one of these methods:

- Scan it (pdf format preferred please) and upload it to the portal using the link on the Final Report page
- Scan it (pdf format preferred please) and email it to [KTP\\_FinalReport@innovateuk.gov.uk](mailto:KTP_FinalReport@innovateuk.gov.uk)
- Fax it to 01793 442797.
- Send it by post to Knowledge Transfer Partnerships, Innovate UK, North Star House, North Star Avenue, Swindon, SN2 1 UE

THE FINAL REPORT MUST BE COMPLETED AND SUBMITTED WITHIN ONE MONTH OF THE END OF THE KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER PARTNERSHIP. PLEASE NOTE THAT FINAL CLAIMS WILL NOT BE PAID UNTIL THE PARTNERSHIP FINAL REPORT HAS BEEN

SUBMITTED AND THIS SIGN-OFF FORM COMPLETED AND SUBMITTED

## APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW GUIDE, ENGLAND NETBALL STAFF (CHAPTER 5)

1. <i>Can you describe the aims of your talent identification and development system What would be the markers of success?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are the aims?</li> <li>• What do you believe are the key parts for achieving these aims?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Performance improvement</li> <li>• Continuous improvement in club academies</li> <li>• National Success outcome</li> <li>• Personal progression</li> <li>• Everybody pulling in the same direction</li> <li>• Coach development</li> <li>• Player profiling</li> <li>• Appropriate player development</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>To what extent</b> were you aware of a need to hold a long term/short-term aims?</li> <li>• <b>How</b> did you decide this/these aim?</li> <li>• <b>Who</b> did you discuss this/these with?</li> <li>• <b>What</b> components did you believe were important for achieving this/these aims?</li> <li>• <b>How</b> did this compare/contrast across stakeholders?</li> <li>•</li> </ul>
2. <i>is there any model or approach that your system is based upon?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Model of talent development</li> <li>• Wants and needs of professional clubs, schools and community clubs</li> <li>• Expectations of funders</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 10,000 hours, LTAD, Early specialisation, SMTD</li> <li>• Commercial interests to generate income</li> </ul>	
3. <i>Why do you do it in this way?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is it the way its always been done</li> <li>• Fits a calendar</li> <li>• A whole sport political solution</li> </ul>		
4 <i>what are the limitations to implementing your strategy?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Who else do you need to consider</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conflict with community game</li> <li>• Wants and needs of Vitality Super League clubs</li> </ul>	
5. <i>Can you tell me about any recent changes you have made to your TD system?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gaining an understanding of the previous history, culture and customs</li> <li>• Gaining an understanding of the problem/challenge</li> <li>• Creation of a specified plan</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discussions with the board, national head coach</li> <li>• Reacting to the conditions of Sport England talent funding (if applicable)</li> <li>• Analysis of performance measures</li> <li>• Analysis of process measures</li> <li>• Reaction to recent global competitions</li> <li>• Expertise of staff in roles</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>To what extent</b> were you aware of a need to carry out certain steps before beginning the process?</li> <li>• <b>How</b> did you decide upon these steps?</li> <li>• <b>Who</b> did you discuss these with?</li> <li>• <b>When</b> did you take these steps?</li> <li>• <b>How</b> did these compare/contrast across clubs?</li> </ul>



			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>WHY?</b></li> </ul>
6. What do you believe are the characteristics of a good TDE?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Multi-disciplinary approach</li> <li>• Quality player experience</li> <li>• Communication &amp; trust</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parent ed</li> <li>• Supportive</li> <li>• Role clarity</li> <li>• Planned</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What needs to be present</li> <li>• How do you integrate different components</li> <li>• Why do you include these</li> <li>•</li> </ul>
7. Tell me what your last innovation was?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Physical testing protocol</li> <li>• Profiling tool</li> <li>• Parent workshop</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Other sport</li> <li>• Evidence based research</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>How much</b> were you aware of the need to do this</li> <li>• Where did it come from</li> <li>• What led you to it</li> <li>• <b>How</b> did you do it</li> <li>• <b>Who</b> did you take on the journey with you to implement this</li> <li>• <b>What</b> resistance did you meet</li> <li>• <b>WHY</b></li> </ul>
8. What is your view on the Vitality Super League clubs and the way they implement their Talent identification and development strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clear vision and mission</li> <li>• Buy in from leaders</li> <li>• Head coach sets out the qualities of a player</li> <li>• Their knowledge of TID</li> <li>• The environment created</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Competence of athlete at national/international level</li> <li>• Time spent with players</li> <li>• Holistic player development activity</li> <li>• Player welfare</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What do you believe drives it</li> <li>• How (out of 10) would you rate the club's effectiveness in developing talent</li> <li>• Why</li> </ul>

## APPENDIX E: INFORMED CONSENT, (CHAPTER 5)

### Consent form

**Full title of Project: Investigation of the Talent Identification and Development process in Rugby League**

**Name, position and contact address of Researcher:**

David Rotheram

RFL, Leeds, LS17 8NB

Dave.rotheram@rfl.uk.com

**Please read the following statements and tick the boxes to indicate agreement.**

**Please tick box**

I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet, dated ...13/01/2019..... for the above study and have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.

☐

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason.

☐

I agree to take part in the above study.

☐

I agree that my data gathered in this study may be stored (after it has been anonymised) in a specialist data centre and may be used for future research.

☐

I understand that it will not be possible to withdraw my data from the study after final analysis has been undertaken

☐

I agree to the interview being audio recorded

☐

I agree to the use of anonymised quotes in publications

☐

Name of Participant	Date	Signature
Name of Researcher	Date	Signature

## **EMAIL TO RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS (CHAPTER 5)**

Dear ...,

Further to our telephone conversation, please see below some further details of the research interview I would like to carry out with you.

I am beginning a chapter will form part of a Doctorate qualification. I would like to investigate the key characteristics of a talent pathway in another team sport.

For this study, I wish to interview a pathway coach and the NGB Talent lead.

The interview should last about 60 minutes.

Please confirm a time and place suitable for you where we can meet to complete the interview. I will very happily meet you at your place of work.

Yours sincerely,

**13 January 2019**

### **Participant Information Sheet**

**Research project title: Investigation of the Talent Identification and Development process in Rugby League**

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether or not to take part, please take time to read the following information carefully. Thank you for your time and consideration.

**What is the purpose of the study?**

To examine the Talent identification and development processes in Rugby League.

**Why have I been invited to participate?**

As a first step, a phone call and subsequent email invitation an invitation was sent to you because of your status within your NGB Talent Pathway.

**Do I have to take part?**

Your participation in this project is entirely voluntary but your contribution would be much appreciated. Furthermore, if you do not want to answer to a question, we can stop discussing the particular question and move on to the next one. You are also free to withdraw from the project at any time, without having to give a reason. Please note, however, that you will be unable to withdraw from the study once the data from the interview have been anonymised.

**Can I take part in this study?**

If you are interested in taking part in this study, you must

- Be a coach who has coached within a team sport talent pathway for at least 3 years

**OR**

- Be the designated NGB Talent lead for a recognised team sport, funded for Talent by Sport England in the UK

**What will happen to me if I take part?**

If you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to take part in an interview conducted by myself. This interview will last approximately 60 minutes and will be recorded for transcription purposes. Before starting the interview, you will be given this information sheet to keep and will be asked to sign two consent forms (one for you, and one for the research team). This is to confirm that you have read and understood the information given in the information sheet and that you are willing to participate. Finally, you will be contacted later on to consider and give feedback on the outcomes resulting from your transcript in order to ensure that our understanding of your narrative is matching your lived experience.

**What are the possible benefits of taking part?**

There will be no direct benefit to you by taking part, but we intend that findings will inform research and better practice to help Indian athletes get all the support they need to excel at the international level.

**What are the possible risks of taking part?**

There are no serious risks of taking part in this study.

**Will what I say in this study be kept confidential?**

The information provided will be kept and analysed confidentially, and only the researchers involved in this study will have access to the interview transcripts. No information enabling your identification will be revealed in order to protect your anonymity and confidentiality. Data will be retained in accordance with the University of Central Lancashire's policy on Academic Integrity and will be kept securely in electronic, password protected and encrypted form for 5 years from the end of the project.

**What should I do if I want to take part?**

Please contact me via email (contact details are included at the end of this information sheet). It would be helpful if you could include some times and locations that would be most convenient for you to meet me. You can register interest and be interviewed until I stop collecting data. Please understand that you will be unable to withdraw from the study once the data from the interview have been anonymised. This means that you must withdraw your consent before the 1<sup>st</sup> of February 2019.

**What will happen to the results of the research study?**

The results may form part of my future Doctoral project and might also be published as articles in different journals. If you would like to receive a summary of the results of this research, please email [dave.rotheram@rfl.uk.com](mailto:dave.rotheram@rfl.uk.com)

**Who has reviewed the study?**

If you have any questions about this project, please feel free to contact me, or the project supervisor *Dave Collins* ([DJCollins@uclan.ac.uk](mailto:DJCollins@uclan.ac.uk)).

