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

A Scoping Review

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Executive Summary

This scoping review explores the lived experiences of young male athletes, specifically former professional football players in the UK, who transition from elite sport to higher education (HE) as a way of managing their rejection from their professional sporting careers. The study was conceived as a response to a perceived gap in research concerning how these athletes manage their rejection and, specifically, adjust to university life. The context for this scoping review was the UK, however as the study aimed to gather research on athletes aged 16-24 who were released from professional academies and chose to pursue further education studies from other countries were considered.

Multiple databases were systematically searched for relevant studies. However, the review found no eligible studies on the lived experiences of young males who transition from professional sport to higher education after being rejected. This absence of research highlights a significant gap in the literature, which the authors aim to address through future studies. Despite the disappointing outcome, the review provides a clear direction for further research on this topic.

While two studies touched on related themes, they did not focus on the academic aspects of the athletes' experiences, making them inadequate for the scope of this review. There were elements of these two studies that can form some of the foundation for future research. The authors argue that the findings underscore the need for further investigation into how higher education can support athletes in managing the psychological and emotional challenges associated with being rejected from professional sport. Given the significant numbers of former players who may choose this route, there is a wealth of learning to be done by higher education institutions themselves who, can improve their own services by understanding more about these young males.

1.0 Introduction

Male professional football is a notoriously difficult environment within which to forge a career. Indeed, for that reason, concern surrounding the education and broader welfare of young male football players is not new (Dabscheck, 1986; Parker 1996; McGlinchey et al 2022). However, the number of players in professional football academies has grown exponentially over the past thirty years and currently between the ages of 8 and 18 “more than 10,000 boys play in professional football academies in England at any one time” (Ball, 2022, p. 25). Over the same period, the number of professional contracts awarded at the age of 18 has remained relatively consistent, meaning a simultaneous exponential growth in the number of males rejected from the game. Ball (2022, p. 25) notes that of the estimated 10,000 players who play in professional football academies, “less than one percent will reach professional level” and that “700 players in the under 16 age group are released each year among the 92 Premier and English Football League clubs” (Ball 2022, p. 50). Research by Platts, Millar and Jacobi (2021) show a similar pattern. They argue that, at the age of 18, 44% of the estimated 2000 scholars (that is those left from the 10,000 who have not been released prior to the age of 16) are rejected each year from their clubs. Finally, even if players secure a professional contract at the age of 18, the Professional Footballers Association (PFA) claim that “five out of six of these players will have been released or dropped by the age of 21” (cited in Segolov, 2023). This is something Williams and MacNamara (2020, p. 3) refer to as the “dead bodies” of talent development systems.

These young men are experiencing a transition phase in their career, they are transitioning out of the academy environment and transitioning away from their planned path of becoming a professional footballer. Transitions are complex to define but usually involve an event, or a combination of events (Lavalley, 2000), which are expected (normative) or unexpected (non-normative) or both. An example of a normative transition would be an athlete’s retirement while a non-normative transition would be a serious injury that ends a career earlier than expected (Wylleman & Lavalley, 2004). The young men at the heart of this scoping review want to be professional footballers, this transition for some is likely to normative (they may have been put on notice), or it may be non-normative and come as a surprise. It is highly likely that this is a forced transition and is an unwelcome event.

The FA Elite Player Performance Plan (2012) makes it clear that clubs have a responsibility for the players that they release. The management of the transition falls under this

responsibility. It is common practice in UK professional football clubs to promote exit routes into HE for players who are rejected at 18 as one way of managing the transition out of the academy. There are two problems with this. First, there is a dearth of research exploring the engagement, satisfaction and experience of these young males in HE. Second, while the option to enter HE may appear a meaningful exit route and help universities with widening participation agendas, a number of 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).

Against this backdrop, a programme of research was proposed by the lead authors and funded by the SRHE. This programme aims to shed light on the experiences of young male professional footballers who, having been rejected from a professional football club at the age of 18, then choose to attend a university as a strategy for 'managing their rejection' and find a different career path. Due to the lack of current research, the natural starting point for this programme of research was to undertake a scoping review to establish what, if any, research exists around the world that has examined this topic. The research question for the scoping review, therefore, was:

What research exists that examines the lived experiences of young males who, having been rejected from professional or elite sport, move to higher education to help them manage that rejection?

