



**Project Title:**

**Exploring the dynamics of the talent  
development environment in professional  
rugby academies**

**By**

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## Abstract

This thesis aims to investigate the factors that determine the impact that Academy Managers in Rugby League have upon the youth-to-senior transition of talent in an elite professional academy. Various methods, models, and processes for supporting national strategies have been identified in previous research, which has informed the success of an academy talent pathway. However, relatively little is known about how academies develop their players and coaching staff in these challenging professional environments. Therefore, this research further develops knowledge in this area, specifically concerning the growth and development of academy staff.

The actions of these Academy Managers and their key stakeholders are a major area of interest within this research project with explicit attention paid to those in charge of the day-to-day player-coach interactions, especially the Academy Manager. Talent development research to date has not yet determined the impact the Academy Manager has on these stakeholders and there remains a paucity of evidence on ‘the what, the how, and the why’ of their practice. Therefore, a more specific overview of the ‘talent development challenge’ needs to be provided. In short, the intricate, dynamic environments in which the Academy Manager exists and what they are working to achieve, will be described through a series of empirical studies illustrating how these are operationalised within the academy context. Various phased qualitative data collection methods were deployed in this investigation, allowing an exploration of the environment, the considerations, and the experiences of the stakeholders within the Academy Manager’s domain.

Critical Realism is adopted as the underpinning conceptual lens which in turn led the researcher to cross a threshold of understanding, by identifying with the concept of Embodied Pedagogy in physical decision-making, opening a new way of thinking around investigatory research. Notably, creating an innovative, cogent, and supportive bond between Embodied Pedagogy methods and the Critical Realism paradigm. Indeed, this research has been exploratory and aimed to develop and assess this theory-driven partnership by using methods, such as reflective narrative, narrative interviews, focus groups, case studies, and narrative inquiry, all of which elicit further understanding within the lived experiences and rich insights of the target demographic. In addition, these methods made evident some of the various barriers and enablers that influenced the agency in the Academy Manager’s daily interactions between the stakeholders and the environment.

The findings from this sequence of studies identified the need for a practical tool with structures that might better enable Academy Managers to recognise and deal with the mixed influences of the social milieu on informal learning. This resulted in the design of a new and groundbreaking multidimensional model called the **Talent Development Self-Navigation Framework** (TDSNF). National Governing Bodies and Academy Managers can use this new model to facilitate and encourage a critical approach to collaborative learning within an Academy workforce. Amongst the key findings, was a disconnect between the skills that Academy Managers require for the role and the reality of what they felt confident and competent in. Therefore, resources developed within the TDSNF tasks displayed results that were a positive social validation of the framework and that the associated tools have merit.

Looking to the future, discussing the bio-ecological role Academy Managers have in their environment is essential. This research yielded results that demonstrate it is imperative to examine the Academy Manager's interplay with the rest of the stakeholders from a pathway that needs perspective. Consequently, these Academy Managers will be able to offer more practical ways of presenting the Academy's foundational wants and the stakeholders' fundamental needs. These are relevant considerations for all people involved in the talent development system including the Academy's Chief Executives, National Coach Developers, National Academy Leads, and National Governing Bodies. The key messages around the impact of bespoke strategies on developing talent in a professional academy highlight the need to continue to explore these relationships.

The results of this research tentatively indicate how future research directions could assist professional clubs or governing bodies and academic institutions to work together to disseminate knowledge on relevant topics and theories in the development of an Academy Manager. The most obvious finding to emerge from this study is that Academy Managers (in Rugby League) can best learn to perform their difficult work of navigating the chaotic academy environment, while in parallel, helping to inform how National Governing Bodies might best optimise outcomes for their sporting communities.

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Special thanks to supervisors Professor Dave Grecic and Doctor Clive Palmer whom both had an eye on my whole person. Dr Clive Palmer, having authored a postgraduate dissertation on professional coaching I can recall Clive's invitation to contribute to the Journal of Qualitative Research in Sports Studies, of which he is the Editor. Unbeknown to me at the time, this invitation and, from it, the subsequent publication would become perhaps the most pivotal moment in my professional development to date. Clive laid the foundations upon which I could discover my potential and find my academic voice. Professor David Grecic, for his talent for posing subjective questions, both in the initial stages and throughout my research, and his endless dedication to this project, for inspiring me to go beyond where I thought possible, and for being an exceptional academic role model.

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## **Glossary and abbreviations**

<b>AC</b>	Academy Coach
<b>AEDP</b>	Academy Ecological Development Programme
<b>AM</b>	Academy Manager
<b>AS</b>	Action Research
<b>CD</b>	Coach Developer
<b>CPD</b>	Continued Professional Development
<b>CR</b>	Critical Realism
<b>DNA</b>	Clubs Community and Sporting Reputation
<b>EP</b>	Embodied Pedagogy
<b>FA</b>	Framework Analysis
<b>HP</b>	High-Performance
<b>ILP</b>	Individual Learning Plan
<b>KPI</b>	Key Performance Indicators
<b>NGB</b>	National Governing Body
<b>RA</b>	Rugby Academy
<b>RFL</b>	Rugby Football League
<b>RFU</b>	Rugby Football Union
<b>RO</b>	Research Objectives
<b>SL</b>	Super League
<b>TD</b>	Talent Development
<b>TDE</b>	Talent Development Environment
<b>TDS</b>	Talent Development Systems
<b>TDSNF</b>	Talent Development Self-Navigation Framework
<b>TiD</b>	Talent Identification and Development
<b>TT</b>	Talent Transfer

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## List of publications and conference presentations during this study

### Publications

- Wilkinson, S. and Grecic, D. (2019) Talent Development in Professional Rugby League observations and analysis from a career in rugby's high-performance environment. *Journal of Qualitative Research in Sports Studies*, 13(1), 153-174.
- Wilkinson, S. and Grecic, D. (2020) An investigation into the talent development knowledge and practice of a rugby high-performance coaching team. *Journal of Qualitative Research in Sports Studies*, 14(1), 210-230.
- Wilkinson, S. and Grecic, D. (2021) A Realist Framework Analysis of Rugby Academy Managers' Duties and Roles: The ABCs and D's of Talent Development (Attitudes, Behaviours, Challenges...and Development needs). *Journal of Qualitative Research in Sports Studies*, 15(1), 29-56.
- Wilkinson, S. and Grecic, D. (2021) A case study exploration into the professional duties of a High-Performance Academy Manager: Creating an individualised learning plan using the TDSNQ framework, *Journal of Qualitative Research in Sports Studies*, 15 (1), 105-136.

### Conference presentations

- Bespoke Academy Staff Approaches. (2020) Presentation on the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> of January. International Conference for Embedding the Pathway. Weetwood Hall. Leeds.
- Wilkinson, S., G. (2021) *The Day I met Yoda on the Banks of the River Danube*. Qualitative Research Gallery: Infographic Collaboration: A Post-Graduate Research Symposium. School of Sport and Health Sciences, UCLan, Preston. [Online: March 2021].