Dave Rotheram  
January 2019

## APPENDIX F: INTERNATIONAL RL CALENDAR 2019

18 & 19 October 2019	Rugby League World Cup Nines	An eight team 9 a-side invitational tournament involving both Australia and England	Sydney, Australia
25 October	Oceania Cup	Australia vs New Zealand	Tbc in Australia
26 October 2019	International match	England Knights vs Jamaica	Leeds, England
26 October 2019	Test Match	Great Britain vs Tonga	Christchurch, New Zealand
2 November 2019	Oceania Cup	Tonga vs Australia	Auckland, New Zealand
2 November 2019	Test Match	Great Britain vs New Zealand	Auckland, New Zealand
9 November 2019	Test Match	Great Britain vs New Zealand	Wellington, New Zealand
16 November 2019	Test Match	Great Britain vs Papua New Guinea	Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea

## APPENDIX G: INFORMED CONSENT, (CHAPTER 6)

### Consent form

**Full title of Project: Investigation of the Talent Identification and Development process in Rugby League**

**Name, position and contact address of Researcher:**

David Rotheram

RFL, Leeds, LS17 8NB

Dave.rotheram@rfl.uk.com

**Please read the following statements and tick the boxes to indicate agreement.**

**Please tick box**

I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet, dated ...15/05/2015..... for the above study and have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.

☐

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason.

☐

I agree to take part in the above study.

☐

I agree that my data gathered in this study may be stored (after it has been anonymised) in a specialist data centre and may be used for future research.

☐

I understand that it will not be possible to withdraw my data from the study after final analysis has been undertaken

☐



I agree to the interview being audio recorded

☐

I agree to the use of anonymised quotes in publications

☐

Name of Participant	Date	Signature
Name of Researcher	Date	Signature

**15 May 2015**

### **Participant Information Sheet**

#### **Research project title: Investigation of the Talent Identification and Development process in Rugby League**

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether or not to take part, please take time to read the following information carefully. Thank you for your time and consideration.

#### **What is the purpose of the study?**

To examine the Talent identification and development processes in Rugby League.

#### **Why have I been invited to participate?**

As a first step, a phone call and subsequent email invitation was sent to you because of your status within either the NRL, NSWRL or NRL Club.

### **Do I have to take part?**

Your participation in this project is entirely voluntary but your contribution would be much appreciated. Furthermore, if you do not want to answer to a question, we can stop discussing the particular question and move on to the next one. You are also free to withdraw from the project at any time, without having to give a reason. Please note, however, that you will be unable to withdraw from the study once the data from the interview have been anonymised.

### **Can I take part in this study?**

If you are interested in taking part in this study, you must

- NRL Performance lead
- NSWRL Talent Lead
- Head of Youth Performance, NRL Club

### **What will happen to me if I take part?**

If you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to take part in an interview conducted by myself. This interview will last approximately 30 minutes and will be recorded for transcription purposes. Before starting the interview, you will be given this information sheet to keep and will be asked to sign two consent forms (one for you, and one for the research team). This is to confirm that you have read and understood the information given in the information sheet and that you are willing to participate. Finally, you will be contacted later on to consider and give feedback on the outcomes resulting from your transcript in order to ensure that our understanding of your narrative is matching your lived experience.

### **What are the possible benefits of taking part?**

There will be no direct benefit to you by taking part, but we intend that findings will inform research and better practice to help Indian athletes get all the support they need to excel at the international level.

### **What are the possible risks of taking part?**

There are no serious risks of taking part in this study.

**Will what I say in this study be kept confidential?**

The information provided will be kept and analysed confidentially, and only the researchers involved in this study will have access to the interview transcripts. No information enabling your identification will be revealed in order to protect your anonymity and confidentiality. Data will be retained in accordance with the University of Central Lancashire's policy on Academic Integrity and will be kept securely in electronic, password protected and encrypted form for 5 years from the end of the project.

**What should I do if I want to take part?**

Please contact me via email (contact details are included at the end of this information sheet). It would be helpful if you could include some times and locations that would be most convenient for you to meet me. You can register interest and be interviewed until I stop collecting data. Please understand that you will be unable to withdraw from the study once the data from the interview have been anonymised. This means that you must withdraw your consent before the 1<sup>st</sup> of February 2019.

**What will happen to the results of the research study?**

The results may form part of my future Doctoral project and might also be published as articles in different journals. If you would like to receive a summary of the results of this research, please email [dave.rotheram@rfl.uk.com](mailto:dave.rotheram@rfl.uk.com)

**Who has reviewed the study?**

If you have any questions about this project, please feel free to contact me, or the project supervisor *Dave Collins* ([DJCollins@uclan.ac.uk](mailto:DJCollins@uclan.ac.uk)).

Dave Rotheram  
May 2015

Dear ...,

Further to our telephone conversation, please see below some further details of the research interview I would like to carry out with you.

I am beginning a chapter will form part of a Doctorate qualification. I would like to investigate the key characteristics of a talent pathway in another team sport.

For this study, I wish to interview

- Performance lead NRL
- Talent Lead, NSWRL
- Heads of Youth Performance, NRL Clubs

The interview should last about 30 minutes.

Please confirm a time and place suitable for you where we can meet to complete the interview. I will very happily meet you at your place of work.

Yours sincerely,

## APPENDIX H: SHORTENED TALENT DEVELOPMENT ENVIRONMENT QUESTIONNAIRE (TDEQ)

# SHORTENED TALENT DEVELOPMENT ENVIRONMENT QUESTIONNAIRE (TDEQ-5)

### 2014 VERSION

#### Instructions

Over the next few pages there are series of statements (28) which refer to you and your development in sport. Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each statement based on your current experiences. For example:

		Strongly Agree	Agree	Agree a little bit	Disagree a little bit	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	
1. Spectators regularly come to watch our games.....	1	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	1
2. My coach often talks to me about how I can improve.....	?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	?

There are no right or wrong answers. All answers will be kept confidential and nobody except for the researcher will see your personal responses. Any information disclosed will only be presented as a group average. This is to ensure you are comfortable about giving honest responses.

The questionnaire will take about 5 minutes to complete. Please do not dwell on questions. If you are not sure, go with your gut instinct. However, please try to answer questions as accurately as you can as this could help improve the standard of your development experiences.

After you have finished please check through your responses to make sure you have an answer for each question

.....

Club .....

Sport.....RUGBY LEAGUE.....

Name (optional).....

Date of Birth.....

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Agree a little bit	Disagree a little bit	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. I can pop in to see my coach or other support staff whenever I need to (e.g. physiotherapist, psychologist, strength trainer, nutritionist, lifestyle advisor etc).....	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
2. I am rarely encouraged to plan for how I would deal with things that might go wrong....	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
3. The advice my parents give me fits well with the advice I get from my coaches.....	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
4. My coach and I talk about what current and/or past world class performers did to be successful.....	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
5. My coach doesn't appear to be that interested in my life outside of sport.....	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
6. My coach and I regularly talk about things I need to do to progress to the top level in my sport (e.g. training ethos, competition performances, physically, mentally, technically, tactically).....	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
7. Those who help me in my sport seem to be on the same wavelength as each other when it comes to what is best for me (e.g. coaches, physiotherapists, sport psychologists, strength trainers, nutritionists, lifestyle advisors etc).....	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
8. My coach and I often try to identify what my next big test will be before it happens.....	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
9. Currently, I have access to a variety of different types of professionals to help my sports development (e.g. physiotherapist, sport psychologist, strength trainer, nutritionist, lifestyle advisor etc).....	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
10. The guidelines in my sport regarding what I need to do to progress are not very clear....	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
11. I don't get much help to develop my mental toughness in sport effectively....	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
12. My coach rarely takes the time to talk to other coaches who work with me.....	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
13. My coach rarely talks to me about my well-being.....	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
14. I regularly set goals with my coach that are specific to my individual development.....	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
15. I am involved in most decisions about my sport development.....	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
16. My coaches make time to talk to my parents about me and what I am trying to achieve...	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
17. I am not taught that much about how to balance training, competing and recovery.....	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Agree a little bit	Disagree a little bit	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
18. My coaches talk regularly to the other people who support me in my sport about what I am trying to achieve (e.g. physiotherapist, sport psychologist, nutritionist, strength & conditioning coach, life style advisor etc).....	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
19. My training is specifically designed to help me develop effectively in the long term.....	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
20. I spend most of my time developing skills and attributes that my coach tells me I will need if I am to compete successfully at the top/professional level.....	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
21. My coach explains how my training and competition programme work together to help me develop.....	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
22. My coach allows me to learn through making my own mistakes.....	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
23. I would be given good opportunities even if I experienced a dip in performance.....	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
24. My progress and personal performance is reviewed regularly on an individual basis.....	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
25. My coach emphasises that what I do in training and competition is far more important than winning.....	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
26. My training programmes are developed specifically to my needs.....	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
27. My coaches ensure that my school/uni/college understand about me and my training/competitions.....	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
28. My coach emphasises the need for constant work on fundamental and basic skills.....	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>



## APPENDIX I: INFORMED CONSENT, (CHAPTER 7)

### Consent form

**Full title of Project: Investigation of the Talent Identification and Development process in Rugby League**

**Name, position and contact address of Researcher:**

David Rotheram

RFL, Leeds, LS17 8NB

Dave.rotheram@rfl.uk.com

**Please read the following statements and tick the boxes to indicate agreement.**

**Please tick box**

I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet, dated ...23/05/2016..... for the above study and have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.