The final part of the introduction is to acknowledge that, a scoping review is a reflexive piece of research, and the process required the researchers to acknowledge their own positionality (Braun & Clarke, 2021). In this respect, it was important to acknowledge the positionality of the research team. Both researchers involved in the project are experienced academics having taught collectively for over 20 years in schools of sport and physical activity across several institutions. The students at the heart of this research have been sat in our classrooms throughout the years, some have succeeded but many have had difficult journeys into and through higher education. We bring these experiences into this research. We firmly believe that this research is rooted in social justice and feel that the voice of these students is often not heard.

2.0 Methodology

This scoping review employed a systematic methodology and made use of tested frameworks. Indeed, the scoping review was conducted using the framework proposed by Arksey and O'Malley (2005), which has five key stages – identifying the research question, identifying relevant studies, study selection, analysing the data and collating, summarising and reporting the results. In addition to these five stages, the researchers were guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta Analyses extension for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR), which also helps ensure a rigorous and transparent approach (Tricco *et al*, 2010).

2.1 Identifying Relevant Studies

Once the research question had been identified, a search strategy was developed in consultation with a research librarian to begin the process of identifying relevant studies. This search was conducted across three databases – SportDiscuss, SCOPUS and Education source and consisted of key words combined using Boolean Operators. Using an iterative process the search strategy was refined through pilot searches and discussions between the two researchers and the research mentors. Table 1.0 shows the final search strategy:

(academ* OR elite OR professional) AND (sport OR athlet*)
AND Operator
deselect* OR terminat* OR release* OR transition* OR retire* OR dropout OR “drop out” OR quit* OR leav* OR depart*
AND Operator
“higher education” OR “tertiary education” OR universit* OR colleg* OR undergraduate*

Table 1.0 Final Search Strategy

Alongside the establishment of the search strategy, the researchers produced a set of inclusion and exclusion criteria. Table 2.0 below shows the inclusion and exclusion criteria applied to the sample:

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data on athletes aged 16-24 who have participated in a professional talent environment • HE offered a possible exit route • Peer reviewed • Where required – ethical approval granted • Published in English • Published from 2012 onwards 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Athletes outside of the age group 16-24 • Athletes who identify as Dual Career (maintain their participation in an elite sporting talent environment alongside their studies) • Lacking ethical approval • Not published in English • Published before 2012

Table 2.0 Inclusion Criteria

Justifying the inclusion and external criteria is an important part of the systematic review process. The search only sought to consider potential HE students, therefore the age criteria of 16-24 was selected. The researchers considered that older than this, athletes may be moving towards a retirement status. The search was limited to studies published after 2012, as this was the date that the Premier League introduced the Elite Player Performance Plan (the latest long-term athlete development policy within professional football in England). It should be expected that after 2012, due to the new policy, there would have been a change in approach within the talent environments. The researchers also took the decision to include UK only studies, a significant number of studies did come through from the US, however they have a very different funding model within the collegiate system.

2.2 The Study Selection

The study selection process had three stages. First, using Excel functionality duplicate titles were recorded and removed. Second, the title and abstract from each returned paper were ‘screened’ and any paper that did not meet the inclusion criteria was discarded. The

researchers completed this task independently, documenting the papers they were including and discarding, and then met to discuss any discrepancies between their decisions. These discrepancies were resolved via a robust discussion. There was a third reviewer on 'stand-by' if the discrepancies could not be solved, however, in the event the third reviewer was not required. The next stage of the study selection phase was to retrieve the full text of the included papers and for each researcher to read them in their entirety. This was, once more, done independently by each researcher who analysed the paper for eligibility. A PRIMSA-ScR was used to provide transparency and reproducibility (Moher *et al*, 2009). Replicating the process from the first phase, the researchers reconvened after assessing the papers to resolve any disagreements. To complete the study selection phase, one last check took place. This involved manually searching the reference lists of the seven papers being checked for eligibility for any additional relevant articles and using the cite function on Google Scholar and check if any more papers suitable for the study could be found that way.

