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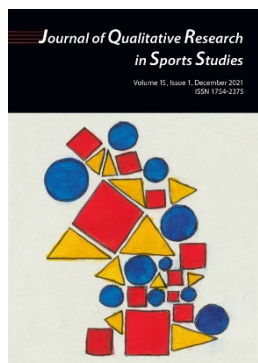
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**A realist framework analysis of rugby academy managers' duties and roles: the ABCs and Ds of Talent Development (Attitudes, Behaviours, Challenges, and Development needs).**

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# **A realist framework analysis of rugby academy managers' duties and roles: the ABCs and Ds of Talent Development (Attitudes, Behaviours, Challenges, and Development needs)**

**Stuart Wilkinson and David Grecic**  
(University of Central Lancashire)

Keywords: *Talent Development, Rugby League, Academy Management, Coaching*

## **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the professional duties of Academy Managers in professional Rugby League. The aim was to explore the knowledge and application of best practice concepts as well as identifying potential gaps in provision and related development needs. The TD Helix (Wilkinson and Grecic, 2020) provided the realist context by which to explore AM's attitudes, behaviours and challenges when operating in this domain. Data were collected and analysed against this theoretical framework. Framework Analysis (FA) of the data found that the professional duties allocated to the AMs within the TD landscape were grouped into the following four areas: developing and maintaining a positive culture; implementing a holistic TD environment; supporting staff development and learning; managing up and down the pathway. The key agents to enable AMs' success in performing these duties were their high-performance coaches. Additionally, in line with the FA method, typologies were created to describe the diverse roles that AMs perform. The roles were: *Cultural Architect, Succession Planner, Life Coach Mentor, Sports Craft Teacher, and Character Builder*. The paper concludes by highlighting the AMs' developmental needs and how bespoke support is essential if they are to successfully overcome the multiple challenges they face whilst performing their professional duties.

## **Introduction**

A focus on Talent Development (TD) as a distinct area of research, applied TD in professional sport, and expertise development in young athletes is a growing area of interest in both research (Holt and Mitchell, 2006; Jones, Mahoney and Gucciardi, 2014; Phillips, Davids, Renshaw and Portus, 2010; Martindale, Collins and Daubney, 2005; Taylor and Collins, 2019; Till and Baker, 2020; Vaeyens, Lenoir, Williams and Philippaerts, 2008; Van Yperen, 2009) and in the public domain via a plethora of social-media content providers, for example see, Talent Equation, Believe Perform, Perception Action, twitter posts, blogs.

In the main, attention in the TD area has been channelled towards the characteristics and skills of performers, the practices they engage with, and the surrounding system and environment (Araújo and Davids, 2011; Coutinho *et al.*, 2016; Davids and Baker, 2007; Durand-Bush and Salmela, 2002; Ford and Williams, 2012; Tucker and Collins, 2012). Having identified many aspects of successful talent development, more recent work has moved to explore these aspects in transition phases; in particular, the transition from Junior to Senior performance levels (e.g. Wilkinson and Grecic, 2019; Webb, Collins and Cruickshank, 2016; Collins, MacNamara, and McCarthy, 2016; Finn and McKenna, 2010; Stambulova, *et al.*, 2009). To date however, few studies have considered the role played by those responsible for setting and managing the development agenda during this crucial phase within professional sports academies, that is, the Academy Manager (AM). With a specific focus on professional Rugby League, this research study critically explores the role and duties of the AM in creating and maintaining their club's talent pathway whilst supporting all those engaged within it, i.e. academy staff (professional and volunteers), parents, schools and the young players themselves.

We note the growing body of research on how to develop the most conducive TDE for professional sport (Gulbin *et al.*, 2013; Henriksen *et al.*, 2014; Larsen *et al.*, 2014; Rees *et al.*, 2016; Thomas and Grecic, 2020; Toering, *et al.*, 2009) as well as what currently constitutes 'expert' professional practice in this area (Gledhill *et al.*, 2017; Lemyre, Trudel and Durand-Bush, 2007; MacNamara *et al.*, 2010). What appears to be missing from the discourse however, is the critical role of the AM in the whole process.

Within Rugby League in particular, there has been a marked increase in research published in the TD domain (Ireton *et al.*, 2017; Redman *et al.*, 2021; Rowley *et al.*, 2020; Till *et al.*, 2012; Wade *et al.*, 2020; Wilkinson, 2014; Wilkinson and Grecic, 2019). This has directly coincided with the increased prevalence of professional academies in the past few years as clubs attempt to capitalise on the development potential of young players. It is the Academy Manager that is responsible and accountable for establishing and maintaining the TDE for these players (Perkins and Hahn, 2020). They are in a pivotal position within the club as they are required to integrate both downwards (Schools and Community Game, Embed the Pathway [RFL], DPP [RFU] and other centres of excellence) and upwards into the First Team professional environment (Côté, Baker and Abernethy, 2007). As such their reach, scope and influence are felt in all aspects of the game. In general Academy Managers bring to bear their influence through the provision of resources and high-quality services (Nicholls, 2014; Rothwell *et al.*, 2020). As such they are responsible for the recruitment and training of experienced high level coaches, and performance support professionals e.g. professionally qualified educators, team managers, sport scientists,