☐

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason.

☐

I agree to take part in the above study.

☐

I agree that my data gathered in this study may be stored (after it has been anonymised) in a specialist data centre and may be used for future research.

☐

I understand that it will not be possible to withdraw my data from the study after final analysis has been undertaken

☐

I agree to the interview being audio recorded

☐

I agree to the use of anonymised quotes in publications

☐

Name of Participant	Date	Signature
Name of Researcher	Date	Signature

23 May 2016

### Participant Information Sheet

#### Research project title: Investigation of the Talent Identification and Development process in Rugby League

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether or not to take part, please take time to read the following information carefully. Thank you for your time and consideration.

#### What is the purpose of the study?

To examine the Talent identification and development processes in Rugby League.

#### Why have I been invited to participate?

As a first step, a phone call and subsequent email invitation was sent to you because of your status within your RL Club.

**Do I have to take part?**

Your participation in this project is entirely voluntary but your contribution would be much appreciated. Furthermore, if you do not want to answer to a question, we can stop discussing the particular question and move on to the next one. You are also free to withdraw from the project at any time, without having to give a reason. Please note, however, that you will be unable to withdraw from the study once the data from the interview have been anonymised.

**Can I take part in this study?**

- If you are interested in taking part in this study, you must
- Be the Chief Executive Officer of a Super League Club
- Be the Head Coach of a Super League Club
- Be the Head Coach of a Championship Club
- Be the Head Coach of a League 1 Club
- Be a Head of Youth performance with the strategic lead for Talent Identification and Development at your Club.

**What will happen to me if I take part?**

If you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to take part in an interview conducted by myself. This interview will last approximately 30 minutes and will be recorded for transcription purposes. Before starting the interview, you will be given this information sheet to keep and will be asked to sign two consent forms (one for you, and one for the research team). This is to confirm that you have read and understood the information given in the information sheet and that you are willing to participate. Finally, you will be contacted later on to consider and give feedback on the outcomes resulting from your transcript in order to ensure that our understanding of your narrative is matching your lived experience.

**What are the possible benefits of taking part?**

There will be no direct benefit to you by taking part, but we intend that findings will inform research and better practice to help Indian athletes get all the support they need to excel at the international level.

**What are the possible risks of taking part?**

There are no serious risks of taking part in this study.

**Will what I say in this study be kept confidential?**

The information provided will be kept and analysed confidentially, and only the researchers involved in this study will have access to the interview transcripts. No information enabling your identification will be revealed in order to protect your anonymity and confidentiality. Data will be retained in accordance with the University of Central Lancashire's policy on Academic Integrity and will be kept securely in electronic, password protected and encrypted form for 5 years from the end of the project.

**What should I do if I want to take part?**

Please contact me via email (contact details are included at the end of this information sheet). It would be helpful if you could include some times and locations that would be most convenient for you to meet me. You can register interest and be interviewed until I stop collecting data. Please understand that you will be unable to withdraw from the study once the data from the interview have been anonymised. This means that you must withdraw your consent before the 1<sup>st</sup> of February 2019.

**What will happen to the results of the research study?**

The results may form part of my future Doctoral project and might also be published as articles in different journals. If you would like to receive a summary of the results of this research, please email [dave.rotheram@rfl.uk.com](mailto:dave.rotheram@rfl.uk.com)

**Who has reviewed the study?**

If you have any questions about this project, please feel free to contact me, or the project supervisor *Dave Collins* ([DJCollins@uclan.ac.uk](mailto:DJCollins@uclan.ac.uk)).

Dave Rotheram

May 2016

## **EMAIL TO RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS (CHAPTER 7)**

Dear ...,

Further to our telephone conversation, please see below some further details of the research interview I would like to carry out with you.

I am beginning a chapter will form part of a Doctorate qualification. I would like to investigate the key characteristics of a talent pathway in another team sport.

For this study, I wish to interview

- CEO, Super League Clubs
- Head Coach, Super League Clubs
- Head Coach, Championship Clubs
- Head Coach, League 1 Clubs
- Heads of Youth Performance

The interview should last about 30 minutes.

Please confirm a time and place suitable for you where we can meet to complete the interview. I will very happily meet you at your place of work.

Yours sincerely,

## APPENDIX J: INTERVIEW GUIDES (CHAPTER 7)

### J1: Interview guide CEOs

Question	Probes	Stimuli	Purpose
<i>. What do you believe are the characteristics of a good TDE?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Multi-disciplinary approach</li> <li>Quality player experience</li> <li>Communication &amp; trust</li> <li>Appropriate level of competition</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Parent ed</li> <li>Supportive</li> <li>Role clarity</li> <li>Planned</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>What needs to be present</b></li> <li><b>How do you integrate different components?</b></li> <li><b>Why do you include these?</b></li> </ul>
<i>Can you describe the aims of your clubs' talent identification and development system What would be the markers of success?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What are the aims?</li> <li>What do you believe are the key parts for achieving these aims?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Performance improvement</li> <li>Continuous improvement in club academies</li> <li>National Success outcome</li> <li>Personal progression</li> <li>Everybody pulling in the same direction</li> <li>Coach development</li> <li>Player profiling</li> <li>Appropriate player development</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>To what extent</b> were you aware of a need to hold a long term/short-term aims?</li> <li><b>How</b> did you decide this/these aim?</li> <li><b>Who</b> did you discuss this/these with?</li> <li><b>What</b> components did you believe were important for achieving this/these aims?</li> <li><b>How</b> did this compare/contrast across stakeholders?</li> </ul>
<i>Why do you do it in this way?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Is it the way its always been done</li> <li>Fits a calendar</li> <li>A whole sport political solution</li> </ul>		
<i>Can you tell me about any recent changes you have made to your TD system?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Gaining an understanding of the previous history, culture and customs</li> <li>Gaining an understanding of the problem/challenge</li> <li>Creation of a specified plan</li> <li>Reserves/Dual registration</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Discussions with the board, national head coach</li> <li>Analysis of performance measures</li> <li>Analysis of process measures</li> <li>Reaction to recent global competitions</li> <li>Expertise of staff in roles</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>To what extent</b> were you aware of a need to carry out certain steps before beginning the process?</li> <li><b>How</b> did you decide upon these steps?</li> <li><b>Who</b> did you discuss these with?</li> <li><b>When</b> did you take these steps?</li> </ul>

Question	Probes	Stimuli	Purpose
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>How</b> did these compare/contrast across clubs?</li> <li>• <b>WHY?</b></li> </ul>
<i>What alternatives did you consider and why did you reject these?</i>			
<i>what are the limitations to implementing your strategy. If so what are they?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Finance</li> <li>• Numbers of players</li> <li>• Relationships with other clubs</li> <li>• Regulation</li> <li>• Control and influence of other stakeholders</li> </ul>		
<i>Can you put an annual cost on the reserve grade team?</i>  <i>Can you put an annual cost on dual registration and loans?</i>  <i>What is the total cost that you can attribute to developing players who are outside of the top 25 and not considered part of the U-19 academy?</i>			
<i>How effective do you think current TD processes are in RL?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clear vision and mission</li> <li>• Buy in from leaders</li> <li>• Head coach sets out the qualities of a player</li> <li>• Their knowledge of TID</li> <li>• The environment created</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Competence of athlete at national/international level</li> <li>• Time spent with players</li> <li>• Holistic player development activity</li> <li>• Player welfare</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What do you believe drives it</li> <li>• How (out of 10) would you rate the club's effectiveness in developing talent</li> <li>• Why</li> </ul>

## J2: Players

Question	Probes	Stimuli	Purpose
<i>Can you tell me the qualities required to be an elite player?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Technical/tactical</i></li> <li>• <i>Athletic</i></li> <li>• <i>Mental skills</i></li> <li>• <i>lifestyle</i></li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>To what extent</b> are you made aware of these</li> <li>• <b>How</b> does the coaching staff do this</li> <li>• <b>Who</b> do you discuss these qualities with?</li> <li>• <b>What</b> components did you believe were important for achieving this/these aims?</li> <li>• <b>Why?</b></li> </ul>
<i>Think back on your journey so far. How do you feel the system has prepared you at each stage to become an elite player? (from the age of 16)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Different approaches</li> <li>• Time spent</li> <li>• Access to different coaches</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Access to high quality training</li> <li>• Access to competition</li> <li>• Too much or about right</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>To what extent</b> do you feel the system has supported you</li> <li>• <b>How</b> has this been communicated to you at each stage</li> </ul>
<i>How did coaches communicate their expectations of you</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are there opportunities to discuss your progress informally/formally?</li> <li>• Are goals set</li> <li>• Review system in place</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1<sup>st</sup> team /reserve team coach</li> <li>• 1<sup>st</sup> team/DR club coach</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>To what extent</b> do you have formal/informal reviews</li> <li>• <b>Who</b> do you discuss your progress with</li> <li>•</li> </ul>
<i>Do you feel that the Talent Development Environments you have been in are challenging and supportive</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Training in the different environments (age and stage)</li> <li>• Access to U-19/Dual registration/reserves team</li> <li>•</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have you played too much?</li> <li>• Did you ever get to speak to players above you at various stages of the pathway</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Who</b> did you speak to</li> <li>• <b>What</b> advice was offered</li> <li>• <b>To what extent</b> did you feel you over/under played</li> </ul>
<i>Are your individual needs addressed?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sessions tailored for you</li> <li>• All coaches aware of your needs</li> <li>• Access to appropriate competition age and stage.</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>To what extent</b> does the coach know about your life away from sport</li> <li>• <b>Who</b> offers support</li> <li>• <b>How</b> were your parents kept informed</li> </ul>
<i>Have you experienced dual registration?</i>			