2.2.1 Analysing the data and collating

In a scenario where a sample could be established the next step required each researcher to re-read the papers in their entirety and begin to develop the headline themes from each paper. The extracted data would be documented in a table so, having completed the task independently, the researchers could reconvene to discuss their findings. Conducting the reviews independently and discussing the results at each stage was one step used to improve reliability and validity. These data can be seen in Table 3.0. During this familiarisation process codes would be developed, discussed between the researchers and grouped together to establish themes.

It is pertinent to note at this stage, and this will be discussed further in the results section, that this systematic review did not return any suitable results. Therefore, theoretically, the final stage should involve synthesising the data to provide an overview of the literature written on the topic. Braun and Clarke (2021) reflexive thematic analysis is a common model for the analysis, following the six steps of familiarisation with data (literature), coding, generating initial themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up.

3.0 Results

This search is classed as an empty review as no eligible studies were found (Lang *et al*, 2007). We conclude, therefore, that at present, no research exists that examines the lived experiences of young males who, having been rejected from professional or elite sport, move to higher education to help them manage that rejection. The significance of this will be addressed in more detail in the discussion. Although this was disappointing, there remains cause for optimism here. After all, without this research, nobody would know this area of research has not been pursued. At best it would remain a ‘hunch’ rather than an accepted hypothesis. Slyer (2016, p. 1) notes that “an empty review should provide a direction for research to fill” and that is our intention here. Again, this is included in our discussion. Given the wealth of experience both researchers have in this field, we hypothesised that there would be a lack of research on this topic. Realistically, given our interest in this topic, it would be likely either or both of us would not have come across such research. It is good that we can now categorically say that no research has explicitly examined this and build from that foundation a programme of research.

As previously acknowledged, a scoping review is a reflexive piece of work. We have acknowledged our positionality at the start, and throughout the process have had thoughtful and challenging discussions to ensure the quality of the review. Therefore, it is appropriate to acknowledge the sinking feel we both had when we realised we were dealing with an empty review. How do you tell the funders that we didn’t find anything? However, Gray (2021) neatly identifies why an empty review should not be dismissed. After a few conversations, we arrived at the same conclusion as Gray– our review has highlighted an important gap in the knowledge about who these young men are, how they experience the higher education system and what support they need to succeed. Did our empty review contribute to knowledge? We would argue that it absolutely did. We will use our review to tell the research community that we are here, and we are interested in this area of work. We will use our review to inform future research practices and provide recommendations to the sector. We will use our review as a call to action, the sector needs to see these young men as they enter HE in what is possibly a turbulent time for them and support them to achieve.

PRISMA

The review used a PRISMA model to provide transparency and reproducibility (Moher *et al*, 2009). The PRISMA diagram can be viewed below:

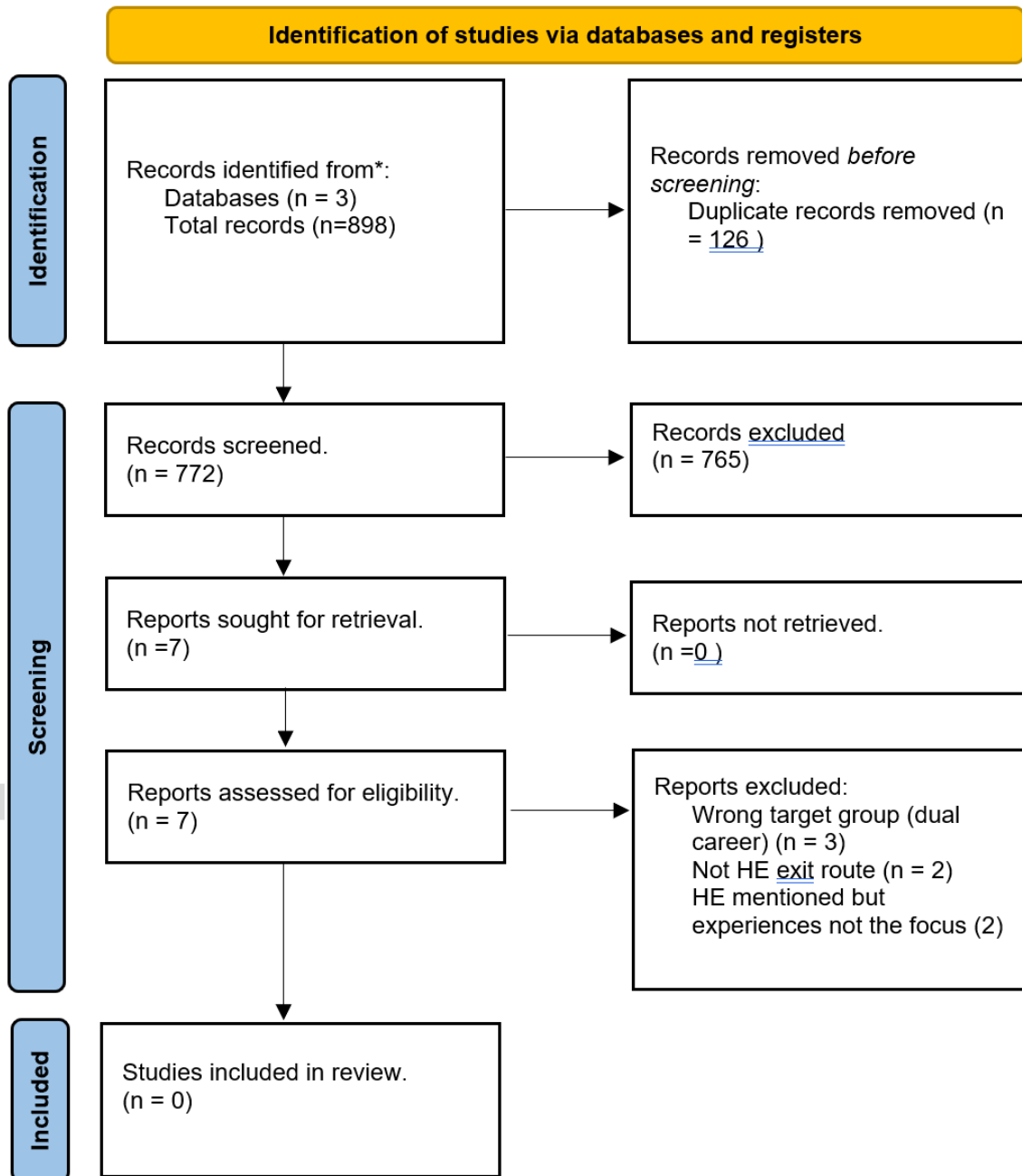


Figure 1.0: Results of the PRISMA process (adapted from Triccol *et al*, 2010)

The second result worthy of note is that, while no eligible studies were found, two papers did begin to examine the role of higher education for young players who had been released

from professional football academies. However, these papers did not make it to be included because the authors of the research did this as part of a wider piece of research and this resulted in a handful of issues that ruled the studies ineligible. This is in no way a criticism of this work, simply a reflection of the focus needed to explore the issue of former young elite athletes who then enter higher education. For the two studies that almost made it through, first, it was notable that not all the participants in the research were rejected from academies and then went to higher education, only some of them did. Consequently, during the screening process, the researchers had to try and decipher which participants in these papers to include and which to exclude. Significantly, this became a very difficult thing to do as not all participants were identified all the time in relation to every issue or theme being discussed. Second, even for those participants who were rejected and then entered higher education, neither study asked explicitly about the whole lived experience while at university. One study framed the questions around how the academy had 'set them up' for the future and the other paper explored only the sporting experiences of those who entered higher education. So, why mention these studies here? Notwithstanding the fact they fell outside of the criteria of the review, the areas these papers did and did not examine provide a good foundation for the future research programme to be developed from this scoping review. As such, the themes of the two papers are outlined in table 3.0 and we will briefly discuss those papers now. These papers were discussed at length by the reviewers before they were excluded. In that regard, we also feel it is an important point to raise for others who will complete scoping reviews in the future. The notion of papers that partially covered the topic wasn't something we had thought about in much detail, but if we were conducting a review again in the future, it is worth considering at the start of the process. Not least because it will help in framing the inclusion and exclusion criteria.