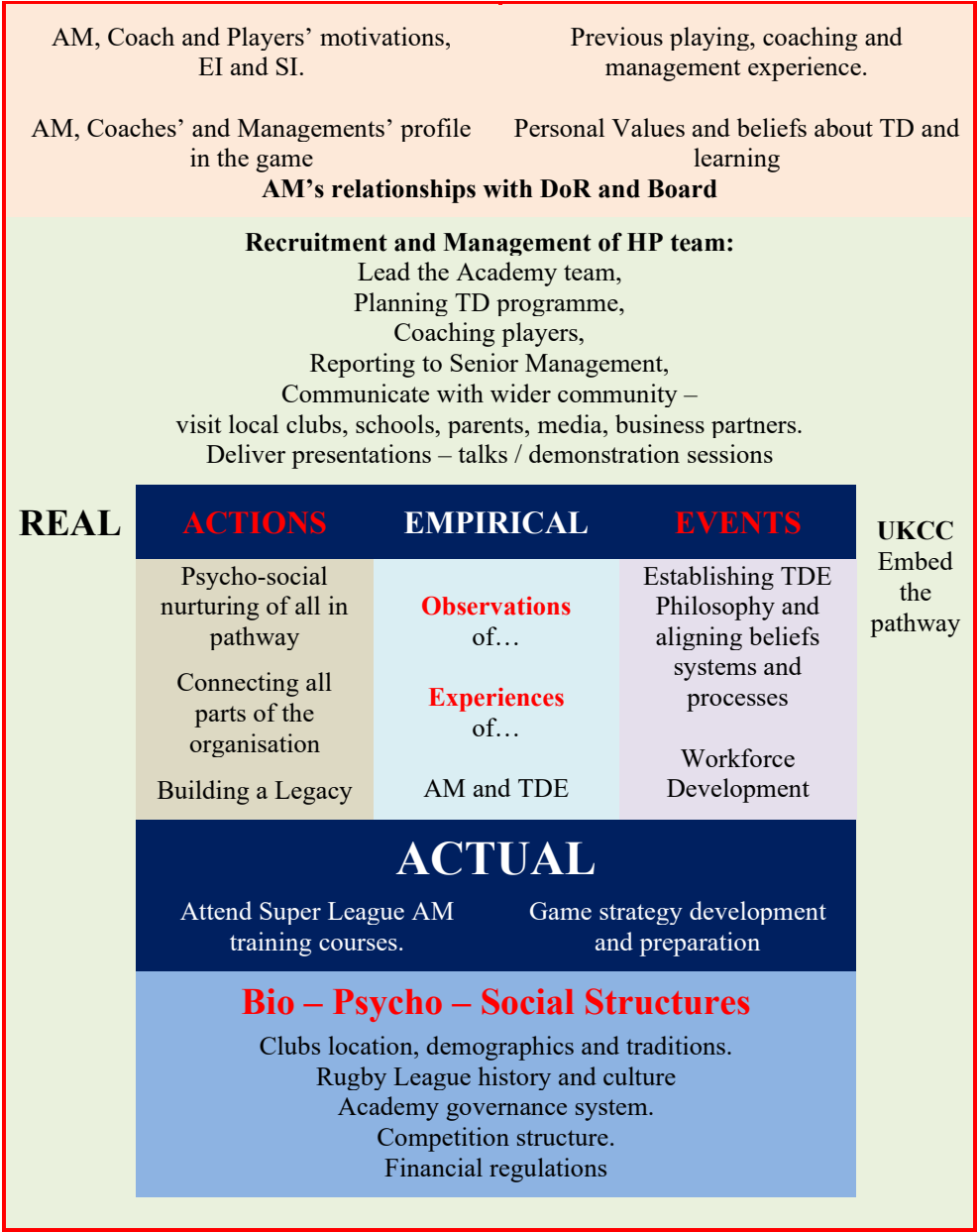
psychologists, video analysts, strength and conditioners, physiotherapists) whose job it is to select and nurture a group of players from a variety of backgrounds such as schools, the community game, local academies and other sports (Hollings, Mallett and Hume, 2014). Making the right choice of personnel and deciding upon the most effective professional development programme for each person, is a daunting task for even the most travelled and experienced Academy Manager.

Of course, the TDE demands and requirements of an AM extend well beyond just the recruitment, deployment and development of key personnel. In our previous studies within this field (Wilkinson, 2014; Wilkinson and Grecic, 2019; 2020; Thomas and Grecic, 2020) we uncovered the range of factors that need attention by the TD team in order to provide the players with the best chance of progression into the professional game (bespoke rugby cognitive, athletic, relational and emotional skill development). There were however some worrying gaps in TD professional's application of best practice that limited the successful creation and operation of the most conducive TDE for their players. Specifically, these related to concepts and theories about the importance and operation of Organisational Connectivity, Philosophical Alignment, Psycho-social Nurturing, Workforce Development, and Legacy Building (Wilkinson and Grecic, 2020). Ultimately however the key finding of our studies has been the over-arching responsibility the Academy Manager has in deciding how best to proceed in order to 'fill the gaps' in the TD environment (TDE), not just within the transition stage (16-19) but throughout the talent pathway. Despite their centrality to the club, the community, and to the talent development process in general, important questions remain regarding how these key personnel can best fulfil their role and develop the skills needed within their respective organisations. The purpose of this study therefore is to build upon our previous TD research by exploring in more detail the AM's attitudes, behaviours and challenges in order to develop a better understanding of the AM's professional duties, their readiness to perform them, and identify any support and development that may be needed.

## Methods

This study adopts a Critical Realist (CR) position in its appreciation that an objective reality exists beyond that which is observable (Bhaskar, 1998a), which is professional Rugby League's domain of talent development (see AM TDE CR in figure 1 below). That is, there are various structures, mechanisms and objects (Bhaskar, 1998a) at play that bear influence on this environment which support or detract from an AM's ability to perform their role. This reality is stratified into 3 layers, the 'real' underpinned by said structures from the natural, psychological and social worlds which may be hidden (Archer, 1995; Sayer, 2000), the 'actual' events and actions undertaken, and the 'empirical', how such events and actions are observed or experienced (Bhaskar, 1998b). For the purposes of this study we are

interested in exploring how RL TD structures influence the AMs ‘actions’ (duties, roles, responsibilities) achieved by investigating the AM’s lived experiences and their perceptions of the reality in which they exist. For a fuller description of the CR philosophy and its research applications readers are directed to Roy Bhaskar’s (1975) initial work *A Realist Theory of Science*, and Julian North’s (2017) book on how CR can be applied specifically to sports coaching.



**Figure 1:** A Critical Realist presentation of the AM’s TDE in Professional Rugby League

## Participants

To gain insights into the professional duties of Academy Managers in professional Rugby League, 'Super League' professional Rugby League AMs were purposefully recruited, based on their current role in the sport. Following personal contact from the lead researcher, n=7 AMs agreed to participate which equated to 60% of the available specialist population. Each AM shared many similar characteristics. All were male and had been ex-professional players. They were qualified at a minimum of UKCC Level 3 and above and had coached professionally before taking up the AM role. All had been professionally involved at the senior professional level of the sport for over 20 years (n=22 years)

## Data Collection

In order to collect rich data on the AMs experience of the TD environment, qualitative methods were deemed most suitable. In particular, semi-structured interviews, conducted by the lead author with those currently operating in this TD domain. Interviews ranged from 45-80 minutes and took place at a time and location suitable for the participants. Rapport was established and developed by the lead author who had experience of professional academies himself, as both a full-time coach and academy manager, at local, regional, national and international levels. In these roles he had gained great experience in working with elite coaches, players, and support teams which he used as a common bond to put the AMs at ease. He also has a good understanding of the colloquial language used in this environment.