Question	Probes	Stimuli	Purpose
<i>If so how has that contributed positively or negatively towards your development</i>			
<i>Have you experienced reserves team?</i> <i>If so how has that contributed positively or negatively towards your development</i>			
<i>Do you feel that the sport has developed you for the long term?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Has there ever been an emphasis based upon winning?</li> <li>• Does the environment you are in allow you to learn from your mistakes</li> <li>• Have you ever played other sports</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If so, which sports. What did you learn from these</li> </ul>	
<i>Was, or Is there anything that constrains you from maximising your potential?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Time</li> <li>• Quality of environment</li> <li>• Access to competition</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>To what extent</b> does the quality of the environment impact on your learning</li> <li>• <b>Why</b></li> </ul>

### J3: Head Coaches

Question	Probes	Stimuli	Purpose
Can you describe the aims of your clubs' talent identification and development system What would be the markers of success?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What are the aims?</li> <li>What do you believe are the key parts for achieving these aims?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Performance improvement</li> <li>Continuous improvement in club academies</li> <li>National Success outcome</li> <li>Personal progression</li> <li>Everybody pulling in the same direction</li> <li>Coach development</li> <li>Player profiling</li> <li>Appropriate player development</li> <li>Access to competition</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>To what extent</b> were you aware of a need to hold a long term/short-term aims?</li> <li><b>How</b> did you decide this/these aim?</li> <li><b>Who</b> did you discuss this/these with?</li> <li><b>What</b> components did you believe were important for achieving this/these aims?</li> <li><b>How</b> did this compare/contrast across stakeholders?</li> </ul>
What do you believe are the characteristics of a good TDE?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Multi-disciplinary approach</li> <li>Quality player experience</li> <li>Communication &amp; trust</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Parent ed</li> <li>Supportive</li> <li>Role clarity</li> <li>Planned</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>What needs to be present</b></li> <li><b>How do you integrate different components</b></li> <li><b>Why do you include these</b></li> </ul>
Why do you do it in this way?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Is it the way its always been done</li> <li>Fits a calendar</li> <li>A whole sport political solution</li> <li>Financial</li> <li>Accessing appropriate competition</li> </ul>		
Can you tell me about any recent changes you have made to your TD system?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Introduction of reserve team</li> <li>Dual Reg arrangement</li> <li>Any other alternatives</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Discussions with the board, national head coach</li> <li>Analysis of performance measures</li> <li>Analysis of process measures</li> <li>Reaction to recent global competitions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>To what extent</b> were you aware of a need to carry out certain steps before beginning the process?</li> <li><b>How</b> did you decide upon these steps?</li> <li><b>Who</b> did you discuss these with?</li> </ul>

Question	Probes	Stimuli	Purpose
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Expertise of staff in roles</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>When</b> did you take these steps?</li> <li><b>How</b> did these compare/contrast across clubs?</li> </ul>
<i>Are there any limitations to implementing your strategy? If so what are they?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Competency of staff</li> <li>Wants and needs of stakeholders</li> <li>Those above you</li> <li>Regulation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Time</li> <li>Cost</li> <li>Quality</li> <li>philosophy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To what extent are they constraints</li> <li>What impact does this have</li> <li>Why</li> </ul>
<i>What is your view of the RFL and the Super League clubs and how they implement TID strategies and policy</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Is there a clear vision and mission</li> <li>Buy in from leaders</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Competence of athlete at national/international level</li> <li>Time spent with players</li> <li>Holistic player development activity</li> <li>Player welfare</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What do you believe drives it</li> <li>How (out of 10) would you rate the club in developing talent</li> <li>Why</li> </ul>

#### J4: Championship and League 1 Head Coaches

Question	Probes	Stimuli	Purpose
<i>What do you believe are the characteristics of a good TDE?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Multi-disciplinary approach</li> <li>Quality player experience</li> <li>Communication &amp; trust</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Parent ed</li> <li>Supportive</li> <li>Role clarity</li> <li>Planned</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>What needs to be present</b></li> <li><b>How do you integrate different components</b></li> <li><b>Why do you include these</b></li> <li></li> </ul>
<i>Can you describe the aims of your clubs' talent identification and development system</i> <i>What would be the markers of success?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What are the aims?</li> <li>What do you believe are the key parts for achieving these aims?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Performance improvement</li> <li>Continuous improvement in club academies</li> <li>National Success outcome</li> <li>Personal progression</li> <li>Everybody pulling in the same direction</li> <li>Coach development</li> <li>Player profiling</li> <li>Appropriate player development</li> <li>Access to competition</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>To what extent</b> were you aware of a need to hold a long term/short-term aims?</li> <li><b>How</b> did you decide this/these aim?</li> <li><b>Who</b> did you discuss this/these with?</li> <li><b>What</b> components did you believe were important for achieving this/these aims?</li> <li><b>How</b> did this compare/contrast across stakeholders?</li> </ul>
<i>Why do you do it in this way?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Is it the way its always been done</li> <li>Fits a calendar</li> <li>A whole sport political solution</li> <li>Financial</li> <li>Accessing appropriate competition</li> </ul>		
<i>What are the limitations to implementing your strategy. If so what are they?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Competency of staff</li> <li>Wants and needs of stakeholders</li> <li>Those above you</li> <li>Regulation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Time</li> <li>Cost</li> <li>Quality</li> <li>philosophy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>To what extent are they constraints</b></li> <li><b>What impact does this have</b></li> <li><b>Why</b></li> </ul>

Question	Probes	Stimuli	Purpose
<i>Can you tell me about any recent changes you have made to your TD system?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gaining an understanding of the previous history, culture and customs</li> <li>• Gaining an understanding of the problem/challenge</li> <li>• Creation of a specified plan</li> <li>• Reserves/Dual registration</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discussions with the board, national head coach</li> <li>• Analysis of performance measures</li> <li>• Analysis of process measures</li> <li>• Reaction to recent global competitions</li> <li>• Expertise of staff in roles</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>To what extent</b> were you aware of a need to carry out certain steps before beginning the process?</li> <li>• <b>How</b> did you decide upon these steps?</li> <li>• <b>Who</b> did you discuss these with?</li> <li>• <b>When</b> did you take these steps?</li> <li>• <b>How</b> did these compare/contrast across clubs?</li> <li>• <b>WHY?</b></li> </ul>
<i>What alternatives did you consider?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Did you consider a dual registration arrangement?</li> <li>• Did you consider a reserve team</li> <li>• Why didn't you follow through with this</li> </ul>		
<i>What is your view of SLE/RFL and how they implement TID strategies and policy</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clear vision and mission</li> <li>• Buy in from leaders</li> <li>• Integrity of competition</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Competence of athlete at national/international level</li> <li>• Time spent with players</li> <li>• Holistic player development activity</li> <li>• Player welfare</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What do you believe drives it</li> <li>• How (out of 10) would you rate the club in developing talent</li> <li>• Why</li> </ul>

## J5: Heads of Youth Performance

Question	Probes	Stimuli	Purpose
<i>. What do you believe are the characteristics of a good TDE?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Multi-disciplinary approach</li> <li>Quality player experience</li> <li>Communication &amp; trust</li> <li>Appropriate level of competition</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Parent ed</li> <li>Supportive</li> <li>Role clarity</li> <li>Planned</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>What needs to be present</b></li> <li><b>How do you integrate different components</b></li> <li><b>Why do you include these</b></li> </ul>
<i>Can you describe the aims of your talent identification and development system What would be the markers of success?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What are the aims?</li> <li>What do you believe are the key parts for achieving these aims?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Performance improvement</li> <li>Continuous improvement in club academies</li> <li>National Success outcome</li> <li>Personal progression</li> <li>Everybody pulling in the same direction</li> <li>Coach development</li> <li>Player profiling</li> <li>Appropriate player development</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>To what extent</b> were you aware of a need to hold a long term/short-term aims?</li> <li><b>How</b> did you decide this/these aim?</li> <li><b>Who</b> did you discuss this/these with?</li> <li><b>What</b> components did you believe were important for achieving this/these aims?</li> <li><b>How</b> did this compare/contrast across stakeholders?</li> </ul>
<i>is there any model or approach that your system is based upon?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Model of talent development</li> <li>Wants and needs of professional clubs, schools and community clubs</li> <li>Expectations of funders</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>10,000 hours, LTAD, Early specialisation, SMTD</li> <li>Commercial interests to generate income</li> </ul>	
<i>Why do you do it in this way?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Is it the way its always been done</li> <li>Fits a calendar</li> <li>A whole sport political solution</li> </ul>		
<i>what are the limitations to implementing your strategy. If so what are they?</i>			
<i>Can you tell me about any recent changes you have made to your TD system for athletes aged 16+</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Gaining an understanding of the previous history, culture and customs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Discussions with the board, national head coach</li> </ul>	