The first study we found in this regard was titled "*Do youth soccer academies provide developmental experiences that prepare players for a life beyond soccer? A retrospective account in the United Kingdom*" (Rongen et al, 2021). This paper did include five players who fell into the ideal sample this scoping review was seeking to examine. That is to say, they had been rejected from a professional football academy at the age of 18 and then transitioned to a university institution. This study noted that some of these players reported feeling 'left behind' in their education, in part because of their time in a professional football club academy. At the same time, they simultaneously found some former players who reflected positively on their time in an academy and did not feel any sense of being left

behind. Moreover, these former players felt that their time in a professional football academy had given them some life skills that had equipped them for later life. What was absent from this research, however, was any examination of the players' experiences when in higher education. This topic was not within the scope of their aim and, therefore, was left unaddressed but the findings do provide something to ponder as this programme of research develops.

A second piece of research unearthed through this scoping review provided further insight into the area of deselection and higher education. Work by Williams and MacNamara (2020) titled "*I didn't make it but...: Deselected athletes' experiences of the talent development pathway*" included ten participants who had been rejected from sporting talent development pathways and then transitioned into higher education. Although this piece of work did explore some of the lived experiences of players in higher education, it was not the experiences those young people had in the academic elements of higher education. There is some exploration of the time spent in university in this study, but this focused on their relationship with and experiences of the sporting offer and nothing more. That is to say, the work was not focussed on how these rejected individuals were using higher education to manage their deselection in a holistic way. Like the first paper, however, there were elements in this work that will assist with our programme of research. For example, participants noted that their time in an academy helped develop a 'toolbox' of psycho-behavioural skills that supported a transition into higher education. They also outlined how they felt their time on a talent development pathway had afforded them an opportunity to develop 'personal assets', such as time management skills, which transferred well into their wider life upon leaving the pathway. We are interested to explore how this toolbox helps (or not) in every facet of their time in higher education.

Title	Authors	Year	Research design	Major Themes / areas for consideration
Do Youth Soccer Academies Provide Developmental Experiences That Prepare Players for Life Beyond Soccer? A Retrospective Account in the United Kingdom	Fieke Rongen; Jim McKenna; Stephen Copley; Kevin Till	2021	Retrospective comparative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Readiness / preparedness for post football life • Personal skills developed in the academy (e.g. self management) • Post football career opportunities • The football network • Football first, education second – the value of education – risk of falling behind • Academy life • Athlete privilege • The academy culture (organisational culture) • The role of others - parents
“I Didn’t Make it, But...”: Deselecting Athletes’ Experiences of the Talent Development Pathway	Graham Williams and Aine MacNamara	2020	Retrospective comparative study	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academies set high standards – positive attribute for post football life • Consequences of negative experiences in the academy • Coach athlete relationship – it takes two to bring about success • Performance focus • Skill development • Desire to succeed • Significant others