Throughout the interview, open-ended questions and elaboration probes were used to explore the participants' views about the world in which they exist and in particular, the actions and events that the AMs had experienced. The conversational nature of the semi-structured interviews allowed variation in the ordering of questions depending on the AM responses, whilst still ensuring consistency and completion of all elements of the interview schedule. The questions used in these interviews focused on determining both the participants' operational and strategic goals, how they defined their current role, the scope and reach of their work, the challenges, and opportunities for development. Example questions included:

- *'Can you explain what you do at the club on a day to day basis?'*
- *'What are your objectives for your programme?'*
- *'Where do these objectives come from?'*
- *'How do you measure these?'*
- *'How successful have you been in achieving your objectives?'*
- *'Why do you think this is / isn't?'*
- *'Who else can impact on your work?'*
- *'Is this a positive or negative influence?'* *'Why is that?'*
- *'How do you manage the other members of your team?'*

- *'Are there any issues that arise working with such a varied workforce?'*

Probes were interjected to dig deeper into a line of questioning in order to clarify meaning or provide a richer insight into the subject. Example probes included:

- *'Can you give me an example of when that happened?'*
- *'What would that look like in practice?'*
- *'Who or what influenced that?'*

All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Field notes were also made during the interviews and used later and support the data analysis stage's descriptive validity (Maxwell, 1992).

## Data Analysis

This study adopted a Framework Thematic Analysis approach to the data. Framework Analysis (FA) is an analysis method established by Jane Ritchie and Liz Spencer in 1994. It is a series of analytical stages rather than a methodology and offers the flexibility to use both deductive and inductive methods which were required for this study given its aim and purpose. Srivastava and Thomson (2009) note that Framework analysis is a better adapted method of thematic analysis when the research has specific questions, a limited time frame, a pre-designed sample of professional participants and a priori issues. All of which were present in this study due to the nature of the participants, the time sensitive pressured environment in which they operate and the pre-defined areas of work which were being investigated.

Framework Analysis is matrix-based method and comprises five interconnected stages that provide clear guidance on data analysis, from initial collection and management through to the development of explanatory accounts (Smith and Firth 2011, Spencer *et al* 2014). Central to the approach is the development of a thematic framework specific to the research study. This enables the researcher to label, classify and organise data in relation to main themes, concepts and categories (Ritchie *et al.*, 2010). The five stages of FA are: (after Ritchie and Spencer, 1994)

1. Familiarisation
2. Developing a Theoretical Framework
3. Indexing
4. Charting
5. Mapping and Interpretation

In this study we have followed each stage in turn:

**1. Familiarisation:** The first author read and re-read each transcript and made reflective notes in the margin of each script. These notes related to his own experiences when operating as an AM but also how the issues and concepts discussed aligned with current academic thinking in Talent Development.

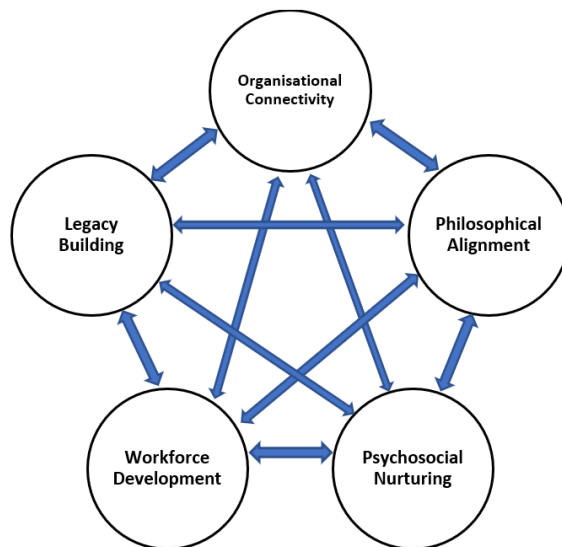


**2. Developing a Theoretical Framework:** Here the *a priori* categories from the authors' previous study into TD was used as the Framework to guide the study's analysis (see figure: 2 TD Helix).

**3. Indexing:** Raw data units from each interview were 'indexed' and collated together in relation to the Framework categories of Organisational Connectivity, Philosophical Alignment, Psycho-social Nurturing, Legacy Building, and Workforce Development. This deductive process allowed the current data to be cross referenced with our previous work and themes generated, to explain the complex TD processes, systems and structures that AMs must navigate with their teams.

**4. Charting:** Both authors then analysed the 'indexed' data grouped together in each area to triangulate their workings and develop their realist understanding (Maxwell, 2012). Here, clusters of raw data that related to common concepts were first grouped together in order to identify the Emergent Themes. These themes were subsequently 'built up' into larger representative Lower Order Themes which in turn were grouped to establish the Higher Order Themes.

**5. Mapping and Interpretation:** The final themes (constituting our new Theoretical Framework for the Professional Duties of an AM), for the interactions and meanings were described and summaries of our interpretations presented in line with Ritchie and Spencer's views of what should be the key objectives of qualitative research, that is, 'defining concepts, mapping range and nature of phenomena, creating typologies, finding associations, providing explanations, and developing strategies' (Ritchie and Spencer, 1994:186).



**Figure 2:** The Rugby Transition Helix: A thematic analysis of TD concepts and issues

## **Validity / Trustworthiness**

Aligned to the CR paradigm, our work is based on the key tenants of CR research, that is; practical utility, ontological plausibility, and empirical adequacy (Ronkainen and Wiltshire, 2021). As this is a qualitative study, Maxwell's suggested interpretive, descriptive and theoretical validity criteria for qualitative research are drawn upon (Maxwell, 2012). We also note Nowell *et al.* (2017) work depicting that to be accepted as trustworthy, qualitative researchers must demonstrate that data analysis has been conducted in a precise, consistent, and exhaustive manner through recording, systematizing, and disclosing the methods of analysis with enough detail to enable the reader to determine whether the process is credible. The FA method has established analytical stages that will enable others to review how the final interpretation was developed (Ritchie and Spencer, 1994). The distinct phases of the framework analysis method facilitate transparency of the data analysis process, and enhance rigour (Ezzy, 2002). Each phase, and the decisions made, can be viewed and amended if necessary. At each phase, the analysis process can be referred back to the original data, thus facilitating the inductive and iterative approach that is characteristic of qualitative research. Indeed, Framework Analysis (FA) provides the researcher with a systematic structure that is visual and transparent, enabling the development and maintenance of a clear audit trail from the start of data analysis (Tobin and Begley 2004). This allows others to follow the methods, processes and decisions taken to produce the findings and arrive at conclusions, which is an important consideration when planning how to evidence a study's robustness and rigour (Tobin and Begley 2004). It also provides a step-by-step guide to the management and thematic analysis of data, which is particularly helpful as its systematic nature helps to effectively organise and reduce data (Gale *et al.*, 2013).