## Preface

The drive and passion to embark on this project can be traced to my journey through professional sport, firstly as a player and coach accumulating over 40 years, secondly through my occupation as professional rugby league's first-ever head of youth performance and then as a talent development professional for various professional academies. Thirdly, via my experience in recruiting and organising a suitably qualified and experienced workforce to develop international teams, or as a professional coach and sports leadership developer. Finally in my current position as a Senior Lecturer in higher education. I often found myself working with some of the best players in the world and preparing coaches for life in an elite environment. Throughout these times, I was frequently and consistently involved in conversations with athletes about how they related to their coaches, family, friends, schools, jobs, or peers and the complex and dynamic interplay of these factors in their sporting environments. Etched into my memory are such young players, with enormous potential, who were recruited into academies, undoubtedly a prestigious milestone in their growth. During their journey, they thrived in the academy, but, strangely, many of their other relationships with the environmental tenets appeared to suffer.

The combination of games and training at junior clubs, representative commitments, academy, and scholarship responsibilities, and travelling to and from all these activities took its toll. Whilst watching these young players' lives away from sports take a decline, it was obvious to me that they were under tremendous amounts of pressure, from principal factors such as school homework, option choices, and career choices, there was no space for any deeper thinking about their futures away from the sport of rugby. Within the myriad of roles (mentor, coach, or academy manager) from which I am drawing these experiences, it seemed apparent to me that these players are disconnected from an environment that they not only loved but needed. As a result, these players expressed that they felt compelled to leave these elite rugby talent pathways altogether. Only through interventions, which ironically involved harmonising the stakeholders in the network which surrounded these athletes, did I manage to create an environment that resembled anything like an academy pathway that these young people craved and required. Deeper insights will be provided in the second chapter, a reflective narrative.

Throughout the course of this 40-year-journey of coaching and managing within elite sports as outlined above, I have spearheaded several initiatives that aimed to promote the development of talent within an academy setting by targeting the relationships between athletes and the primary stakeholders in their environments. As alluded to above, this involved collaboration with our senior coaching staff, schools, community clubs, and other environments which even included other sports. This was in part because I had recognised that despite creating strong systems for developing the sport-craft in players, the academy lacked a talent development (TD) model that addressed the previously highlighted problems. Incidentally, many of these practices evolved into a bespoke way for clubs to navigate the development of players through the complex environments by characterising these pathways. In my roles as head of youth performance at Leeds Rhinos, Widnes Vikings, and later with the National Governing Body (NGB), the Rugby Football League (RFL) as a National Performance Coach, I witnessed first-hand how the potential of athlete stakeholders, talent practitioners included, varied significantly. Some were well-resourced and able to contribute positively whilst others experienced barriers hindering their ability to support. Notably, the lead practitioners within these pathways, many of whom can be found in similar positions to me at one point in my journey, have been seeking guidance and support in ways that are accessible and specific to their needs. Therefore, it was logical for me to construct or find a sensible academy TD model with the player at its heart. It is this intersection of my experiences and reflections that inspired my initial research question.



## The organisation of the thesis

This thesis will be written in the form of a monograph. The decision to write a monograph will increase the connectivity between the chapters and was determined mainly by the nature of the research project, the evolution of embodied pedagogy nesting inside the paradigm of critical realism, the dynamic tasks that caused such emergent behaviours and the consolidation of the data collection all become aligned and consistent. Evident throughout the text is the pathological nature of the population within the academy environment who help dictate the coherent presentation of multiple studies. For example, coach development methods, an academy manager's leadership framework, and an academy development plan are all products of a new talent development environment (TDE) model, the **Talent Development Self-Navigation Framework (TDSNF)**, are now new agents of change thanks to their diligent involvement.

This thesis comprises of seven chapters, five of which are described as empirical research projects. These studies address each of the thesis' objectives in sequential order. A more detailed account of the research philosophy is given in **chapter one**, which explores many research theories and frameworks to help describe the global view on TDE in a variety of sports and other high-performance domains. It discusses the professional duties of the AM and their coaching workforce and how they apply these duties across the player pathways, locally, regionally, nationally, and internationally. Consequently, these are then matched against the research paradigm of Critical Realism (CR). Furthermore, the implications of both informal and formal learning are provided throughout chapter one, where the research philosophy binds the different projects together. **Chapter two** then provides both an overview and discussion sections on the overarching traditional views held in the field of TD in not only a rugby league academy but considers how it connects to sport in general. Specifically examined are the practitioners who work with the players and who eventually become central to the chapter, such as the AM and their coaching workforce.

Chapter two is a series of rich personal reflections illustrating how these areas are brought to life in a professional academy based on my own experiences, transpiring in different landscapes on what is expected nationally and what happens on the ground, day-to-day within clubs, between theory and practice and the glaring lack of appropriate support for those who lead in this domain. **Chapter three** then concludes with a new professional academy TD-specific framework which can guide and support those who

operate within the academy environments. At this point, a formulative set of methods to qualify any emerging themes is developed, which in turn informs a rationale for the direction of travel, and the methodology of the subsequent chapters within this thesis is then established.

**Chapter four** investigates the TDE within the transition stage of a professional academy to explore the knowledge and application of best practice concepts by the academy coaching workforce that operates specifically with academy players to facilitate a transition to the first team playing squads within two comparable sports (Rugby League and Union). The research methods for this chapter needed to be accepting of the human experiences and perceptions of the academy workforce, along with embracing stakeholder experiences and perceptions across the entire club (including senior staff, and bottom-end volunteer pathway coaches). To help navigate this diverse population a focus group was established to fully explore their academy TDE perceptions and experiences in a deeper way. A series of TD workshops presented a range of recognised academic theories and concepts which were analysed thematically. While the participant's understanding of the experiences and perceptions of the academy staff helped meet the research aims, it also converted and evaluated the reflections into action to resolve the problem (Smith, 2001; 2011). These findings suggest that those currently working in a professional academy's TD transition stages have a series of 'gaps' in their theory to practice which are limiting the successful creation and operation of the most conducive pathway for their players.

This exploration demonstrates a desire to generate shared knowledge and behaviours to develop recommendations for their professional development (e.g., academy manager education/development) relating to the generated themes of *organisational connectivity, philosophical alignment, psycho-social nurturing, workforce development and legacy building* which are now known as the professional duties of an AM. It was apparent by recognising the fundamental role that education and training have in any aspiration to create effective TDE and that the over-arching responsibility the AM has in how best to proceed and fill the gaps, not just within this transition stage but throughout the talent pathway.

The focus group exercise was the pivotal point, highlighting where the academy coaching team and manager were being challenged to play across many stages of the club's pathway, not just within the transition point for which they had initially been employed. Indeed, during the workshops, the AM commented on his evolving role in the

club and recognised that he would be the one tasked with creating and developing an effective TDE to ensure a positive transition for all the club's players. Furthermore, exploring and understanding the connections with other similar professionals for additional support and advice on how best to implement a bespoke model for his club guided the research in the next chapter.

Chapter four sought to explore the knowledge and application of best practice concepts as well as to identify potential gaps in provision and related development needs for Academy Managers. The TD Helix in chapter three provided the realist context by which to explore AM's attitudes, behaviours, and challenges when operating in this domain which was analysed against this theoretical framework. The findings uncovered 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*. Taken together, including the key stakeholders' understanding of what works well for TD at a national level, this makes quite a daunting task for even the most experienced AM. Furthermore, these results helped the investigation of what is frequently practiced by an AM involved in TD at the coal face of a professional academy.

The key agent in supporting the enablement of AM's success in performing these duties were their academy and senior coaches. Additionally, in line with the framework analysis (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 authenticity and the trustworthiness of the results are stronger because the analysis is conducted in a collaborative manner (Argyris and Schon, 1991) between myself and my supervisor. Furthermore, **chapter five (parts 1 and 2)** progressed these findings by highlighting the AM's developmental needs and how bespoke support is essential if they are to successfully overcome the multiple challenges faced whilst performing their professional duties.