Table 3.0: Summary table for the included papers

4.0 Discussion

The context outlined in the introduction to this report serves to highlight the significance of an empty review in this area of study. Several influential organisations such as the Professional Footballers Association (PFA) and the League Football Education (LFE) along with people in the academies themselves advocate higher education as a possible exit route for players who fail to gain a professional contract. However, at present, nobody seems to have examined how this route unfolds for those former scholars or young professionals who adopt it. According to the PFA, which is the players union in professional football in the UK, they part-fund between 600 and 700 players per year to enter higher education (see figure 2.0, Platts, 2024), around 400 of whom enter undergraduate levels (Platts, 2024). It is the only data we have on the numbers of young players entering higher education. The PFA does not fund every player and, simultaneously, not every player the PFA fund has been released. But even a modest prediction would suggest around 500 players per season entering higher education after being released, 1500 across three years. Given the criticism of education within academies by those who have researched this area (see for example Platts, 2012; Platts & Smith, 2018). It is a significant issue that, notwithstanding the attention received by this issue in media outlets and non academic books, as it stands it appears that little academic rigour has been applied to understanding how they experienced higher education. Their retention, achievement and engagement during their time in higher education and, finally, their experiences once they have exited higher education are all worthy of academic study. It is also a relevant point that the university institutions themselves do not know that these young males have entered higher education from professional football academies. Anecdotally, from a sample of six universities, the researchers uncovered that as the qualifications completed by players are not directly accredited by the football clubs, there is no way for university admissions to differentiate these students from those who have not studied in a professional football academy.