Another important strength of FA is that the coding and charting enable the researcher to look upon emerging themes (thematic analysis) and look across cases (case analysis), which can help to identify patterns (Gale *et al.*, 2013). Furthermore, as it is a continuous and iterative process, it provides researchers with the ability to move backwards and forwards across the data, which helps them to become more familiar with topics and immerse themselves in the study (Smith *et al.*, 2011). Ultimately, this leading to a better understanding of the perceptions and experiences of the study's participants (Gale *et al.*, 2013) and therefore the interpretations of reality made by the authors (Ronkainen and Wiltshire, 2021).

## **Results**

Following the initial indexing to the categories within the Talent Development helix framework, 140 individual coding units were identified. These were brought together into clusters to form new emerging themes. These were then grouped together and collated into 14 lower-order themes.

Higher order theme	Lower Order Theme	Emerging themes
(i) Developing and maintaining a positive culture.	Creating a vision Reflecting the club traditions Connecting staff to the purpose Managing conflict	Psychosocial Development Community identity Brand, DNA or Playing Style Shared Mental Model Micro Cultures Cooperative Learning Motivational climate Parent Partnerships Meta Perceptions
(ii) Implementing a holistic TD environment	Creating self-sufficient players Character building strategies Developing coaches' sports craft Planning a mental skills program	Adaptability Self-regulation Coachability Shadowing / mirroring first team approaches Valued based coaching Autonomy Meta Perceptions Occupational positioning Coach-athlete relationship Challenge, trauma & learning theories Critical analysis
(iii) Supporting staff development and learning	Building Coaches TD knowledge Developing collective self-efficacy Establish a culture of continuous learning	Coach CPD Skills Profiling Multidisciplinary teams Emotional Intelligence Position specific Spiral curricular Commitment & accountability Social & Coaching networks PJDM
(iv) Managing up and down the pathway	Identifying resources and planning Managing player transition Sharing information with stakeholders	Self-determined learning Teaching & social practices Mentoring players Pathway expectations Routines, Rules & Expectations Reflective practice Volunteer coach development Liaison with parents and schools Support for representative teams U20s

**Figure 3:** Analysis of Themes relating to the Professional Duties of an Academy Manager

These in turn were amalgamated into 4 higher-order themes to provide a high-level overview of AMs professional duties, as illustrated in figure 3 above. All AMs interviewed were able to articulate a wide range of professional duties, challenges and development needs related to their roles in professional rugby. A wide range of interesting areas emerged from the data. In order to illustrate and understand the key actions and events relating to the AM's work, the paper will describe and explore the four higher order themes in detail, those of; (i) Developing and Maintaining a Positive Culture; (ii) Implementing a Holistic Talent Development Environment (TDE); (iii) Supporting Staff Development and Learning; (iv) Managing Up and Down the Pathway.

### **Developing and maintaining a positive culture**

Towards this higher order theme the key concepts revolved around the ability of the AMs to capitalise upon the close connections their club had to the local community and utilise the club's traditions and values to get stakeholder buy in and formalise their ideas.

Many of the AM interviews took place at clubs' training grounds, where physical symbols, memories of the club's greatest players via Halls of Fame, as well as images of famous victories, medals and trophies were all visible as soon as passing through the entrance. Posters with appropriate behaviours and values were commonly displayed throughout the ground's corridors and rooms. The environment was seemingly inspired by a global view of rugby values that highlighted players living and playing with passion, being proud of their club, and believing in what they do. Images celebrated committed players demonstrating joy and courage, concentration, focus, and readiness in all tasks.

It was these values that all the academy managers regularly talked about, and their ability to use these to assess and shape their desired culture for the club. AMs highlighted that an optimal outcome would be to create respectful players who demonstrate tolerance, acceptance, and understanding of differences, regardless of status, attributes, and skills. AM6 summarised his views that a major area of work for AMs is to help develop a culture that is a reflection of the club's tradition which comprises its values, attitudes, norms, assumptions, and beliefs - even if this was as simple as being recognised as 'world class'. He explained, *'why? Because everything the club has ever done has been world class so this must be represented in our academy's fundamental approach for player development... being world class'*. He continued to explain what this meant to his team in practice, *'We put the student-athlete ahead of our personal goals and aspirations. You can't have a coach here who only cares about winning a championship'*.

The passion and respect for his clubs' historical and cultural practices is clearly evident in AM6's statement. AM5 also highlighted how due to the competitive nature of professional Rugby League, loyalty was a key value for him and his club:

*'Loyalty is the biggest thing when developing an academy... because a lot of stuff we do is confidential. I mean it is not war, but you keep your secrets for yourself. Your techniques and other tactical aspects need to remain a secret and we don't want our rivals using anything we do to gaslight with parents'.*

AM2 explained the importance of establishing such clear values as these to enable consistency throughout the whole club pathway, *'we've a large numbers of people doing dynamic or complex tasks in a variety of locations (Embedding the Pathway Programme) and all have to be engaged simultaneously and aligned to our organisational values'*. AM3 described the benefit of being clear of what was desired and communicating this throughout the club, *'It would be fantastic if we develop the opportunity to share these values with the rest of the club because it creates a unity among and across age groups'*.

In this respect AM4 reflected how important it was to have those around him reinforcing the key messages and values when he said,

*My assistant was an ex-international. He fully understands what you can and cannot do as a player... (He) has been absolutely critical for sticking to our aim of aligning our players with our (values).*

Unfortunately, this joined-up thinking and pathway was not a consistent picture at all clubs. AM3 noted that he still had much work to do as he described his team as still being disjointed and misaligned: *'... everyone is doing their own thing, in a good way, doing good work and all of that kind of stuff but we're just not connected'*.