The significance of chapter four is in the insight it provides into the attitudes, behaviours, and challenges faced by the AM and it directly highlights the need for new AMs training protocols and programmes to be created and adopted by professional academies which will directly result in enhanced TDE in an academy as well as providing a template to inform many other talent pathways and sports. More importantly, it helps to uncover the important ecological context for any national or club educators who are aiming to enhance the skills, characteristics, and knowledge that AM's professional development relies upon.

The results from chapters three and four suggest the need for more long-term, systematic, and sustained methods to delve deeper into rich data captured within the practical expertise required of the AM to assist the development of academy coaches and their players. The construction of a bespoke club/organisation-specific model that encompasses how an AM orchestrates environmental relationships coordinates these interactions and develops their interdependencies will be of great interest within TD (see chapter five, parts 1 and 2). Furthermore, the analysis also identified various roles the AM has, such as player *psychosocial nurturing and the cultural, cross-cultural, and contextual aspects* within a club, which became the focus of chapter five. The qualitative data from chapters two, three, four, and later in chapter six provided many insights into the lack of balance (coherence or incoherence) between what is expected from the NGBs and what happens on the academy pathway.

A significant finding emerged that whilst it is suggested that the NGB education programme influences the coaches, it appears not to cater to the AM needs, or to be aligned to the club's needs and demands at different levels of the pathway. Reflecting on this and the subsequent need to evaluate the academy's foundational want and the AM's fundamental needs, this chapter addresses our RO3 which includes the design and construction of the **Talent Development Self-Navigation Framework** (the creation of a new TD Tool) that has the potential to uncover strategies to help formulate a bespoke educational plan for the academy and the AM.

In **chapter six**, the research project captured the AM in action by creating a climate that is consistent with interdisciplinary roles and the chaotic daily interactions with the academy pathway philosophy, club, or organisational culture (DNA), the National KPIs' and the academy workforce. The theories, perspectives, and designs employed in the tool's design (TDSNF) have been underpinned and guided by a certain ontology and epistemology (Crotty, 1998; MacDonald and Richardson, 2002). Such paradigms as *critical realism* (CR) and its bond with *embodied pedagogies* (EP) underpin the activities for data collection practices and can be attributed to the dominance of behavioural psychology as the subject's traditional disciplinary guide for the design of the tool (TDSNF) which is concluded in chapter four and five (part B).

Potentially, the delivery of a bespoke embodied academy professional development programme to the coaching staff with the AM acting as educators involves an intimate dialogue of bodies, gestures, physical demonstration, and even contact. In essence, it is how they interact daily and therefore a strong emphasis on what appear to be relatively

minor physical adjustments can make large differences to the AM's performance. Their influence and daily operation can be changed by minor adjustments made to the theme they are teaching to the coaching workforce.

Designing qualitative interviews needed to be conducted using methods of *embodied pedagogy* (EP) with the AMs who are key stakeholders on the academy pathway, to explore their perceptions of their professional duties-in-action (chapter six) and create a similar climate to their daily interactions with the academy environment and the rest of the workforce. Well-thought-out EP inquiry-based tasks, scenarios, prompts, and probes, help the stakeholders to accept that their interventions will only be successful under certain indeterminate conditions, as it is during their daily interactions. The findings presented in the earlier chapters provide important quantifiable insights that highlight positive and negative coherence or incoherence on the pathway that the NGB can utilise to further align the talent pathway. To meet RO4 of this thesis, **chapter seven** presents broader recommendations on further aligning the academy's pathway grounded in the findings of the studies in this thesis. This chapter also offers potential insights for other TDE system builders, which are presented in this chapter and during the design of the TDSNF.

The *Case Study* in chapter six presented results drawn out of a series of environmental EP inquiry-based tasks with an AM, where it is clear in national education systems that these professionals are not meeting their needs and require further development. Re-creating the everyday chaos within the AM daily interactions, also helped shape the direction of the research probes and more interestingly some solutions. Two of these solutions were to design and establish the *Academy Ecological Development Programme* (AEDP) and *Individual Learning Plans* (ILP) with bespoke delivery for the AM and have all become new agents of change.

Uncovering this new revolutionary framework with the perceptions, professional duties, and fundamental desires all in place and ready to be navigated by the AM and their workforce presented a new foundational change embedded in the domains of *Critical Realism* (Fletcher, 2016; 2017). The chapter highlights how EP inquiry-based tasks underpin a holistic approach to problem-solving by accepting the broader benefits of a meta-methodology that encompasses diverse ways of conducting empirical research, over a single method for collecting and analysing data (Erro-Garcés and Alfaro-Tanco, 2020). These in-depth collaborative interviews were used to gain detailed insight from AM's interactions with the stakeholders involved at the time of the case study and the

implementation phases of the new change agents which emerged from chapter six.

Photographs, charts, and activities used during this exploration were collected and recorded during the observations of the tasks. These were then printed and used with the permission of the participants. A fascinating new model emerged and was later refined to become a new agent of change, the '*Talent Development Self Navigation Framework*' (TDSNF) which was designed, developed, and used in this exploration. Prototypes of this model were presented at an international coaching conference 'England Talent Pathway (ETP)' on the 14<sup>th</sup> of January 2020 for peer review and dissemination. To remain consistent with the AM's role within the organisational culture on performance, talent transition, and development of the academy workforce become a paramount finding in this chapter. Chapters two, three, four, and six all highlighted the difficulty in managing coherence across the entire club talent pathway and that each member of staff will tend to have their own nuances or cultures, placing at risk any philosophical alignment. All these chapters displayed the AM as a cultural architect, their behaviours reflected through a mixture of relevant artefacts during the data collection such as stories, myths, historical instances, norms, standards, basic assumptions, fixed core values, principles, beliefs, ideals, and expectations (Cruickshank and Collins, 2012).

Considering recent interest in TD in professional academies (Rotheram and Collins, 2020), it is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore the impact that the AM is playing in shaping an academy environment. This thesis uncovered the importance of an AM's professional development as it is a vital component in the organisation's system and plays a key role in the recruitment and development of future professional players. Therefore, the need for a suitable educational framework has also been a part of my evolution throughout the completion of this PhD. It is easy to accuse AMs of operating in isolation from the rest of their context. However, this would be a narrow outlook that fails to acknowledge the diverse environments in which they must operate. These environments are composed of many different people with diverse sets of skills and experiences that must operate in unison to offer the robust support required within an elite setting.

As previously stated, my own experiences are included in these environments to bring to life the concepts discussed throughout this thesis. These environments include fully fledged professional High-Performance (HP) clubs during world championship successes as well as youth and senior international environments and competitions that

included a total of six World Cup campaigns. Also included are experiences in senior coaching roles within the development of five European Nations which aspired to increase their own TD standards. These roles inevitably shaped the development of the many different research project ideas which embody the tasks, the data collection, and the written text of this thesis.

At this point, it is worth explaining the term 'We' which I use interchangeably at different points during any group data collection. Because I played the role of facilitator during the data collection tasks, I found myself immersed within their interactions and discussion, my role within the group's tasks grew with the planned prompts and probes as the newly emerging themes gathered an obvious interest. I found myself helping with any discourse or confusion whilst taking care not to share solutions. Whilst discussing roles in High-Performance teams of staff, Reid *et al* (2004: 209) widened the views of such systems by stating that one of the key concepts of the systems approach is that of circular causality; that is, events are seen to be multicausal, multidetermined, and reciprocal rather than linear.