Question	Probes	Stimuli	Purpose
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gaining an understanding of the problem/challenge</li> <li>• Creation of a specified plan</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Analysis of performance measures</li> <li>• Analysis of process measures</li> <li>• Reaction to recent global competitions</li> <li>• Expertise of staff in roles</li> </ul>	
<i>What alternatives did you consider and why were these not followed up?</i>			
<i>Please can you suggest names of players for us to interview</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Who has been through in the last 6 years</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Players who have made it</li> <li>• Players who are in the championship</li> <li>• Players who have gone back to community or out of the sport</li> <li>• Who is in the system now eg perennial reserve teamer or dual reg player</li> </ul>	

## APPENDIX K: RFL 2019 SCHOLARSHIP PLAYING POLICY

### U16 PLAYING POLICY FOR 2019

This is in place to support players who may find themselves playing games across multiple games programmes at community, Schools, Scholarship and international.

The main points are

- Players must not play 2 days before any scholarship U16 game.
- If a player plays any part in a scholarship U16 game then ideally they must not play any further game for 48 hours.
- Players must not play 2 games in any same mid-week programmes.
- It is recommended that school games are played mid-week when there are no Scholarship games.

Most U16 scholarship games will take place on a Wednesday and the games scheduled for 2019 are as follows:

<b>March</b>	<b>6<sup>th</sup> 13<sup>th</sup> 27<sup>th</sup></b>
<b>April</b>	<b>10<sup>th</sup></b>
<b>June</b>	<b>26<sup>th</sup></b>
<b>July</b>	<b>10<sup>th</sup> 24<sup>th</sup></b>
<b>August</b>	<b>7<sup>th</sup></b>

Sun	Mon	Tues	Weds	Thurs	Fri	Sat	Sun
Yes	No	No	Game Day	No	No	Yes	Yes

Players must not play a competitive game on “Red Days”

There may be some Scholarship games played against London on a Saturday, therefore the days the player could play that week are below.

Tues	Weds	Thurs	Fri	Sat	Sun	Mon	Tues	Weds
Yes	Yes	No	No	Game Day	No	No	Yes	Yes



## APPENDIX L: INFORMED CONSENT (CHAPTER 8)

### Consent form

**Full title of Project: Investigation of the Talent Identification and Development process in Rugby League**

**Name, position and contact address of Researcher:**

David Rotheram

RFL, Leeds, LS17 8NB

Dave.rotheram@rfl.uk.com

**Please read the following statements and tick the boxes to indicate agreement.**

**Please tick box**

I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet, dated ...05/06/2018..... for the above study and have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.

☐

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason.

☐

I agree to take part in the above study.

☐

I agree that my data gathered in this study may be stored (after it has been anonymised) in a specialist data centre and may be used for future research.

☐

I understand that it will not be possible to withdraw my data from the study after final analysis has been undertaken

☐

I agree to the interview being audio recorded

☐

I agree to the use of anonymised quotes in publications

☐

Name of Participant	Date	Signature
Name of Researcher	Date	Signature

5 June 2018

### Participant Information Sheet

#### **Research project title: Investigation of the Talent Identification and Development process in Rugby League**

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether or not to take part, please take time to read the following information carefully. Thank you for your time and consideration.

#### **What is the purpose of the study?**

To examine the Talent identification and development processes in Rugby League.

#### **Why have I been invited to participate?**

As a first step, a phone call and subsequent email invitation was sent to you because of your status within your RL Academy.

**Do I have to take part?**

Your participation in this project is entirely voluntary but your contribution would be much appreciated. Furthermore, if you do not want to answer to a question, we can stop discussing the particular question and move on to the next one. You are also free to withdraw from the project at any time, without having to give a reason. Please note, however, that you will be unable to withdraw from the study once the data from the interview have been anonymised.

**Can I take part in this study?**

If you are interested in taking part in this study, you must

- Be a Head of Youth performance with the strategic lead for Talent Identification and Development at your Club.

**What will happen to me if I take part?**

If you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to take part in an interview conducted by myself. This interview will last approximately 30 minutes and will be recorded for transcription purposes. Before starting the interview, you will be given this information sheet to keep and will be asked to sign two consent forms (one for you, and one for the research team). This is to confirm that you have read and understood the information given in the information sheet and that you are willing to participate. Finally, you will be contacted later on to consider and give feedback on the outcomes resulting from your transcript in order to ensure that our understanding of your narrative is matching your lived experience.

**What are the possible benefits of taking part?**

There will be no direct benefit to you by taking part, but we intend that findings will inform research and better practice to help Indian athletes get all the support they need to excel at the international level.

**What are the possible risks of taking part?**

There are no serious risks of taking part in this study.

**Will what I say in this study be kept confidential?**

The information provided will be kept and analysed confidentially, and only the researchers involved in this study will have access to the interview transcripts. No information enabling your identification will be revealed in order to protect your anonymity and confidentiality. Data will be retained in accordance with the University of Central Lancashire's policy on Academic Integrity and will be kept securely in electronic, password protected and encrypted form for 5 years from the end of the project.

### **What should I do if I want to take part?**

Please contact me via email (contact details are included at the end of this information sheet). It would be helpful if you could include some times and locations that would be most convenient for you to meet me. You can register interest and be interviewed until I stop collecting data. Please understand that you will be unable to withdraw from the study once the data from the interview have been anonymised. This means that you must withdraw your consent before the 1<sup>st</sup> of February 2019.

### **What will happen to the results of the research study?**

The results may form part of my future Doctoral project and might also be published as articles in different journals. If you would like to receive a summary of the results of this research, please email [dave.rotheram@rfl.uk.com](mailto:dave.rotheram@rfl.uk.com)

### **Who has reviewed the study?**

If you have any questions about this project, please feel free to contact me, or the project supervisor *Dave Collins* ([DJCollins@uclan.ac.uk](mailto:DJCollins@uclan.ac.uk)).

Dave Rotheram  
June 2018

## **EMAIL TO RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS (CHAPTER 8)**

Dear ...,

Further to our telephone conversation, please see below some further details of the research interview I would like to carry out with you.

I am beginning a chapter will form part of a Doctorate qualification. I would like to investigate the key characteristics of a talent pathway in another team sport.

For this study, I wish to interview Heads of Youth Performance within RL Academies

The interview should last about 30 minutes.

Please confirm a time and place suitable for you where we can meet to complete the interview. I will very happily meet you at your place of work.

Yours sincerely,

## APPENDIX M: EXEMPLAR QUOTES (CHAPTER 8)

What do you believe to be the purpose of scholarship games?	CLUB A	I think the games are a reward more than anything for the hard work they've put in, Not for me it's not. The important thing is, you know, that when kids come onto our scholarship we identify areas that they need to improve, either as a rugby player, as an athlete, or the most important of all, as a person
	CLUB B	do an individual game review until you put them playing at that level their skill level isn't challenged the physicality of the game isn't challenged until they play at that level when you compare a scholarship game to a community game its like chalk and cheese it looks like a different sport a lot of the time
	CLUB C	, players who have got the potential to be Super League players with an opportunity to challenge themselves at a higher level than they're ordinarily use to measure a players, erm, improvement in their understanding, you know what's expected in the journey to becoming a professional player whilst I don't think that the games necessarily as a snap shot, will determine that decision to recruit or retrain a player, I think definitely an important part in, erm, providing some pieces of the jigsaw
	CLUB D	an extension to our training regime how players prepare dietary, sleep, rest, recovery, so we get all that from scholarship games. It doesn't necessarily play a big part in the retention process for us, we don't use the games as a performance indicator in terms of are we keeping or letting a player go we see the players over 40 weeks, 80 sessions and the games we play are a small part of that.
	CLUB E	give the players another level of rugby that they don't normally get. On the back of that as a club then you can teach them more about what the professional game is about and roles and responsibilities on the field because it gives you the opportunity to look at players who you think have got potential to play at the next level in a different environment. lads that of shone through in the games because they've suddenly shown that they area capable of playing the next level after only ever, sometimes playing division 2 rugby at North West Level. We'll make our retention decisions based on how they play for us. they don't play enough in the North West, North West counties leagues to make appropriate decisions there. One of our, our, probably our top player this year will have played 4 games for his community club, all season and we're now start of July and he'll have played 4 games in a critical under 16s year. But it's the impact on the kid, and the team that he plays with or his teammates that he's got, some of them lads will have only played 4 games and if it wasn't for playing scholarship rugby they'll have had 4 games in an under 16s year and then in theory they're leading in to playing under 19s 12 months later having played 4 games, erm, so the 7 opportunities that they get to play for us are huge for them.
	CLUB F	To give players an opportunity to play at a higher level and for us to see those players at that level and how they deal with it.