### **Implementing a holistic TD environment**

The main focus of this theme was the importance of placing the player and his needs at the centre of an environment that provided appropriate challenge and support to enhance all round development and prepare players for the next stage of the pathway. Key to this provision was the AMs being clear on what the players needed to be successful and how the AM role could best enable them to deliver it. Many academy managers discussed the importance of espousing whole-person development. As AM5 explained, *'The main area that we pride ourselves on is producing the person as well as the player'*. All the academy managers enjoyed talking about 'being athlete-centered' during the interviews and wanting to embed this philosophy within a holistic talent development model. They highlighted how they try to align to some of the TDE best practice tenants when describing how they are encouraging independence, sacrifice and empathy, an understanding of individual differences and an encouragement of adaptability. However, during these

interviews' discussion moved onto whether clubs' entire coaching workforce agreed on such a wide-reaching view of TD. AM1 clearly didn't think this was happening at this club when he responded,

*The times I have watched the first team coaches, and observed the environment, they do seem to coach a lot... [but it seems] it's all about me [them/their coaching]. How is that building character and independence in these young players...I thought the idea was we're trying to make ourselves [the coaches] redundant?*

Indeed AM 4 explained his intention to create his TDE aimed at the exact opposite. This view was centred on his desire to give players the tools and space to take ownership of their own development, *'If you've got a player coming in at 16, we're providing them with an opportunity to develop optimally, and it's their responsibility to actually do what's required of them to take them to the next level ... it's got to be player-driven'*. AM 2 also described the importance of his players becoming autonomous learners and being able to reflect on the challenges they experience:

*The biggest thing for me about development is how young players experience disappointments. How did they feel in that game? Did they lose control? Did they lose focus? Did they lose confidence? Or, how can (the player) learn to handle that better?*

There is abundant room for further progress in determining how to modify the Talent Environment and the coaching practices players experience around their individual needs. Creating self-sufficient and resilient players doesn't just happen. This is certainly a serious test for the Academy Manager when considering how to develop his performance team in this area.

AM 7, highlighted this challenge by explaining that the academy context itself was just one part of the whole environment,

*A player is a reflection of what he is when he isn't here, more than what he is when he is here. So, if they go away and they can't relax and they can't be themselves when they're away, ... they can't recover properly ... if things aren't good away from training and the game, you won't get an effective result in either of those.*

In this respect, TD teams needed to develop an awareness of each player's personal context to support and develop an environment in which the players are comfortable and able to reach their full potential, whatever their circumstances.

Despite the desire to make players *'autonomous decision makers'*, AMs also related that the players are part of a complex ecosystem dependent on each other, the academy coaches, and senior coaches. They noted that all stakeholders are essential for learning and *'keeping a high level of quality'* during the player development programme. From further discussions the emerging theme Interpersonal Knowledge

reflected the AMs' thoughts about the importance of their coaches' social interactions through verbal and nonverbal communication in both coach-to-coach group environments (volunteers, academy coaches & senior team coaches), and coach-athlete relationships (Côté and Gilbert, 2009; Gilbert and Côté, 2013) that were essential in helping to establish their optimal talent development environment.

### **Supporting staff development and learning**

As was becoming evident, the ability of AMs to upskill their teams is essential for them to establish the culture and holistic TDE blueprint they desire. We found that all of the academies were highly focused on the act of educating and developing players, but the AMs noted that this wasn't possible if their team weren't able to teach this optimally.

Having an appetite for learning was therefore identified as a key focus during staff recruitment. The AMs also described the importance of everyone being motivated to learn for their own sake with AM3 expressing his constant need for self-improvement by *'trying to improve all the time'* and *'having a hunger for knowledge'*. AM4 discussed using a range of sources to enhance his professional development:

*I've learnt a lot from talking to other coaches from other sports. In terms of learning and seeing what's out there... emm, it's about looking at business, looking at other sports, looking at other team managers, performance directors... trying to put in what relates to my role as me (an AM).*

Nearly all AMs identified regularly utilising coaching skills such as reflection within their own practice and saw this as essential to enable their coaches to develop. AM6 explained, *'Having self-reflection moments...being really receptive to thoughts... and being critical of yourself are all skills my coaches need to develop'*. AM2 agreed, *'Certainly, academy coaches need to reflect accurately, honestly to identify and appraise both their strengths and areas of development'*. AM7 looked at this from his own perspective, *'if I'm given feedback that I'm lacking because I haven't got 'x' for example, then I will work hard to learn 'x' because that makes me a better operator, So yes I would want the same for my academy coaches'*. AM5 supported this idea but noted that this was not always easy for his staff, *'I do try to help them with this, but it's a bit like pulling teeth for the coaches'*.

Given the critical role of the coaches within rugby academies, it was interesting to note that AMs were unsure of a definitive pathway for coaches to reach the high-performance level (senior coaches with the first team). All AMs agreed however that being able to identify coaches' development needs, and put in place relevant action plans was an important part of their role. AM1 explained how he tries to facilitate this in his club:

*Every single time we got together we're learning stuff... things like why they did what they did when coaching... or what they thought they could do better, and how they should do it, or whether they thought they would do it differently... that's good, but what's not good is that it's more about me making it happen as opposed to them (academy coaches) doing themselves.*

The academy managers highlighted the issue of access to appropriate training for their teams. They noted the lack of relevance to much of the formal training they had been offered or received over their careers. AM 6 gave the example of coach programmes reflecting that,

*Most of the focus was looking at ourselves... such as what do we need? How do we see ourselves? What are our strengths and weaknesses? What should our academy coaches look like? We try to bring in experienced coaches, but we should really have the ability of making this more current... capturing their [academy coaches] current delivery and connecting this to an ideal delivery model, our overall club philosophy or our future needs.*

One participant sounded concerned about the ability of his coaches to engage in continued professional development,

*In terms of this being built in to our plans (a programme) then that's not happening...it should be, but where do I start? None of my coaches have a psych qual and the club's psych is part time and thinks she's first team exclusive (AM2).*

Indeed, AM6 expressed his frustration when he commented that, 'we've no resources or people to help us... we do have a programme to develop our academy coaches (but) it is very ad hoc'.

This was a recurring theme, with many gaps concerning support for learning and development being identified in our previous study of a rugby TD performance team (Wilkinson and Grecic, 2020). These were clearly evident again, now viewed through the eyes of the individual AMs. All AMs raised these 'gaps' in some form or another and highlighted the frustrations that they had caused. Many described the difficulties posed to their own learning in light of these challenges, as well as the resilience they had to show in order to overcome these challenges. AM1's quote in particular summed up how he felt and how he had developed his own innovative solution to come back from learning setbacks, 'I just have that song in my head round and round, you get knocked down, but you get up again, so that's what I do'.

### **Managing up and down the pathway**

The talent pathways taken by professional sportsmen and women and the stages within them have been widely described (Hollings *et al.*, 2014; Holt and Mitchell, 2006; Rees *et al.*, 2016; Stambulova *et al.*, 2009; Wylleman and Lavallee, 2004) as the integrated and systematic environment required to facilitate optimal progression



(Henriksen *et al.*, 2010; 2014; Larsen *et al.*, 2014; Martindale *et al.*, 2005). The AMs role in this context is to help players successfully navigate their way through these stages. The duties that emerged here also demonstrated the linkages to the other major themes when determining the extent of the AMs professional practice. That is, the need to ensure the provision of a well-planned, supported and connected environment for the players, whilst at the same time communicating the underpinning ethos. That is, as well as the why, the what and how of the programme, effectively to all involved.