## Research aims and objectives

Reflecting on the concerns discussed in the previous section, addressing both the theoretical and applied need for further research, it made sense that the aim evolved into a need to ***explore the dynamics of the talent development environment in professional rugby academies***. To achieve this aim, an exploration into managing an elite TDE and the Academy Manager's professional development, develop into the following objectives of this thesis:

1. To identify the nature of the challenge for AMs involved in the development of young talent in a professional academy.
2. Explore the ingredients for a successful AM within a professional academy.
3. Critically investigate the interplay of the biopsychosocial pressures to empower and equip the individual with effective resources to navigate and negotiate these TD challenges for a professional AM.
4. Formulate a critical review of recommendations for future use of the TDSNF, future implications for NGBs, coach development, professional organisations, and further studies.

To establish these research objectives, I became immersed in all the projects to offer the readers a rich source of information that through its diversity will unravel a clear, consistent, and coherent picture of the group's emergent beliefs starting with the reflective narrative in chapter two. In the formulating and addressing of the aforementioned research objectives there are immediate tendencies to align with the basic ontological principle of critical realism, whereby phenomena are said to be constructed and in a constant state of revision (North, 2013a; 2013b; 2017), which is consistent with chaotic demands within a professional academy. Similarly, Forgasz's (2015) key research points out that the objectives of the research involved attempts to understand and interpret how AMs viewed and constructed the world around them. This adopted an interpretive epistemological approach to the research design, whereby the utilisation of a qualitative methodology was perhaps inevitable to sufficiently capture and examine the academy workforce's experiences, feelings, and attitudes (Bourdieu, 1990; Forgasz, 2015).



In making these methodological decisions, it is worth mentioning the generic limitations of the approach. For example, qualitative research often relies on smaller sample sizes to provide rich and subjective data, whereby depth is sought over breadth, and it is difficult to condense or reduce subjective interpretations to a “norm” (Whittemore *et al*, 2001). Therefore, the navigation of this thesis is qualitative, with a multiple-layered approach. A typical example is chapter three, which correlates a critical review of the transition between junior, youth, and senior squads within the Rugby Academies (RA), analysing a group of RA staff in operation, and the synthesis of TD needs for Academy staff on the ground. The critical investigation into the daily professional duties for the AMs were also appraised, their execution of these duties meant that a reflexive approach throughout the nuances of the research process (Fletcher, 2016; 2017; MacIntyre and Buck, 2008) is highly important. Specific methodological issues within the separate studies are highlighted throughout the relevant chapters.

## **The current context in Talent Development, Academy Manager and Academy Coach Education and Development**

Over the last decade, there have been many new TD initiatives, a good example being FIFAs most recent Talent Development Scheme or TDS (FIFA, 2022) which is in place to help promote talent development (TD) in high-performance sports, the collaboration between stakeholders such as players, their parents, schools, community clubs, separate governing bodies, and elite sport organisations. The AM and their coaching workforce involved in developing these talent identification (TiD), talent development (TD) and talent transfer (TT) programmes have been desperately calling for guidance to help create a bespoke ecological TD model. TD is a pertinent component of sports science and sports coaching, given the considerable influence it may have within the pursuit of excellence. Research has attempted to identify the detriments of a talented performance using testing procedures. However, many of these traditional approaches have been operationalised by mono-dimensional objective physical performance tests that do not inherently account for the multidimensional requisites of gameplay or even consider other intangible factors such as the psycho-social progress of the individual, which is essential in a professional sport such as rugby (either code).

In response, large-scale national coach education programmes have been developed by NGBs such as the RFL and RFU to help prepare an AM and their academy coaches (AC) for their role (Nelson and Cushion, 2006) in managing a professional academy environment and, once qualified, to enhance their further development. The RFL and RFU sport-specific courses operate at various levels, including well-defined content based on role descriptors, for example, the bottom-end pathway coaches (mostly volunteers) and top-end pathway coaches

(mostly professional), and typically take a competency-based training approach to coach development (Wright *et al*, 2007). Thus, for coaches to be deemed competent and ready to coach, they must be able to demonstrate a minimum level of technical proficiency and instructional aptitude in a prescribed manner (Abraham and Collins, 1998; Cushion *et al*, 2003). This is problematic when attempting to develop talent in an environment heavily influenced by its own unique sociocultural factors, values, and beliefs, and these successful performance team sports do share the same combination of physical, technical, and tactical elements. However, they all detect, identify, and develop their talent in diverse ways. For example, some clubs can nurture a physically late-developed junior to succeed against their physically superior counterparts by giving them additional technical and tactical skills; commonly referred to as a “compensation phenomenon” (Wallis and Lambert, 2015:187).

It is useful to know that longitudinal performance based upon one element of effective play such as physical dominance during pre-maturation will likely lead to an unsubstantiated and biased selection while other clubs may only target such attributes. Building this level of understanding within an AM and their coaching workforce sits outside any national coach education programmes. Such a disconnect from a club’s perception of TD can result in not only limited applied focus, but also the lack of organisational alignment and an inability to support performers in fulfilling their potential (Baker *et al*, 2018; Collins *et al*, 2018; Pankhurst *et al*, 2013). Consequently, reflecting this TD agenda, a great deal of the clubs’ informal coach development consists of indoctrinating their academy workforce with their ideological approach where the makeshift coach developers (which is traditionally the AM) direct what is to be learned and, it is assumed, academy coaches can acquire the concepts and skills they require before transferring and applying them effectively to the context in which they practice.

For the past twenty or so years, with the ambition of the NGB’s (The RFL) ideology, which is to develop England Internationals, each club’s bespoke TD Manager (AMs) must be able to connect and integrate with the national framework and provide talented young players with high-quality coaching, personal development training, synthesize with the clubs’ sociocultural factors and focused playing opportunities at the right time, for optimum transfer to their senior teams. Traditionally, the NGB’s provide a license for clubs to deliver and set their own KPI’s for TD and tended to align or form a subcategory to match the KPI for England Internationals, all of which is a consistent strategy for any centrally funded TD programmes (e.g., RFL, 2022). Crucially, this lack of understanding of a professional clubs’ perceptions of talent which is influenced by their succession and community reputation (club DNA) requires the utmost consideration and understanding to validate an academy license as they are essentially two different environments.

Considering the numerous questions about what AMs should do sitting within this discourse, what they should do to manage the disconnect, including how their talented players can be nurtured, and how to develop a successful workforce all evolve into the AM's foundational wants and their academy's fundamental needs. Specifically, what does a player they have identified require developing into both a senior professional and a future international? Additionally, what factors across AM's personal development can influence best practice? How can an NGB influence these factors to deliver the best programmes, particularly when both bottom-end and top-end pathway coaches (McCarthy *et al*, 2020; UK Sport and EIS, 2020) appear to resist formal educational opportunities and certifications, with the pursuance of a preference for informal and non-formal learning experiences that are influenced by their club's sociocultural factors (e.g., the club's community reputation or DNA)?

Perhaps, because of an AM's preference for informal development, there has been an increasing focus on the bespoke CPD aspects of learning. Coincidentally, this is unexplored in professional coaching literature. Most commonly, this entails an individual construction of knowledge through the direct experience of social practice and their interactions with others (Butterworth, 1992) rather than as a direct result of a formal educational process. Currently, a good example is that NGB's in both rugby codes recognise the importance of coach mentoring (Cushion, 2006; Nash, 2003), and mentoring schemes are formulated and delivered by NGB's outside of formal learning settings.