		its immaterial whether we win or lose, its about development opportunities and giving people an opportunity to play you're an outstanding player playing at an outstanding community club, there'll always be playing on the front foot which is a little bit easier, erm, so we get to see them in that so it does it does effect it a little bit but I don't think it's a major major decision maker for us.
	CLUB G	<p>?) I suppose it was put in place to challenge kids to a higher level, aid development at an appropriate level we would use them to reward players who show the mental traits that we look for in a player, so the ones that are committed to the programme the ones that show hard work the ones that show coachability that want to be there, they'll play</p> <p>) ...I think they're in the way of development if I'm honest.</p> <p>the only advantage you get out the game is the kids to keep enthusiasm for playing for the academy because they get to play other academies.</p> <p>, they get looked after by a wide base of professional staff which they wouldn't get at community clubs, they're getting a taste of what it feels like and looks like to be a professional player longer term.</p> <p>; I can remember one player in the last 4 or 5 years that we offered a contract to on the back of one scholarship game</p>
	NPDM	<p>some talent selection in there of deciding on future signings probably based on confirmation probably talent confirmation of confirming what you've think you've seen within the training settings and also within what they played in community games, erm, you could also, not a main purpose, but you could also argue that's it an opportunity to see what might be available to other clubs</p> <p>to work on some of the areas that you've tried to develop them on during the year so a harder challenge on if you've worked to get them to play in a certain way or practise certain skills that its that they may not get chance at a community club level</p> <p>I think they're important for different people for different reasons</p> <p>I think parents place a real importance on it's a chance for their son to put the shirt on, you know, for lots of positive reasons there will be obviously some, you know if I'm really honest is bragging rights there's a bit of bragging rights my lads played for club 'X' and he's got chance to put the shirt on. I think it's a real motivation for kids I think the kids are motivated they would like the chance to play against a Wigan or a St Helens or a Leeds or whoever they're playing for, erm, so they'll place a lot of importance on there. And then within certain clubs they see it being successful in those games will help recruit you other players</p>
	NYC	<p>it's to test the skill sets of the players you've got on your scholarship programme, no more no less. It's definitely not a win situation or a league situation, I think it's just the tests; the skills and attributes that you've signed your players in your scholarship programme for.</p> <p>I don't think scholarship games will influence that selection or nothing.</p>
How do you prepare the players for the	CLUB A	<p>you probably start to go a little bit away from developing,</p> <p>doing the little bit more team stuff</p> <p>probably, in my opinion, takes away from areas which you really should be focusing on.</p> <p>some basic systems in there so we leave it as late as possible</p>

competitive games phase?	CLUB B	<p>we don't do loads of structure we're looking to create players that are good decision makers , the coach we've got at the moment didn't quite understand because he was not from it</p> <p>we played two total under 15s sides against under 16s because it was right for their development, we don't pick sides to win games</p> <p>if that means kids play different positions or getting challenged physically</p>
	CLUB C	<p>the short term nature of the games and the competitive nature of the games, err, I think contradicts the long term aims of any programme</p> <p>while there's a long term approach (development at every player that comes here?) at times, you know, that has to be compromised to try and develop some players in order to try and play a game</p> <p>the aims of our programme are to identify players that have got the long term potential to succeed at Super League and then our programmes are designed to try and fulfil that.</p> <p>it's our jobs I think as heads of youth to make those coaches understand that actually your sort of performance is going to be measured upon on how many players you equip to progress in to the academy and ultimately then potentially become Super League players rather than those coaches feeling that they're going to be judged whether they beat another clubs under 16s team</p> <p>I think those games have an adverse effect on the type of players that are recruited and obviously then, the players that aren't recruited, I think we're missing a massive, massive pool of players</p>
	CLUB D	<p>we don't alter much</p> <p>I have to temper sometimes the coaches approach</p> <p>we're not actually focusing on what you might call tip sheet, tactical</p>
	CLUB E	No response
	CLUB F	<p>That's one of the biggest challenges I believe in regards managing our coaches.</p> <p>but our focus changes because we're all competitive and we all want to win, so managing the coaches to making sure they stick on plan in regard and they don't go down the line of win at all costs they've got to remember its development, that's a big challenge</p>
	CLUB G	<p>However, at times you know trying to manage the coaches perception of that is very difficult so you have to kind of scratch their itch as much as looking after player development</p> <p>I don't think we should change anything we do week to week just because of them games.</p>
	NPDM	<p>sweeping generalisation there is probably too much focus on structure and how you're going to play against other teams</p> <p>with the target of winning the games rather than making the most of the learning experience.</p> <p>you probably give more time to your to in theory your most obvious talents at that moment. You may be less prepared to experiment and do some different things of trying people in different positions or different roles in a team, erm, you are likely within the limitations of scholarship to have only exposed them to one way of playing so you are setting them up, they're going to run in to different ways of playing as they move through, erm, and there's probably ways of playing the game at that age where you can be successful that don't necessarily mean those kids</p>



		are gonna be successful later on than that you can win an under 16 game by playing a certain way that might be really ineffective as they get older because of the restrictions you've placed on them, erm
	NAM	I think they go away from player development, I think they go for team preparation and team preparation only. that they aren't getting the finer detail right of core skills, fundamental skills its making our players robotic and only knowing one way of playing that it helps probably the senior coaches in that club or particular club identify if they can play in their club's structured way
How do training sessions differ when approaching/during the games phase?	CLUB A	They become more about.....the systems that we're working to
	CLUB B	its developing the understanding of what you've got to do in certain areas of the pitch
	CLUB C	review on previous performances think to be fair that's valuable it's a different experience that players are not necessarily use to coming from a community environment getting to understand what they've done really well and where they can improve, I think that is a vital part of it I do think there's an expectation from both the players and the parents that that's what should be going on as well, and its down to us to try and educate those players and parents that actually, and through our actions as well, that whatever happens in these games isn't going to dictate, you know, your long term future in the game as long as, you know all the other, all of the other indicators are there, so your attendance at training, your attitude in training, you know, your long term sort of physical development, as long as all those things are in place whether you might have a shocker in a game, you know, you might not win a game, now that's not necessarily going to determine whether you're going to be a Super League player, but, I think that society or certainly the culture in our sport is about here and now and you know
	CLUB D	I do have to be mindful of the coaches mindset, that a lot of the coaches are volunteers,
	CLUB E	it becomes skill and positional specific work, erm, lads don't just go in one positional group as well so half backs will also do a bit as 9s, some of the half backs will go as full backs, some of the centres will go as back rowers, the front rowers will go as back rowers, so that everybody starts to get an understanding and appreciation of what the other positional requirements are. we spend 3 hours on the field, over the course of the week which perhaps spend half an hour doing some, erm, some patterns of play
	CLUB F	Yeah, that's what they want to do they want to coach the big picture, err, whereas our challenge is to ensure that those coaches stick to our plan in regards to skills development things like that, but its not perfect I'll be honest the focus changes. Take the games out, simple.
	CLUB G	left v right, err, 13 on 13 stood, erm, and you know, your big picture all the stuff that we all know is dead wrong, erm, but we need to kinda, unless its going to be myself and likeminded people you know, such as Rob who are delivering that we have to work in a way that gets what we need in a way that's going to be delivered with, erm, energy if you like off the coaches because they're buying in to it.