In particular, it seemed that the connection element, upwards to the aims and preferences of the clubs' first team manager and their teams, and downwards into the school and community club game differentiated each AMs particular challenges.

All AMs expressed the crucial role of their coaches in communicating consistent messages to all involved. It was in this specific area however that the AMs felt they needed to focus most of their attention. For example, AM4 explained that, *'I spend so much energy aligning people's (coaches') perceptions or beliefs with what the top team (senior squad) are doing'*. He went on to explain how role modelling and the teaching of performance behaviours were so important in this context when he described,

*These players really need to see what it takes to make it... it seems to play a role in the selection processes and can define who makes it with the senior team....basically if our kids aren't living and breathing the same as the first team lads they've no chance..., who do they get these behaviours from? Our coaches – that's who.'*

For others these linkages did seem a long way away. AM 7 explained, *'I cannot see us (the academy and club) performing optimally with so little interaction or cooperation from top to bottom'*. This prompted the researcher to probe deeper as to why this was the case, which received the following response, *'well common sense tells you if its interactive sport like Rugby League then the whole of the club's workforce needs to work directly with one another...which we are not'*.

An important part of this connection, or lack of it, related to the shared mental model of what was needed to fully equip players for progression through the pathway. This was regarded as a critical attribute, one that was dependent on coach effectiveness and had become a key indicator of players' progression to the next level. AM2 explained:

*In the world of Super League there is a lot of choices on what players best suite our succession...it is just being clear with the head coach or CEO why they take on this particular choice... So, I am very clear... our players have just got to be confident in what they are saying and doing, and [it is my job] to see my academy coaches committing to developing these attributes in our players.*

These shared mental models also had to be transmitted down the pathway too, in order to give youngsters the best chance of future success. Here AM4 conveyed how ‘*confidence*’ again was one of his club’s main building blocks of development and promoted throughout the pathway. He stated that stakeholders at ‘*all levels look for good communicators and those who can display confidence*’.

Finally, linking this section to the other major themes the AMs reported that in order to develop their TDE and ensure the programme’s values/ethos were upheld, it was essential for the AMs to develop systems that enhance communication structures between the key people in the pathway and get ‘*buy in*’ from all involved. Utilising the example of confidence again AM5 expressed how he tries:

*To make this [self-confidence] visible throughout all the player transitions (into the Academy at u14, u14s to u16s, and u16s onto u18s)...by celebrating a player being able to act confident even when they are not, communicate with senior staff and above all else confidence in their ability’.*

He went on to clarify this point further, ‘*I better add being able to communicate with confidence was regarded as a critical attribute according to the senior coaches... I am so glad they share the reasons for this with our coaches*’.

## **Discussion**

The aim of this study was to investigate and ascertain the main actions and events concerning professional duties of Academy Managers in professional Rugby League. As such we have identified a series of higher and lower order themes that both categorise and bear influence on the AMs. What becomes evident from the data and results is that AMs in professional Rugby League engage in a plethora of duties that act upon various agents in a wide range of contexts often with conflicting aims and objectives. What was clear however was the critical role the coaches played within the AMs teams for enabling the AM to be successful. Indeed, the successful recruitment and training of the workforce that can operate successfully in this TDE was the key determining factor for many AMs success. This was best summarised by a quote from AM2 when he stated that:

*[TD coaching] is a multifaceted job calling for a variety of competences in our coaches. These include setting up training regimes grounded in deliberate practice, allowing athletes appropriate mental and physical rest, preparing athletes for consistent high-level competitive performance, teaching and assessing physical, technical, perceptual and mental skills in a safe environment and providing opportunities for athletes to prepare for life after sport...yes its sounds complex, but I am telling you if [they’re]not prepared to learn how to do this optimally [they’re]not for us.*

Indeed, in line with Framework Thematic Analysis practices, the data have uncovered a range of typologies of the AMs work, most of which focus on their interactions with their coaching team. These include the need to be a:

- *Cultural Architect, a*
- *Sports craft Teacher, a*
- *Succession Planner, a*
- *Life coach and Mentor, a*
- *Team Leader, and a*
- *Character Builder*

all rolled into one each with definite challenges and accompanying development needs. These will now be described to best illustrate the range of professional duties undertaken by AMs in these various roles.

### **Cultural Architect**

Professional rugby academies and their organisational culture needs to be considered in the context of a modern sporting management team circa: during the last twenty years. Furthermore, an AM, even academy coaches, will find they are leading and managing a workforce that is multidimensional and one that must report accurately to many levels i.e. senior management, National Governing Bodies, local grassroots clubs, and players' schools and families. The need to build an all-encompassing conceptual framework to align all those involved in the pathway is essential. This 'all on the same page' group thinking is based around how different sections of the organisation give different meanings to relationships within the academy, and how its population give meaning to their interaction with the environment. This can only succeed with a strong cultural foundation that is established, promoted, and maintained by the club and supported by the AMs.

Indeed, all AMs recognised themselves as having a major role in creating the '*right culture*' for their staff and players, i.e. a foundation for the development of the desired qualities needed in high-performance sport. The two main actions related to this were the need for them, a) to set out and communicate a clear vision to their teams and stakeholders, and b) to ensure all those involved were connected socio-culturally to the club (all staff aware of the club's historical evolution). As AM4 described himself, '*In this role I am probably a bit of a control freak... (as it) helps keeping everyone on the same page*'.

Most AMs spoke about a culture built on humanistic values and linked to the holistic TDE they had as their vision. This humanistic stance also encompassed their interactions with their team and a cultural aim to facilitate the growth of all academy personal (coaches, sports scientists, administrators) that were under their wings.

They sought to achieve this by purposefully influencing senior personal at the club and utilising sociocultural factors such as the club's community identity, their traditional playing style, their public brand and their historical origins to manipulate resources to ensure that decision makers focussed on helping the AM, the coaches and volunteers to provide the best possible transition experience for the players, whether this was ultimately within and outside their club (moving from academy to the senior teams or leaving).