As a result, it appears that several pathway coaches and their AMs are not willing to be influenced to any significant degree by formal coach education and yet, are still deemed "competent" practitioners (Cushion, 2011). Furthermore, the literature suggests that coach development is complex, largely individualised, and in many cases serendipitous (Abraham *et al*, 2006; Cushion *et al*, 2003; Cushion *et al*, 2010). Historically, there is no research investigating the coaching education and development factors associated with TDE or academy pathways. Therefore, this thesis will have a pivotal role in the future of professional academies and their stakeholders. Taken together, with over thirty years of experience in these roles, I can conclude that the current system does not seem to be meeting the needs of the academy pathway personnel.

# Chapter 1: Research Philosophy

## 1.1. Introduction

The research paradigm of critical realism is a set of beliefs that dictates what should be studied, how that investigation should be conducted, and how the results should be interpreted (Archer 1995; Bhaskar, 1998a; Collier, 1994; Fletcher, 2016; 2017; Sayer, 1984). This thesis will adopt a critical realism (CR) paradigm to study a professional academy talent development environment (TDE), and more specifically the role the academy manager (AM) has in developing these high-performance environments. From a CR viewpoint, when examining the academy environment and how the AM improves this part of the professional pathway; important factors such as national sporting governance, the academy's reputation, the sport's specific rules, by-laws, and UK sport funding adherence, along with the sociocultural influences that bind these elements together at an ecological level, will all be considered and explored within this thesis.

The critical realism method provides a means to investigate the roles of the academy manager, who works in the talent development environment. Additionally, I will be using a multi-method design for each of the separate research projects to help recommend changes. The thesis then proceeds to a data analysis and synthesis process by collecting all the reflective artefacts left by these AMs. A good example of this is Chapter Three's narrative interviewing which is described in detail further below; collating data in this manner enables the triangulation of subjective information, as creating commonality and recurring themes is a matter of knowledge integration practice. Thus, bringing forth tensions around philosophy, methodology and my role as a researcher while managing what is collected. Therefore, using CR to enable knowledge integration in this way will engage these important tensions, such as my perceptions of the participants, the group's reactions to the tasks, the probes and the group's perception of each other's responses and comments will all become a little clearer, ease any conflict and increase the efficacy between the participants. This can only strengthen my approach to addressing the TDE problems by employing interdisciplinary collaboration between the AM, his academy coaches (AC), other academy practitioners and my data collection methods. Steelman and colleagues believe that conducting transdisciplinary research allows me to combine the knowledge gathered from these experts into one thick strand that can be used to solve many problems for the academy stakeholders (Steeleman *et al*, 2019). These stakeholders are, in this instance the academy managers, the academy coaches, (AC) and the strength and conditioning coaches.

To embrace potentially different worldviews, I must inhabit the academy environments and share the roles played out by its stakeholders (e.g., the academy manager, and academy coaches). The pragmatic aim here is to enable a mutual learning process between my data collection methods and the TDE stakeholders. In summary, the integration of the findings from each of the independent research projects will be the main cognitive challenge of this thesis (Jahn *et al.*, 2012). As the monographic thread evolves, this thesis will use inductive reasoning because this relies on patterns and trends emerging from the narrative accounts described by the participants. Once these trends are established, the emergent patterns will perpetuate logical reasoning by probing deeper and building a rapport during data collection tasks, which can then be examined as facts to conclude. The advantage of this inductive reasoning approach is that the conclusions drawn from these five independent research projects are more likely to be accurate if the original premises of the data collection methods are true. For example, if all stories, and artefacts that are drawn out of the data collection methods, especially from the reflective interviews, are analysed through appropriate reasoning then this will enhance the trustworthiness of the findings.

To recommend changes in the future, these five independent research projects need to be dependable; therefore, improving trustworthiness can be as simple as making adequate time to secure the integrity of the data collected, a point made by Braun and Clarke (2006). Therefore, attention will be paid by thematically analysing the participant's responses, reactions, views, opinions, knowledge, experiences, and values from a set of qualitative data methods such as the tasks, follow-up interviews and typologies. All provide enough detail so that I (the researcher), the participants and the reader fully understand the data's analysis. Piepiora *et al* (2021) describe the inductive reasoning theory as a stratified ontology which acknowledges that 'the way' is real. Once this 'way' is seen to be composed of real structures and mechanisms of the TDE, this 'way' can then seriously commit to the structures and mechanisms of its purpose. Which is, to link the thesis' independent projects, themes and stories together. To help capture the inductive reasoning, Radulescu and Vessey's (2008) Domains in Critical Realism will be used to navigate the real, the actual and the empirical domains of the academies and its stakeholders who operate within this TDE. In doing so, all three domains (see Figure 1, p32) will become stratified allowing the emergence of differentiated data findings and reflective stories, narratives and artefacts that affect the kind of ontological depth identified (Archer, 1998:110).

## 1.2. Adapting Radulescu and Vessey Conception of Critical Realism

Julian North's (2017) innovative critical realism study explores the philosophical foundations of sports coaching research, examining the often-implicit links between research process and practice, descriptions, and prescriptions. All of these will be perceived to be different between each of the seven academy managers, their stakeholders, and the professional environment in which they reside. Because our AM professional duties (see chapter three) are concerned with the nature of causation, agency, structure, and relations, and the implicit or explicit agencies they are operating with, then there can be no assumptions of traditional single-disciplinary accounts, such as those based on psychology or sociology, risking any oversimplifying of my understanding of coaching, the development of coaches or the development of academy players. Therefore, adapting Radulescu and Vessey's (2008) conception of critical realism whose structure seems the most logical to utilise as it represents a change process, and seeks to explain how change or reproduction takes place in social reality (i.e., the academy pathway). It highlights the concept of emergence in structures, culture, and agents which are all important areas in the space between the national sporting governance and what is delivered to the coaches and players on a daily is part of the AM's professional duties. While Radulescu and Vessey's (2008) structure is perhaps the most fundamental example of CR, its mediation by agents is essential to bringing about the change; and a club or organisation culture reflects the conditions under which any future changes can take place.

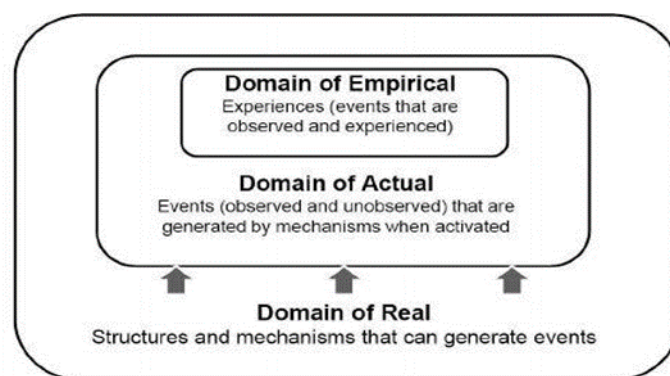
Paradigmatic considerations have led me to discussions of critical realism and how it is used to distinguish between the 'real' world and the 'observable' world (Fletcher, 2016; 2017). This paradigm also shaped my role as a researcher and is probably best described by Sayer (1984: 2000) when he explained the possible difference between the environments the AMs operate within is the nature of the world and the relationship between the world and its parts. A good example of this is the national sporting governance, the sport's rules, by-laws, and United Kingdom sports loyalty funding adherence; all of which affect the daily operations of the TDE, yet all sit furthest away from the AM daily delivery; the domain of real (see Figure 1, p32). According to CR, unobservable structures cause observable events and within the social world, they can be understood only with awareness of the structures that generate these events. AM's professional duties are embedded in the social environment, and much more consistent with the domains of empirical experiences (see Figure 1, p32), these embodied phenomena are formed within a historical, sociocultural tradition and consequently have moral or political meaning (Fleetwood, 2008). As such, it is important to bring an awareness of the nature of the bespoke TDE within professional academies because they remain one of the most controllable dimensions of the TD processes that ultimately shape the AMs themselves.