	NPDM	there's probably too much of a focus towards team play and structure and probably it starts to move away from individual development that you play and then you go fix up which may or may not be relevant drop off on individual skill work
	NYC	It's all dictated towards the games at the weekend. City of Hull Academy for example do loads and loads of individual work, technical, tactical, mental, lifestyles, within their weekly programme I know other clubs like Warrington Wolves, for example, who were undefeated this year. Well most of their sessions are team preparation sessions for the weekend, so their players are really structured within what they do.
What is your approach to team selection for games?	CLUB A	start off with your Year 11's you're looking at hopefully offering, you know, a fair proportion of part time professional contracts. you usually introduce...some of your under 15's to see how they can do they just keep working hard on their skills, if we think a player is both football ready, physically and mentally ready, he'll get an opportunity to play in scholarship games.
	CLUB B	the players that are really performing will play more games 'cause they've earned it
	CLUB C	the parents and the players are told in the recruitment meeting that, a player will be eligible to play if he's deemed to have, erm, worked hard throughout the period leading up to the game and that for us that's in September when they start, so that's one thing that we talk to the players about that if you work really hard, you will give yourself a chance to play in those games. that are physically capable of playing in those games and we'll have players that are not capable of playing in those games and there's a serious risk of injury we've got an under 17 at the moment that he never played a scholarship game for us, he was with us at under 15s and under 16s but didn't play once because he was deemed that physically he wasn't ready to play, he's now gone on to international selection and played as an under 17 in our academy team fairly frequently this year the personnel that make up the other under 16s teams, we are often at a physical disadvantage because of the certain type of players that we, suppose we can recruit, you know and some of the players that we'd actually like to recruit, erm, we feel that we're always physically up against it, you know and I, it's a hard one for me personally because my sort of aim is a long term one, so the team we probably pick at times will be dictated by the physical attributes, erm, because you know it's the only way that we can try and compete and to be fair, we're still I think we're still at a physical disadvantage certainly don't have a policy about the under 16s must play, I think again, there's a perception from parents and players that because you're under 16 you're going to play in those games, erm, that our recruitment, our selection decisions are based upon what we said at the start
	CLUB D	we try to use as many players as we can game opportunities, if you look at a squad of 36, I'm always mindful that if we pick 20 what happens to the other 16, do they just stand and watch or do we actually do some skill development

		<p>with them, so we do try to embrace the whole squad and not neglect part of the team because we're so obsessed with the game,</p> <p>your player will not live or die by the game,</p> <p>I thin over the past 4 years, err, 4 and a half years I've been with Huddersfield Giants, there is no player within our scholarship who hasn't had at least 2 to 4, if not more game inputs</p> <p>, we seem to play London every year either home or away, more commonly away and for that game, I actually predominantly pick year 10s, with a little bit of support of year 11s off the bench</p>
	CLUB E	<p>The under 16s get the primary game time,</p> <p>it's something that's explained at every review meeting that we have to both age groups sets of parents,</p> <p>if we decide to play an under 15s player, erm, the first thing we do is speak to parents and ask their permission</p>
	CLUB F	<p>we try make sure everybody gets a playing opportunity that's 15s and 16s in the current format.</p>
	CLUB G	<p>where you might just go right these are the best players at this week or this month we're going to put 13 players on the field if this is 6 props</p> <p>our induction is very much based around our profile, our profile in to what we use around, this is how we're going to develop individual players</p> <p>they aren't the be all and end all it's the journey them 2 years that's important, games will be selected based on players that are, you know showing that their commitment to themselves showing commitment to the programme with the right attitude with a work ethic willing to, you know, try, we'll put players in that might not be the best players at the time but deserve that spot, erm, and all, all parents are aware of that</p>
	NPDM	<p>Well, I think there is a bit of variance club to club,</p> <p>your initial games are probably targeted towards the lads that you are going to potentially that you think at that moment you're going to probably sign and they get to probably play in the positions that you think you're going to sign them in.</p> <p>but you probably go priority lets say the ones we think we're going to sign once they've confirmed do we need to see some other ones that are our maybes the (A ones?) maybe we're not sure so they need to keep playing mixed in with the rest but there could be a decision and I'm sure certain clubs decide at some point actually we could win all these games so lets just leave it as the group we've got</p>
	NYC	<p>For scholarship, I think they pick a team just to win games at the weekend</p> <p>What I see is they do, they mirror what a first teamer does</p> <p>So if they do a team run, they'll do the equivalent with the conditioners, so they get no skill development or personal development</p>
Do you liaise with the players community club and school about playing loads?	CLUB A	<p>Not so much schools</p> <p>The community game.....think there is an element of clash there</p> <p>We are very mindful of the volume that those players get, you know, certainly the majority of them are active in schools, whether that be rugby, whether that be football, whether that be athletics or any other sport</p> <p>I do think it can be a mental and physical stress on the players, you know, if it's not managed right.</p>
	CLUB B	<p>we're constantly in communication with the community clubs</p> <p>We encourage them to play for the school</p>

		<p>we do some data capture on how much they're doing elsewhere with PE and everything else</p> <p>It's also important that the parents do some of that because otherwise they just stand behind us instead of saying look he can't play because he's got toed he can't play otherwise you end up with us being in the middle of everybody</p>
	CLUB C	<p>No, in all honesty we don't have a particular sort of strategy or policy</p> <p>the under 15s, I think are the players that are most affected by it because they tend to play, certainly where we are, we have players they don't only play rugby, they play football as well so a year 10 player could be training with his community club, he could be at scholarship as well, he could be in an England programme at some point, erm, but he also plays for year 10 and year 11 at both football and rugby and inevitably they'll also be doing GCSE PE and core PE on top of that, and when we're trying (inaudible 15:18-15:20) err, it becomes quite debilitating because players are literally they're just doing, they're clearly doing far too much at the moment and not really enough to be fair of what they do is focused upon their development as Rugby League players</p> <p>we definitely don't try and dictate that that player will play for us, you know, we'll let the player know that it's up to him to make that decision kind of thing and you know, if he's got, you know a school final or whatever else, you know, there's absolutely no issue with him playing in that game</p> <p>we do have some issues with parents that, utilise the professional club as a mechanism for the boys to miss training or not play for the community club which is obviously a separate issue</p> <p>our induction policy at the very start with parents, we let them know that, you know, there's no interference between professional club commitments and community club commitments and school commitments</p>
	CLUB D	<p>I would have to say, to be honest that we don't have a great communication line with the community clubs and the schools,</p> <p>we can't tell you your child cannot play rugby union, rugby league, football, athletics what you are, you are the barometer for their energy levels, and you see them 24/7 we see them twice a week, you know what their work load is and we ask them to communicate that in to us</p> <p>I think its really difficult given the misconception, the sort of presumption that academies ruin community clubs and stop players playing, we don't do that at Huddersfield, its up to the parents to be the barometer.</p>
	CLUB E	<p>at under 16s no,</p> <p>. At under 15s, erm, we have good links with schools so, we kind of know well in advance of when they're playing</p>
	CLUB F	No, simple answer no
	CLUB G	<p>we record all of that but we don't communicate.</p> <p>an assumption that it wouldn't be valued at their end whether it be a community coach or a school and that's an assumption and its thinking about it is incorrect probably</p>
	NPDM	NA
	NYC	NA
How important are results of games?	CLUB A	some clubs they will make that an absolute feature to attract players next year
	CLUB B	for me the results irrelevant,
	CLUB C	I'm in a very fortunate position that the result of the under 16s games don't mean anything,

		<p>they're a very small part of that players journey to becoming a Super League player if that's a win then that's brilliant but if it's a lose you know, we can then fall back on those processes as well and we can look at that and look at areas to learn</p> <p>, I think there's got to be some level of instinct motivation to want to win, I think it's really important that we as a club and as a game we reframe what winning means, you know what, and its got to be personal for that player, he's got to have his own sort of (affluent?) little battles and little competitions with himself, you know, in terms and we can measure his progression through the games and communicate that to him and his parents that even though we may have lost a game, he's getting better every time</p> <p>I do believe that there are huge amounts of players hat aren't being given opportunities to gain access to professional clubs because those players won't necessarily help win games at under 16s and unfortunately I think there's players that are entering and I think most of the clubs are conscious that they are recruiting players that, err, haven't necessarily got a chance to become a Super League player, but they're recruiting them because they've got games and they know full well that, you know, we'll maybe recruit 50% of these players were, you know, 50% to two thirds of those players are going to get recruited, so it doesn't matter whether we've got some year early developers in there, we'll use them for a couple of years and then discard them after 2 years and I think, you know, the again the downside is you know, I think a lot of the clubs now would say, I would say certainly the 3 North West clubs alongside ourselves and certainly the main one over in Yorkshire, I think a lot of their players are being drawn from what you would perceive to be successful community clubs if success is where you are in the league table and they then go in to a scholarship environment at a professional club where they're also quite successful in terms of results and then I think the long term consequence for those players is that, they don't transition well to being senior players because, you know, you go in to a senior first squad and no one cares that you played and won every game for Siddal or won every game for (Halton Farnborough Hornets?) no one cares, you know, and suddenly, they're being asked to cope with situations that they haven't got the, they just haven't got the psychological attributes or the characteristics to actually deal with them, you know, that I think that's the really sad part of it that, at both ends of the spectrum, you know, we're not giving enough players who've got real long term potential opportunity and a lot of the players that we do give an opportunity to, you know, aren't being equipped with actually the characteristics that's needed to progress them long term</p> <p>, I think there's got to be some level of instinct motivation to want to win, I think it's really important that we as a club and as a game we reframe what winning means, you know what, and its got to be personal for that player, he's got to have his own sort of (affluent?) little battles and little competitions with himself, you know, in terms and we can measure his progression through the games and communicate that to him and his parents that even though we may have lost a game, he's getting better every time</p> <p>I do believe that there are huge amounts of players hat aren't being given opportunities to gain access to professional clubs because those players won't necessarily help win games at under 16s and unfortunately I think there's players that are entering and I think most of the clubs are conscious that they are recruiting players that, err, haven't necessarily got a chance to become a Super League player, but they're recruiting them because they've got games and they know full well that, you know, we'll maybe recruit 50% of these players were, you know, 50% to two thirds of those players are going to get recruited, so it doesn't matter whether we've got some year early developers in there, we'll use them for a couple of years and then discard them after 2 years and I think, you know, the again</p>
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	CLUB D	<p>its parents probably have a club mentality, a community club mentality, I would say that the majority of coaches after a period of time with us start to understand what we're trying to do, erm, we don't, we don't ever make the result the most important part of the game, what we look at is the challenge</p> <p>kids love winning, the parents love winning, yeah they do but they have to learn what the challenges are when you get beat</p> <p>you'll see we don't win many scholarship games, and I think there's certain times selection would guarantee us more, but we like the challenge of a challenge in a game.</p>
	CLUB E	<p>Not at all.</p> <p>but learning how to win and learning how to get out of difficult situations is.</p> <p>if we're in the middle of recruitment for under 15s and we've just been beat by 60 off Wigan, which happened to us 12 months ago that doesn't help</p>
	CLUB F	<p>as a club not relevant what's so ever</p> <p>but community club coaches opinion of scholarship results is massive or that's what I'm finding at the minute over here is they are all about winning because that's what it is at their community club they're all about winning so that's their mentality.</p>
	CLUB G	They're not, at all.
	NPDM	<p><b>Ref impact on national programme</b></p> <p>I would suggest that it leads towards more physically mature players likely to be picked on programmes because you know they're going to be potentially playing</p>