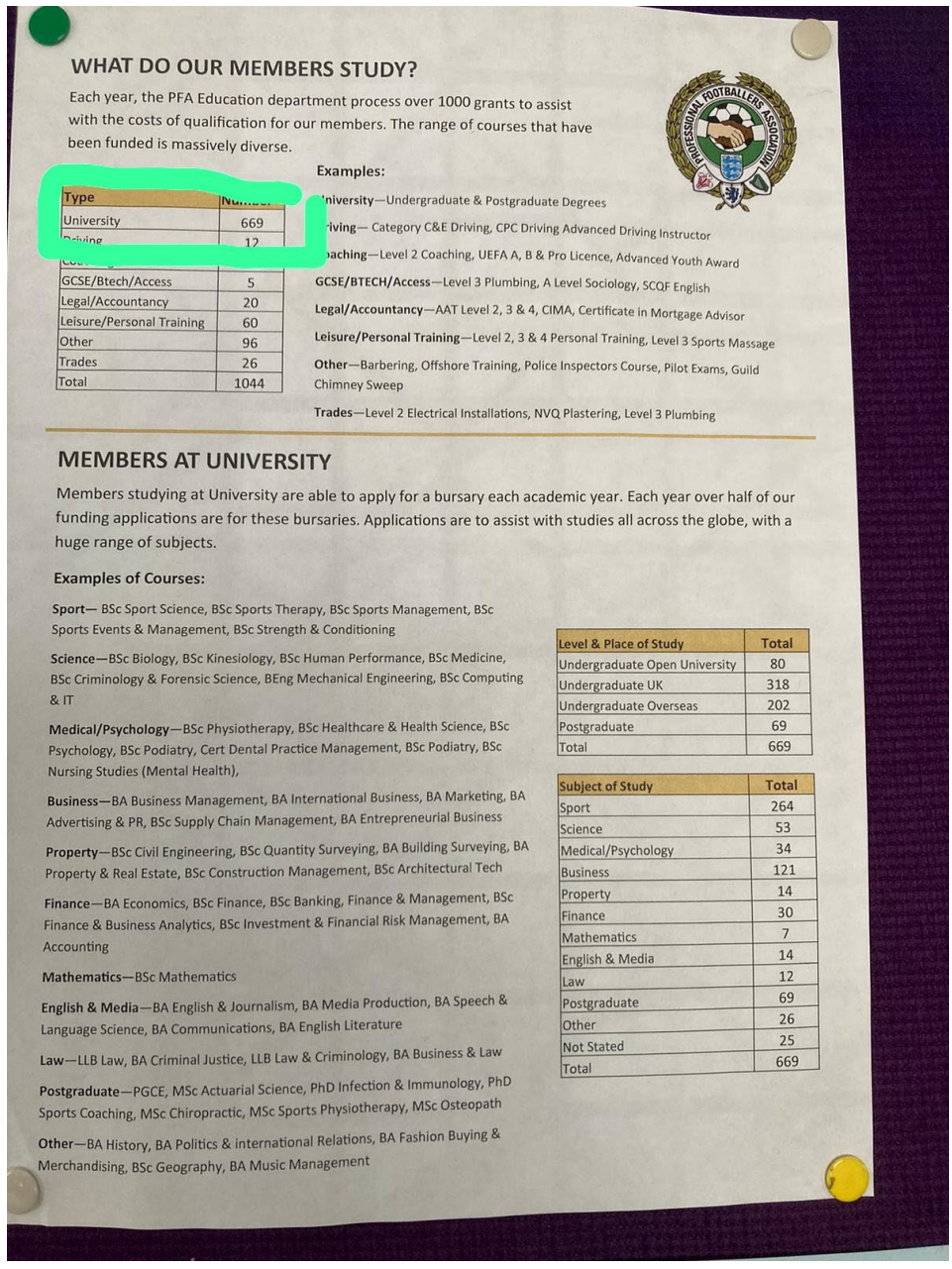


Figure 2.0. Members of the PFA who the PFA fund through higher education (Platts, June 2024, undisclosed location)

Career transitions and crisis transitions

Having established that more research is needed to understand the lived experiences of young players who are rejected from professional football clubs and then enter higher education, it also became clear that many of the papers were being screened as part of the scoping review held theoretical frameworks that could be incorporated into any future research. In particular, the concept of a crisis transition. The area of athlete transitions is

well researched (see, for example, Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004; Stambulova, Ryba & Henrikson, 2021; Stambulova, 2016).

A period of transition, whether normative or non-normative, often requires an athlete to employ one or more coping strategies to deal with the stressors that are associated with the period of change (Stambulova, 2017). To consider this in the context of the topic of the scoping review, for young males who have been released at the age of 18 from their clubs, they are facing a transition in their career. One coping strategy some of these males employ to manage that transition is to enrol on courses in higher education. But these coping strategies do not always work in the way they are intended. For example, Stambulova (2017) highlights that a 'crisis transition' occurs when the coping strategies employed are ineffective. To put the findings of this scoping review into theoretical terms then, it seems reasonable to conclude that, at present, nobody knows the extent to which those who enter higher education having been released from a professional football club experience a positive transition or a crisis transition. The need to know this is neatly summarised by Stambulova (2017, p. 62) who states that "a crisis is a critical moment in the transition process, where helping athletes to avoid the unfavourable pathway can tip the scale toward a better outcome". What is more important perhaps is that others who have researched crisis transitions have noted that they are under researched in sport (see, for example, Cosh, McNeil & Tully, 2021). In line with this, it is perhaps unsurprising then that this scoping review could not locate any research that considers how the potential impact of a crisis in a transition had consequences for the lived experiences of young males who entered higher education.

5.0 Conclusions and Recommendations

This work has highlighted a gap in understanding the experiences of young football players who are released from professional clubs and transition into higher education in the UK. While the broader field of athlete transitions is relatively well researched, it remains unclear how the transition we were examining affects young men who face this change. What we do know is that all transitions have the potential to cause stress, requiring athletes to use coping strategies, and we also know that a significant number of males 'use' higher education as a route to try and cope with their rejection from professional football. Finally, we know that these strategies sometimes do not play out as intended, and a "crisis transition" occurs, which can lead to more challenges.

The recommendations we would like to offer centre on increasing the knowledge of this area.

- 1) We believe that there is room for a study, quantitative in nature, that gathers data on, among other things, how many players are entering higher education through this transition, what subjects they choose and the qualifications they enter their institution with. This would be the first step is defining the numbers of young males who seek to use higher education to manage their rejection.
- 2) There is a piece of qualitative research to be done that does what this scoping review sought to develop. A study that examines the lived experiences of young males who, having been rejected from professional football enter higher education. There are two possible approaches to this piece of research. This could be done longitudinally following some of the young males over the course of their three years, or it could be done as a cross-sectional piece of research gathering data from participants at each stage of their journey.
- 3) We also think there is room for work that assesses the grades, progression and retention of this cohort of males, including the intersection between class, ethnicity, learning disability and socio economic status for example. This data could then be compared with other young males who have entered higher education through what might be considered more traditional routes.

- 4) The women's game is growing in popularity, as the academy provision for young female footballers. Learning from the above research could help inform policy and strategy to provide young females with high quality education with academy settings.

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