Some of the data collection methods (qualitative research narratives, empirical studies of focus groups, case studies, narrative interviewing) will become strands of the embedded pedagogy (EP), explored through a phenomenological lens, and the potential of EP for the study of an AM embodiment becomes clearer when any primary tasks are recalled. Within each chapter, there will be a section assessing which methods are most appropriate for different investigatory projects (Creswell, 2013; Sparks and Smith, 2014) within this thesis.

Researchers have been engaged in paradigm conflicts (Burke and Onwuegbuzie, 2004) regarding the superiority of either qualitative or quantitative research methods, with a perspective that a combination of these methods is emerging as dominant (Campbell and Stanley, 1963; Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Maxwell and Delaney, 2004). Interestingly, Howe (1988) advocates that some research questions are incompatible with certain methods. Moreover, it has been suggested that using one method cannot adequately answer some research questions (Greene and Caracelli, 1997). All of these are considered, particularly in Talent Identification and Talent Development Environments (Collins *et al*, 2018).

The benefit of this approach is that the critical realism philosophy of science is not only flexible to accommodate different approaches, but it also assumes that reality is composed of different levels (see Figure 1 below). This information will help capture the spaces between what happens at the delivery level within an academy but also how the AM guides and shapes the sport's national directives.

- The Domain of Real (how the sports are played globally and national governance)
- The Domain of Actual Events (junior, academy, professional, international duties)
- The Domain of Empirical Experiences (the club's sociocultural influence on daily delivery)



**Figure 1:** Raduescu and Vessey Domains of Critical Realism (2008)

None of these domains within Figure 1, nor what occurs with them, can be combined. This model (Figure 1, p32) is a cornerstone of the thesis analysis, as it implies that complex social phenomena, such as information needed, seeking and use, cannot be explained whilst operating on a singular domain, be it personal, cognitive, discursive, or socio-cultural (Raduescu and Vessey, 2008). This interdependency between the domains helped make the decision to choose the above framework, to adhere to recommendations made within contemporary literature, whilst unveiling useful information held by academy managers. Consequently, an interpretivist perspective is offered, subscribing to the idea that there are multiple realities, and multiple research positions through lived experiences and interactions with others (Cresswell, 2013; Sparks and Smith, 2014). confirming that the AMs have an important role in all three of CR's domains.

Using a combination of methods has been defined as an empirical inquiry that investigates a real-life phenomenon within its real-life context (Yin, 1989). In the context of the domains described by Raduescu and Vessey (2008), operating within all three of these can only enhance the interactions between myself and the participants. Additionally, within the interpretivist perspective, it is noted that the values held by the researcher may enhance the understanding of topics and should be reconciled (Lincoln *et al*, 2011) between the personal, cognitive, discursive, or socio-cultural, therefore preventing any divergence from the thesis aims.

In the scope of this thesis, in taking a critical realist position, there is the assumption that there are no barriers to producing knowledge about the professional academy world. What can be observed in the AM's world, is the physicality of the bodies of the players coached and managed in these pathways, and how the AM orchestrates his staff and stakeholders as it enabled me to access the production of truthful knowledge, neutrally and objectively. As Connell (1995:51) phrases it: 'There is an irreducible bodily dimension in experience and practice; the sweat cannot be excluded.' Given the centrality of the body within sports, and in particular a professional rugby academy, it is surprising that, with some notable exceptions, relatively little use has been made explicitly of phenomenological approaches within sports-related studies (Allen-Collinson, 2009). Critical realism has only recently been applied in the field of sports coaching (North, 2013a; 2013b; 2017), which offers a set of meta-theoretical assumptions (e.g., emergence, ontological depth, and causal theory) that can provide a novel contribution to understanding the influence of practitioners (Elder-Vass, 2010).

Consequently, critical realism acknowledges that the data collection is living and breathing, new agents emerge within the empirical domain, and knowledge production from the tasks is



theory dependent. Here, meaning and discourse become important, but at the same time, they are not the only things that exist. This post-positivist approach encourages me to consider meaning and discourse but goes further to look at causes, social structures, and the impact of discourse. This also provides a stance on embodied pedagogy tasks to enhance data collection methods, as the embodiment here incorporates conceptions of the AMs and stakeholders' bodies in action which are socially and historically located, socially related and interacting from structural standpoints (Husserl, 1931) within the domain of empirical experiences. A real-life example of this would be a discussion between the AM and their staff about TiD of under-fourteen players, particularly, grading future international players or maybe a consideration that they are not future international players; while they are recruiting for their club's succession plan yet have a directive from the NGB to ensure they are potentially a future international. Historically these discussions can become animated.

The benefit of taking CR with the EP tasks approach is that it can adopt an ontological and epistemological view that reality can be objectively measured and understood through the application of scientific methods which removes influence from the project lead. However, in the context of this study, the epistemological stance deals with knowledge, its nature, source, and legitimacy (Giacobbi *et al*, 2005a; Jones, 2014), to seek and apply more embodied pedagogical activities that allow for the extraction of these natural insights. In summary, critical realism (Fletcher, 2016) drives the philosophy behind this thesis towards a powerful method of retroductive reasoning (Bhaskar, 1998b), which will be a key component deployed to connect the data from the different projects.

During participants' discussions, there will always be some confusion before alignment to tasks and ultimately agreements. A typical example is assessing the aggressive pitch-side conduct of a senior coach (SC) when addressing one of the academy's players and how this behaviour is not aligned with the pathway's philosophy (see chapter six case study tasks). Werthner and Trudel's (2009) explanation for such idiosyncrasies described in the previous sentence encourages me to further explore how these variations between a senior coach's behaviour and an academy coach's development can influence their (AC) career path and understanding of the process of becoming an expert. From a constructivist view of learning, Jarvis (2006; 2007; 2009) argues that an individual learns in social situations which are experienced throughout life. Socialisation transforms a coach cognitively, emotively, or practically, and is integrated into the AM's career and way of life. Indeed, because of an AM's unique biographies and behaviours, they may be ready to learn from certain planned and unplanned experiences which are then built upon. Understanding how meaningful these episodic interactions are with their stakeholders within the domains of empirical experiences

may change how an AM thinks, feels and acts is valuable. This experience can catalyse subsequent long-term learning.

To philosophise the existence and nature of this approach, the research must ask questions about the AMs and their stakeholders' actions within the domain of empirical experiences. More specifically, what will emerge from the data collection tasks? What is real? and whether an objective reality exists independently of myself? An example would be, is the knowledge this research seeking, observable and measurable (objective), or is it something that is being experienced (subjective) at the time of the data collection? It is necessary here to clarify exactly what methods I will be using, qualitative research narratives, empirical studies of focus groups, framework thematic analysis, case studies and content analysis.