		, so you could write down the 17 best kids you've seen which might include 5 hookers but there is probably going to be a challenge where somebody goes well you've picked 5 hookers how are they gonna get a game? And you've not picked me any wingers, how are we going to be able to play
	NYC	<b>Ref impact on national programme</b> So from an England point of view it massively hinders the skill that we expect our players to come into the programme with. So we would expect our players to come in with, if you think of the core skills required to play our game, we would expect them to come into our programme with a high skill level. They don't so a consequence of that is we've had to now adapt. So the first 40 minutes of every England youth and every England academy session we hit 5 targeted areas, which we've identified which our players are poor Some heads of youth really want to change, so they're interested in our profiling, so they want to change because of what we're finding. Other clubs are blaming the community games and saying that that's what they're like when they get them from the community games. ... and if we do get information it tends to come from the parents We don't get anything from clubs.
	CLUB A	I don't think they're a necessity for long term development. I don't think the games, you know, will impact on the long term outcomes of any individuals We've done it before, you know, where we haven't really had any games and we've still produced a lot of players. Will it take a lot of pressure of the players if we didn't have those games? Yeah. Would it ease things when it came to community rugby? Yeah, for sure. You know, I can see both sides of it, but I don't think, whichever way we go on it, I don't think the long term impact, you know, will impact on players development and improvement .....for well-being and the pastoral care of the kids, can we push them too hard? Are we putting them under too much stress too early and can that impact on them long term, you know, mentally when they start to get washed out with the game a little bit? I think there's a strong argument with some of that.
	CLUB B	probably look to try and arrange some opposed training sessions during the winter against another academy
Have you considered any other approaches to providing playing opportunity?	CLUB C	in house sort of competitive games we can condition things in a way , for instance we might do some stuff where the defensive line is 5 metres rather than 10 metres we were very close last year to actually not participating in those games as an organisation, we didn't feel that actually playing in those games would increase the likelihood of any of our players progressing to Super League players . I definitely like the idea of, which has been, err, suggested where, you know, there's a festival type of event that goes on, erm, where, you know, it may be conditions, you know, there may be some sort of parameters, may be smaller sided whatever else, I think that would be a bit more informative and I think what we get there I think you'd actually get, I think in the main, you would get some collaborative, erm, work going on between the clubs, I think at the moment, I think there's very little collaboration that I'm aware of going on between the clubs because we're competing for the same players, I think if you took that 13 V 13 game away and those sort of 6 games or whatever it is, I think suddenly you're playing a different kind of sport, not just rugby league, you know, but you're trying to draw out the key attributes that rugby league players need and the concepts that you want players to understand,

		<p>suddenly then you know, it isn't a game of rugby league its something completely different and we're all doing it because we want our boys to get better, you know, the reality is at the moment that, those games don't, when you watch those games that they're dominated by a minority of players, you know, there's players that are being contracted because they've been part of a successful under 16s team that actually, they haven't really done anything, they've just been part of a team, you like, you go and watch the top team in the prem and you can guarantee that that team will have more scholars than anybody else playing</p> <p>there's an opportunity to, to look at this from a whole sport perspective and identify better ways that competition can be utilised than the way it is at the moment, I don't think it, at the moment, I don't think the system, if it is long term about developing Super League players, I don't think from a competitive point of view, its fit for purpose.</p>
	CLUB D	<p>I actually like the volume of opportunities that we have,</p> <p>we go back to probably a similar format to previous years where we have 4 before and 4 after.</p> <p>, if you sit in a transition meeting with a parent they always quote match time and game time back at you and as much as you impress upon them that's not how we judge a player they see it as important</p> <p>I don't think getting rid of scholarship games is the right idea</p> <p>the most important thing in any part of scholarship is, is what your focus is regards the player centric values you have</p>
	CLUB E	<p>Well I think we need more games.</p> <p>community rugby doesn't prepare the best players for the professional game with the challenges that its go providing consistent playing opportunities for the most talented players is what we desperately need</p> <p>I don't really like having 7 or 8 games in an 8 or 9 week period, alongside everything else that they do with school games and community games it doesn't give us enough time to do proper review; but I would like more games.</p>
	CLUB F	<p>you'd still have the scholarship programme, right? But you'd take the games out but I am a firm believer of there'd have to be a representative programme, so I would go back to Warrington town team against someone else's town team, so I'd go back to town teams at 12s, 14s and 16s so those players are still getting exposed to rep football</p>
	CLUB G	<p>we need to take away the actual games and run development festivals or whatever</p>
	NPDM	<p>because the first festival you're going to be randomised who you play with so that takes virtually throws structure out the window because you're not going to be able to do structure, its going to make you play what's going on its gonna probably show who can cope under some pressure with something completely different,</p>
	NYC	<p>we're looking at playing Q3's and Q4's against Wales for example</p> <p>We've opened up our programme so we don't deselect now, so its 64 in our programme and we play certain designer games within our programme to identify players, their profiling wheel basically, so we can have a look at that</p> <p>. It's quite difficult for us because obviously we get the players that scholarship select. One of the things we're considering looking at is having a talent day for non-scholars – non scholarship players</p> <p>Scrap scholarship games.</p> <p>Which would then makes the focus on scholarship clubs to just develop skilled players that they need in their environment. So an example would be because we play games we have to have two props, we have to have two</p>



		back rowers, we have to have two centres. If there's a need within the club that they don't need two props, well they don't need to bring them in their system,
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## **APPENDIX N: RFL PRESS RELEASE, JULY 2019**

The Rugby Football League and Super League Europe can confirm that a Reserve Grade competition will be relaunched in 2020.

The 11 English Betfred Super League clubs have approved a proposal for all Super League clubs, and clubs with Category 1 funded Academies outside Super League (Widnes Vikings and Bradford Bulls), to have a mandated reserve team.

Five further applications from clubs in Betfred Championship and League One have been received, with decisions to be made by the end of July.

The launch of Reserve Grade will be accompanied by a change in the regulations surrounding the Academy, which will now become an Under-18s competition rather than Under-19s, as at present. The dual registration and loan systems will remain unaffected.

**Dave Rotheram, the RFL's Interim Chief On-Field Officer**, said: "We have listened to the views of stakeholders - clubs, coaches and players - before making this proposal.

"The majority view is that the game would benefit from the reintroduction of a Reserve Grade competition, primarily as a next step in the development of players between Academy and senior rugby, but also to provide regular rugby for players on the fringe of selection, returning from injury, and a platform for later developers.

"It was important in making what is a significant change that we also took into account the impact on the other professional competitions - Betfred Championship and League One - and also the community game."

Robert Elstone, Super League's CEO, said: "Super League is about superstars - players that get us on the edge of our seats, players that make our jaws drop, players that inspire us.

"Our success will depend on our ability to find, nurture and create the superstars of tomorrow.

"It's why development pathways like this are so critical to the future success of the game.

“It is essential that we offer appropriate challenges to our young players on their journeys into Super League.

“A well-managed, resourced and competitive reserve grade will provide that.”

Lee Radford, the head coach of Hull FC who have continued to play reserve team fixtures in recent years despite the absence of a structured competition, said: “I know from personal playing experience the value of reserve team rugby, and I’ve also seen it at Hull in the last few years. I signed for Bradford at 18 but didn’t become a regular first-teamer until 22 or 23, and without the years I had in reserves learning my trade, I might have been left in the wings.

“It gave me the grounding for first-team football, playing against some experienced Super League players. It also means clubs won’t be having to make difficult decisions on 19-year-olds, when some players – especially in the pack – tend to develop a bit later. I look at lads at Hull FC like Jamie Shaul, Chris Green and this season Kieran Buchanan, who have all benefited from reserve team rugby before getting their first-team chance.”

The Reserve Grade competition in 2020 will be administered by the RFL. The fixture schedule will be finalised during the winter but is expected to run on a home and away basis, with no play-offs.