

Learning to manage rejection? Investigating the lived experiences of former professional male athletes who have engaged in higher education

Vicky Hunter¹, Chris Platts²

¹Leeds Trinity, Leeds, United Kingdom. ²Future Field, Sheffield, United Kingdom

Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

Male professional football is a difficult environment within which to forge a career. Within this context, Higher Education is often vaunted as an ideal exit route for players who are rejected by professional clubs at the age of 18. However, researchers have highlighted the shortcomings of educational provisions offered within professional football academies prior to HE (Parker, 1996; Parker, 2000; McGillivray and McIntosh, 2006; Monk and Olsson, 2006; Platts, 2012; Platts and Smith 2018). This potentially leaves players who then enter HE in a vulnerable position. It seems odd therefore that there is a dearth of research exploring the engagement, satisfaction and experience of these young males in HE. Using a SRHE small grant award, this paper presents the results of a scoping review aiming to highlight the experiences of male athletes who, having left a long-term athlete development system, choose Higher Education as a way of furthering their career.

Full paper

Introduction

The number of players in professional football academies in the UK has grown over the past thirty years or so and currently “more than 10,000 boys play in professional football academies in England at any one time” (Ball, 2022, p. 25). However, Ball (2022, p. 25) notes that of the estimated 10,000 players in such academies, “less than one percent will reach professional level”. Research by Platts, Millar and Jacobi (2021) found similar. They claim that at the age of 18, 44% of around 2000 scholars (those who have not been released at 16) are rejected each year. Finally, even if players secure a professional contract at 18, the Professional Footballers Association suggest “five out of six of these players will have been released or dropped by the age of 21” (cited in Segolov, 2023).

One destination for those released is HE. Indeed, the League Football Education (LFE) claim “Academy players who achieve the required academic qualifications at the end of their LFE apprenticeship are able to pursue a route into HE” (LFE 2023). However, at present no researchers have studied how these players experience HE.

Literature Review

There are two areas of academic research that helped develop the rationale for this study. First, researchers have highlighted the shortcomings of educational provisions offered within professional football academies (Parker, 1996; Parker, 2000; McGillivray and McIntosh, 2006; Monk and Olsson, 2006; Platts, 2012; Platts and Smith 2018). This is the education players need as a foundation for their studies in HE. In the early 1990s, Parker emphasised the anti-academic culture that surrounded professional football academies. Parker (1996, p. 145) observed that “for any player to admit to an affinity for academic attainment or to overtly undertake steps towards post-career planning was, in effect, to admit also to the inevitability of footballing rejection”. Around two decades later, similar findings were reported by Platts and Smith (2018). They argued that “for some players, aspiring to be ‘average’ or ‘middling’ dominated their habituses and egalitarian identifications with education, while for others education was something in which they needed to invest only minimal effort to perform well” Platts and Smith, 2018, p. 939).

In conclusion, Platts and Smith (2018, p. 939) noted that players:

aspirations and experiences can at least be partly understood as responses to the prevailing neoliberal learning environments which they inhabit and in which they engage in performative practices of working-class masculinities.

It is from this wider body of research into young males’ relationship with education that a second rationale emerged. Academics (such as, Ball 2013; Francis and Skelton 2005; Stahl 2015, 2016) have long been occupied by trying to understand gender inequalities in educational attainment. A sizable chunk of this work has been devoted to understanding how the growth of neoliberal ideologies in education policy has failed to serve the needs of working-class males (Davies and Bansel 2007; Francis 2006; Stahl 2015). Given that many of the males who enter professional football academies are from working-class backgrounds, it seems likely they too will have been underserved by education. We also know they are going to spend two years in an anti-academic environment, it further reinforces the need to study how they ultimately cope if they enter HE.

Methodology

A scoping review is to be used to understand the experiences of any males, from any sport in any country who have entered HE following time in a Long-Term Athlete Development Programme. Using the databases Sport Discus, Scopus and Education Source, a total of 899 papers were returned. The search strategy is outlined in Figure 1.

(academ* OR elite OR professional) AND (sport OR athlet*)

AND

deselect* OR terminat* OR release* OR transition* OR retire* OR dropout OR “drop out” OR quit* OR leav* OR depart*
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AND

"higher education" OR "tertiary education" OR universit* OR colleg* OR undergraduate* OR "Dual Career" OR Dual Career

Figure 1

In accordance with PRISMA principles, each researcher will independently screen the papers using these inclusion criteria.

- Report data on athletes aged 18 - 24 who have participated in a professional talent development environment which includes an educational offer and mentions HE as a possible exit route.
- Research should be published in a peer reviewed journal unless in the grey literature search
- Studies with ethical approval where appropriate
- Published in English

The researchers will then meet to resolve conflicts before agreeing on the papers to be included in the review. Is it the findings of these papers we will present at this conference.

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