### **1.2.1. Trustworthiness**

To reinforce trustworthiness, the data collection and analysis processes will need to be addressed throughout the programme of study. Therefore, within the following section, I report on trustworthiness, and the issues associated with the main data collection and analysis methods used in this thesis and explain how these will be addressed. The question of how to evaluate reliability and trustworthiness remains a considerable challenge for qualitative research. Even so, I chose to pursue the issue of embodied pedagogy (EP) during data collection. The motivation for this section of the research was multi-layered, as inspiration came from some personal embodied, emotional experiences as a professional coach, coach educator and professional player. Potrac *et al*, (2013) highlighted that while individuals often varied in duration, intensity and connection, their emotions such as joy, pride, guilt, and anger remain consistent. To date, a constant companion in my respective coaching and sporting career.

### **1.2.2. Personal Influences**

Having considered the influence of research paradigms, models, and perspectives I include my own experiences that will influence my role as a researcher and academy manager. My professional sporting life started in 1978 and has continued up to the present day as I prepare the Serbian National Team for the 2022 European Nations Cup and as Head of Salford Red Devils Academy. This life journey has immersed me in different roles that have involved helping as many individuals as possible through multidisciplinary approaches. This immersion has led me to what I see as a contrast between the practicality of coaching and performing in

these environments. More so, the abstract, thematic explanations of what coaching and performing are or can be conceptualised to be. As a burgeoning awareness of generalised concepts and models of explanations intertwined with my accumulation of experience in professional sports, I noticed how different, naive and, in most cases, presumptuous much of coach development and education is within a professional sport. There is what I would call a disenfranchised culture in many of the current academy workforces, particularly within these studies (see chapter two). This is a result of the neglect of these vital aspects of contextual lived experiences.

### **1.3. Reflective Narrative**

To help identify with current and present-day practices of an AM, the past seems an ideal starting point. Therefore, a reflective narrative was written that allowed me to look back at incidents and changes in the three domains of CR. Exploring the three domains in a reflective narrative enabled me to recount experiences and analyse the deductive reasoning behind changes or lessons learnt. Pragmatically, this reflective critique will uncover findings that highlight potential solutions which in turn could advise on suggested resources and tools that will improve the TDE.

Quite often, as Lyle (2002) suggested, an experienced coaching environment or in this case, a professional academy workforce will use stories and past experiences to investigate current critical issues during the reflective process such as, winning and losing, players coping or failing, and the quality of the environment. To be clear, the point here is not to say that the current High-Performance (HP) leaders, AM practices, National Governing Bodies (NGB) programmes, expert coaches and mentors should be avoided, their reservoir of knowledge is essential for good decision-making and providing advice when supporting others (Nash and Sproule, 2009). Engaging the AMs or their academy workforce in such a reflective narrative will allow access to knowledge of their actions within the three domains in CR (Figure 1, p32) and offer possible answers to the challenges faced in the current professional academy environments. In doing so offer firm directions for actions and decision-making (Stelter, 2014: 3) in both the rugby academy environment and future research projects for this thesis.

#### **1.3.1. Narrative Inquiry**

Within chapter two, a personal narrative is provided to help place current talent development (TD) literature in the context of my professional experience for further investigation. Since

personal storytelling infuses biographical events and unique experiences into culturally available narrative templates (Smith, 2016), the narrative inquiry was selected as a suitable approach to study how academy managers make sense of their lives, careers, and the TDEs' social workforce interactions. Notwithstanding, the concept of expertise can be challenged by different researchers, while expertise in developing talent, sport-specific coaching and managing coaches are important aspects of excellence in any high-performance (HP) environment. For example, as Kaufman and Gregoire (2015) pointed out, one risk of being a seasoned professional is that they can become so entrenched in their point of view that they have trouble seeing other solutions.

Although these scholars (Grecic, 2017; Grecic and Palmer, 2013; Jenkins, 2018; Kaufman and Gregoire, 2015; Smith, 2016; Wilkinson, 2014) advocated the study of narratives from a relativist perspective, a realist perspective has also been implicated as a success in many biographical studies (Steensen, 2006). Therefore, compounding a realist perspective reaffirms my epistemological knowledge of this method. While this body of research also emphasises that social science research should aim to explain and not only describe the types of narratives, but also the discourses evident in the data. According to Shufutinsky (2020: 51), the trustworthiness of such a qualitative inquiry is heavily dependent on the interpretation of the narrator, personal perspectives are driven by cultural upbringing, life experiences, values, prior knowledge, and situational beliefs. All of these are bound to be introduced into the data during analysis and theory generation. A reasonable approach to tackling this issue would be to seek a critical friend's advice. For this thesis and convenience, my supervisor and director of studies provided this critical advice.

I was aware of the potential for confirmation bias and sought to establish questions to minimise such bias. Resolving the problem of bias is not simple. Evident through practice are well-thought-out structural methods that need to be developed between the 'storyteller' (narrator) and the researcher. One possible implication of this is that the narrator is immersed in both the past and the present. While being conscious of the use of their whole being in the intentional execution of their role, for effectiveness in whatever the current situation is presenting (Jamieson *et al*, 2010) this will be rationalised. To manage this flow between the past and the present accurately, it is important to constantly ask for comparisons between the past and the future depending on the narrator's response. This qualitative inquiry will therefore rely on the reflexivity of both the narrator and the researcher who are emphasising that the experiences and data exist in multiple realities, including those of the researcher, and their interpretation.

### 1.3.2. Narrative Interviewing

To bring to light the academy manager's knowledge and understanding, chapter three utilises narrative interviewing techniques within the semi-structured approaches. This interviewing method allows the AM to continue constructing their personal stories, as they rely on cultural narrative resources that offer specific plots for stories and real-life scripts that are prescriptive plots for how an "ideal" TDE should unfold, and what events and experiences are normatively expected in the different CR domains.

In general terms, this means the qualitative data collection process whereby stories are generated through an interview provides greater insights into the life of an AM, which helps to understand the participants, their meanings, their experiences, their success, disappointments, and frustrations. When it comes to dealing with participants such as AMs, this research project will rigorously follow ethical considerations. According to Cohen *et al*, (2007), interviews are considered an intrusion into respondents' private and in this case their professional lives regarding the level of sensitivity of questions asked. For all research projects outlined within this thesis, the appropriate ethical approval was granted (see Appendix A). Information sheets with a brief explanation of the study's nature and the participant's rights will be distributed along with consent forms that are project specific for study participants to sign.

For this thesis, expanding my understanding of narrative interviewing provided evidence about how an AM navigates their experiences, intentions, and meanings. Moreover, it helped in gathering material for making inferences about the types of meaningful work relevant for NGB leaders and academy coaches in the changing structural and ideological landscape of a professional academy (see chapters two and six). Nevertheless, this realist ontology and interpretive epistemology has not escaped criticism from governments, agencies, and academics because it is incredibly time-consuming. Additionally, perhaps they might not value this approach because their world revolves around statistics.

The data from chapter four supported the induction and deduction from chapter three's findings, (see Wilkinson and Grecic, 2020; 2021a; 2021b) which also functioned as retroduction which helped increase my confidence in the findings in both chapters. In essence, this dialectic approach almost becomes that of a critical friend, and in agreement with Appleton (2011), critical friends were the supervisory team and yet as colleagues were able to challenge and question my assumptions and interpretations in ways that would guide any critical reflections.