Cultivating progressive environments and humanistic cultures in professional sport can only increase player awareness and well-being, and improved professional practice of those involved. AMs in this study noted that such environments the '*right culture*' could have a major positive impact on how they were able to perform their professional duties. They explained that a '*good culture*' helped to manage player expectations, their transition and encouraged their disciplined conduct in order to demonstrate the qualities required in the senior teams. They also identified how such a culture required time investing in the education of parents, coaches, and volunteers too. The AMs has identified these stakeholders as having important roles in facilitating and assisting in developing appropriate player attitudes and behaviours for optimal and adaptive rugby participation on and off the field of play. Only if clear and consistent messages were being transmitted from these various sources (all reflecting the AMs desired cultural values and norms) would the conditions for facilitating players' competitive performance, before, during and after matches be able to be optimised.

### **Succession Planner**

This approach brings together different elements, from helping people (coaches, volunteers, administrators, players and parents) be the best they can be (again aligned to humanistic values), to the targeted recruitment and development of staff to perform the desired future roles and duties that the AM has identified a need for within his longer term development plan. In this context most of the AMs' attention and thoughts revolved around their coaching workforce. The AMs also recognised that in their environments, simply being an expert coach also did not guarantee a future position in the senior professional team. They were aware of what their role required in the development of coaches, being based on the complex need for fluidity of activity, endless decision-making and constant planning and evaluation.

They identified the holistic life span in knowledge and development within coaching careers as a reciprocal interaction between development in the athletic and non-athletic domain. Wylleman and Lavallee (2004) outlined three non-athletic areas of coaching development, including the psychological level, the psychosocial level, and the academic and vocational level. The ex-playing careers of many coaches include many interrelations between all 3 areas and the athletic level. It is

this varied array of needs that the AMs have to struggle with if they are to effectively develop their future workforce, and design training that will have most benefit.

According to the academy managers, external facilitated workshops could be of value to their coaches. Similarly, they thought that a personalised needs analysis could help them see the warning signs, personal gaps and the differentiation needed for their diverse coaching workforce. Ultimately, the professional duty of an AM is to develop an effective coaching workforce, without question a difficult task considering the broad spectrum of coaches that they must support (newly qualified volunteers up to level 3 professional academy coaches). One concept that could help is that from Bronfenbrenner (1979) who stressed how development is affected by the complex interrelationship between process, person, context and time (PPCT model). It is these variables that the AMs have to consider when trying to align their training and development offer to their personnel in the context of the club's succession plan and in the time the AMs have available to them to achieve results for the club.

### **Life Coach Mentor**

Within the realm of (iii) Supporting Staff Development and Learning, the AMs described many elements of training that could and would have benefit for their club. The sociocultural connectivity, in the case of a professional rugby club and its community programmes, involves the construction of new identities as the individuals become enculturated into a community of learners including players, parents and the volunteer coaches. This provides some insight into just how diverse and dynamic the AMs' professional duties can be. In response, the AMs had to be open minded and creative into how best they could support all involved.

The AMs reported that NGB (RFL) courses had helped their coaches learn how to facilitate age specific teams. All the academy personnel mentioned that when they took part in NGB courses at one time, they were all young and new to coaching. As a result, these courses exposed them to material that made them realise the importance of prioritising the development of young players. Starting out on their careers, they didn't really know how to coach or how to share their knowledge with players or other coaches. These courses certainly helped them in the theoretical aspects of coaching, but they failed to explore and embed values into their approaches or consider how to manage ethically sensitive situations. The coaching at a rugby academy is about creating change. In order to ensure an environment exists that is conducive to coach and talent development, such change is complex and involved the AMs searching for alternative mechanisms and education processes to teach their coaches how to coach beyond the methodologies and sports craft provided by the NGB. This is where the AMs saw their role more as a mentor to their team whilst also being a life coach to their players and coaches.

In order to fulfil this role all AMs recognised the need for more natural interactions between all those involved in the pathway. They expressed a desire to connect with players and parents and develop greater relational affiliation with senior and volunteer coaches. AMs believed their coaches '*lived and breathed*' the academy life throughout their entire experience and had 24/7 commitment to the programme. They identified that strong and meaningful relationships with all the organisation's workforce needed to be developed and maintained in order to create a sense of joint endeavour. Only then would all parties be willing to candidly express their thoughts and share ideas, thus allowing the AMs to support them more effectively. Additionally, AMs considered what would be their own essential learning tools. They identified these as having the opportunity to have exchanges with other AMs, and a desire to intentionally seek out interactions with peers who could act as their mentors too.

Perhaps all these interactions would enable the AMs to better prepare their coaches to facilitate a psychosocial practice model because they will be able to learn '*sensible strategies*' that other coaches use through mentoring and how others mentor first team players etc. Certainly, an in-house coach development programme based on life coaching and mentoring would benefit academy coaches by ensuring that they interact frequently with other coaches, players and parents within the organisation which would ultimately, strengthen and help inform their relationships with these groups.

### **Sports Craft Teacher**

All the AMs spoke about the importance of creating a talent development environment that reflected their club's sociocultural ideology underpinned by a strong psychosocial programme. Unfortunately, however the '*gaps*' in their TD teams' knowledge and practice made this objective very difficult to achieve. The AMs were clear on what they wanted and needed from their coaches to develop the requisite competitive rugby skills in their players. These, of course, included the technical, tactical, physical and mental skills, but in particular, the AMs wanted their coaches to identify and apply strategies to maintain player confidence, effective communication, attentional focus and self-regulation. It was in this mental skills domain more than any other, that the AMs found themselves having to go back and teach their teams how to best enable their players to learn and demonstrate these attributes.

This specific '*gap*' regarding the mental preparation of players, reflects previous research that highlighted sports psychology as an area of need for coaches. It is also reflective of work that found the specific areas of talent transition bereft of said mental skills; the '*know-how*' and one where sports psychology needed to be more effectively used in a coaching context (Pain and Harwood, 2004; Silva, 1984).

The AMs also described a situation where almost all current methods of coaching skill development and correction at their academies relied predominantly on technical and tactical input with little or no psychosocial influence. The AMs' evaluations were that their entire pathway was primarily focused on teaching the core technical and tactical skills to their players rather than having an integrated strategy that included psychosocial and sociocultural factors. The need for the AMs to become 'sports craft teachers' was therefore very real and wide-ranging indeed.

### **Character Builder**

The role of the AM in successful TD environments goes far beyond the training the athletes. As noted above, a key role of the AM is to establish and maintain the culture to develop and help socialise new members into their (the AMs) desired environment. The AMs noted that their coaching workforce could and should develop characteristics that far exceed sport-specific skills, such as autonomy, responsibility for personal development, resilience and interpersonal skills. These are associated with a wide range of life skills including the ability to structure life as a rugby player as well as prepare players so that they can thrive after their playing career. As AM3 explained, *'The character of the player is vital, so we look to educate them socially as well as their rugby craft wisdom'*.

Academy managers discussed ways of facilitating players' desired personal character qualities. When developing young rugby players, AMs perceived they had a role in maintaining athlete confidence through encouragement and praise yet they mentioned that they also needed to challenge players to continuously improve. AM1 qualified this idea when he explained this was not by saying *'you're here because you're good enough... just make sure you're showing it'*, but by developing their players to become *'more self-aware, self-determined and self-regulated'*. The AMs did however note that this character-building role that they had to undertake was made even more difficult without support from their coaches who could plan and deliver a psychosocial model for practice.

Interestingly the AMs described that experience and ongoing education were the two variables that helped them explain the differences that exist between their coaches who facilitate character building in an intentional manner and those who did not. Specifically, the AMs mentioned that as coaches gained more experience and education, they became more efficient at developing and applying coherent club philosophies and holistic coaching practices aligned to humanistic principles and character-building objectives.

This study demonstrated a genuine openness from the AMs to learn more about how sport can be used as a tool for development. This motivation and willingness to learn needs to be supported so that they can develop their teams to articulate their

philosophy (i.e. values, beliefs) in a coherent manner so they do not just focus on teaching technical skills, but are engaged in adopting a holistic TD environment that facilitates the development of life skills and other sociocultural factors that will nurture character within their players.

To summarise this section, the development of players within an effective academy must involve the formation of effective behaviours, skills, attitudes, and knowledge that enable them to promote themselves in this competitive environment whilst also enhancing their performance and that of their team. In order for this to be achieved, all AMs discussed how rugby skills need to be learned within the context of the academy's culture and underpinned by the club's sociocultural reputation. The AMs perceived that their players developed these skills because of the culture within a club rather than learning them simply through being coached rugby. This was therefore a major focus of AMs work and the various roles they had to perform effectively.

## Conclusion

The aim of this study was to investigate the professional duties of AMs in Rugby League. This is an original study that adopted a Critical Realist position and utilised Framework Analysis for the first time in this TD area. This philosophy and method proved useful in analysing data against findings of our previous study, synthesising similar concepts and formulating new thematic ideas. What we have discovered have been findings that are much broader and richer than our study's initial remit. Through the detailed responses to our questioning, the AMs have presented a complex picture of the current state of play regarding the transition from Junior to Senior level in professional rugby, and how the AMs try to navigate the dynamic challenges they face by performing the diverse yet interconnected roles of *cultural architect, succession planner, life coach mentor, sports craft teacher, and character builder*.

Through the rigorous adoption of the Framework Analysis methods the AM's duties themselves were categorised into the following major themes:

- A: Developing and Maintaining a positive culture.
- B: Implementing a holistic Talent Development environment.
- C: Supporting staff development and learning.
- D: Managing up and down the pathway

What was clear however, was that all our participants, despite their vast experience in the sport, identified their own needs for support and professional development. For example, we found that current academy coaching knowledge regarding the process of developing Junior to Senior rugby players still focuses predominantly on developing traditional sports skills rather than nurturing the



psychosocial competencies perceived by AMs as being essential for successful progression. It is this challenge that seems front and centre of both the AMs reported duties and the roles they need to undertake to achieve them.

All AMs identified how this challenge was manifested within their specific contexts. Each characterised very different training needs, not only for their teams, but for their own professional development too. Major concerns raised however were that nothing that they had encountered previously, been provided, or were aware of thus far, had had sufficient content, processes or value to help them accomplish their required duties and roles within the talent pathway. Although there have been some isolated attempts to access rugby academy coaches and managers' knowledge and context in previous research (Hughes and Palmer, 2010, Taylor and Collins, 2019; Wilkinson and Grecic 2019; 2020; Thomas and Grecic, 2020), it is clear from this study that more bespoke support is required to improve AM performance, and improve their own coaches' effectiveness in order to attain more positive player outcomes. The significance of this study is in the insight it provides into the attitudes, behaviours and challenges faced by the AMs. It directly highlights the need for new AM training protocols and programmes to be created and adopted by rugby academies which will directly result in enhanced TD in Rugby League as well as providing a template to inform other sports. It is this topic of the AMs' own learning and how they can best support that of their teams and players which needs to be a key topic of future TD research. This study has also highlighted the important ecological context for those educators aiming to enhance the skills, characteristics and knowledges that AM professional development rely upon.

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## JQRSS Author Profiles

**Stuart Wilkinson**<sup>1</sup> is currently a Lecturer in High Performance Coaching, Course Leader and PhD student at the University of Central Lancashire, Preston, UK. Previously Stuart had a career as a professional Rugby League player in the UK and Australia (Barrow, Carlisle, Wests in Australia and Workington) a professional coach (Leeds Rhinos, Wigan Warriors, Widnes Vikings, Salford City Reds and The RFL) manager (England Schools, Great Britain Academy, England, Wales, France, Russia and Serbia) and High-Performance consultant (Italy, Germany, Sale Sharks, Wakefield, Newcastle).

**David Grecic**<sup>2</sup> is a Professor in Sport, Health and Physical Activity at the University of Central Lancashire. His work in talent development spans both physical education and amateur / professional sport.

## Reviewer Comments

The authors reveal a complex web of factors which inter-play around the development of professional Rugby League, effecting key personnel in different ways. While this research concentrates on the Academy Manager, who is in a pivotal position for achieving success from the whole team, it is interesting to consider from this work, who is actually involved in the broader notion of 'team'. From the Board

member to groundsman, from business partners and media, there seems to be an important team ethos that is needed for success at a club, which somehow falls to the Academy Manager to pull together. Figure 1 in the text points to these roles and signals their various interests. Consequently, the researchers identify from their engaging data presentation, a range of thematic descriptions which allude to the roles and duties of the Academy Manager. These include being a *Cultural Architect*, *Succession Planner*, *Life Coach Mentor*, *Sports Craft Teacher*, and *Character Builder*. This is a daunting list of expectations upon the Academy Manager, teased out from extended observation and interview work in the rugby setting. While the Academy Manager may not be able to do all these things on his own, he has his ‘team’ around him, he does seemingly have to draw together the connections for these things to occur for the good of the players and their overall success / development. What is particularly commendable is the high level of data analysis being evidenced, and informed inferences by the researchers as rugby specialists, to explore the ‘real’ pressures in Rugby League talent development, i.e. from the ground upwards. This research points to some very interesting and important discoveries for this role and Coach Education more broadly.