When discussing how to consider trustworthiness in research methods that include historical narratives, it has been outlined that the connectivity between the criteria, principles and techniques is vitally important (Gill *et al*, 2018). The term naturalistic refers to investigators studying every day or natural situations instead of intentionally manipulating variables in a research setting (Gill *et al*, 2018). For many organisational theorists, the naturalistic inquiry is a useful research approach in which insights are induced through the interpretation of evidence. This notion of trustworthiness is particularly relevant to narrative interviewing, as it stresses the importance of understanding not just 'what' is produced, but also 'how' it is produced, as assessments of what is plausible will change over time.

This naturalistic inquiry proposes that principles and techniques are connected, complementary, and reinforce one another. Gill *et al*, (2018) provide criteria of trustworthiness that appreciate the time and context which are more applicable to reflective historical sources, including examples from across the social sciences where scholars have practiced the principle or some aspect of each technique:

1. Credibility
2. Conformability
3. Dependability
4. Transferability

In following these criteria, I am seeking to support the participants' organisational response, examples, and stories in bringing their role in the construction of their narratives to the fore and opening their decisions up for research discussion.

#### **1.4. Focus Groups**

In chapter three, the focus groups (FG) with the High-Performance (HP) staff (e.g., AM, senior coaching staff, head of sports medicine and head of sports science) enhanced the process of validating the empirical model by making it both relevant and general within the professional academy context. This will be achieved by meaningful insights towards collecting and analysing opinions and critical reflections of the AMs, senior professional staff, and expert coaches. The qualitative material generated by the focus group discussion offers real-life narratives, stories and organisation artefacts that are typically associated with qualitative structural analysis. At this point and because I will use the word a lot, it is wise to describe what I mean by using the word artefact in a professional academy context. An artefact is defined as a man-made object that has some kind of cultural significance. Coaching-related

artefacts include national TiD and TDE processes, club or organisation policies, and procedures, as well as technologies such as coaching and playing systems, daily interactions with stakeholders, and the environments these experts have created over time (adapted from Quattrone *et al*, 2021).

The focus group method allows the diversely skilled experts to tell us about their TDE. The argument presented here is that such qualitative material if utilised within a broader realist framework of inquiry, has the potential to contribute to a better understanding of causal relations and processes operating within a professional academy and its historical connection to their talent development (TD) philosophy. Firstly, one of the main benefits of FG is that they offer an in-depth understanding of the participants' views. This helps uncover personal attitudes and beliefs that are consistent with reflective narrative findings, which other group research methods cannot replicate. In conclusion, a focus group can provide more insightful results. Though focus groups give rich information, there are disadvantages, the group represents the opinion of only a few individuals, some with strong leadership skills, some not and while they are qualitative in nature, the results are highly subjective to the interpretation of the people involved in the interviews.

Margaret Archer (2020) suggested that critical realism is a differentiated social world in the sense of recognising the existence of multi-determinations rather than a single deterministic trend. This is because societies are more open rather than closed systems, and the focus group intends to keep the system open to enable the participants to explore any of the TDE artefacts. Thus, enabling a positive correlation between participants' comments and how these individuals respond and interact within this 'society'. From a sociological stance, the FG becomes a microcosm of the real world under review. The FG has the potential to provide access to a range of opinions about questions of interest around the findings detailed in chapter two. By engaging in a realist analysis of the qualitative data emerging from the discussions, attempted to move beyond the interpretation of the CR categories to move towards a concrete conceptualisation of the underlying mechanisms at work (Larrain, 1979: 132).

The trustworthiness within this form of qualitative inquiry must be gained in the extent to which a measure, such as a focus group is accurate and replicable between each of the current participants (Rauf *et al*, 2014). Lingard and Kennedy (2010) expanded this understanding when describing FG, that the theme being explored by one FG could or may not concern another FG, of similar but different people, who would give similar answers or that FG often has problems with reliability. Limitations also include recognising during transcription, who has

contributed, with voice recognition questioning reliability factors such as background noise.

The thesis participants are similar in terms of roles but vastly different in terms of professional evolution and the management of their environments. The trustworthiness of the data will be enhanced by multiple layered coding. To expand on this member checking, the coding technique was adopted with other stakeholders in this research such as my supervisory team in scheduled meetings. Each reviewed the multiple sources of information from the FG. To ensure the reliability of the FG member's responses, a structured definition and typologies needed to be developed. Chioncel et al, (2003: 497) explained that an important and influential set of parameters on the FG interviews relate to the specific experiences and opinions drawn out of the previous chapters, such as the academy managers' professional duties (see chapters three and four).

### **1.5. Framework Analysis**

Critical realism author Julian North (2013a; 2013b; 2017) suggested that 'the nature of the object of the study determines the knowledge that the participants already have.' Examples of North's subjects included research problematics such as inner life, thoughts, emotions, perceptions, personal accounts, versions of events, personal narratives, situated interactions, discourses, ideal talk interactions, and ethnographically observed social orders. North's criteria are vital for this thesis to contribute to any suggested change in learning culture at a professional academy level. Furthermore, rendering these matters in an open inspection is dependent upon the involvement of other parties, such as a group of AMs listening and applying their active interpretation to subjective meanings, talking through interactions, events, and personal narratives.

To capture and then uncover how the AMs navigate the chaos of TDE is conceived as being fundamentally different from that of either grassroots or senior professional environments. A further explanation can be found in chapters two and three, where interesting results found that the acknowledgement of meaning arises from interactions between the HP staff, and therefore the AM's representations of human conduct are dependent upon a shared language and description (Hughes, 1980). If this is the case then Praetorius *et al*, (2018) recommended that narrative analysis is one of the best-known qualitative data analysis methods and techniques to help uncover any artefacts hidden in the professional duties of the AM. The narrative approach is a cornerstone to analysing different stories the participants create. In summary, the purpose is to understand how people form meaning in their lives as narratives (Pareto and Willermark, 2019).



The intention here is to adopt a 'Framework' Thematic Analysis approach to the data. Framework Analysis (FA) is an analysis method that is a series of analytical stages rather than a methodology and offers the flexibility to use both deductive and inductive methods (Byrne, 2022) which is required for this study given its aim and purpose. More specifically, this framework analysis is not to resolve the tensions the TDE naturally creates for the AM, but rather to make the interplay between epistemological and methodological concerns relating to the method visible to an inspection in their discussions and interactions. Then to illustrate this interplay, the findings will illustrate examples, new emerging themes and areas for further research, in particular the production of the FA. This type of applied research concentrates on finding solutions to an immediate practical problem (Ritchie and Spencer, 2002), and has a key role to play in providing insight, explanations, and theories of the social behaviour of the AMs.

Mapping and interpretation of any new themes or agents during the analysis are sifted and sorted into their core themes in preparation for describing and explaining findings, but also structuring future exploratory projects for this thesis. Guided by the original research aims, (outlined earlier in the organisation of the thesis section) easy-to-read charts can be used to help guide and map the range of an AM experience, as well as find associations and typologies within the data set. This thesis is used to map the AM's experiences, personal narratives, and discourses.

To help navigate the findings means conducting trustworthy qualitative research across contexts. As I mentioned earlier, FA trustworthiness is a concept that encompasses several dimensions, which include credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Bryman, 2016: 6) which is the most consistently aligned with the professional duties of these AMs. Methods to enhance credibility include prolonged engagement, triangulation, saturation, rapport building, iterative questioning, member checking, and an inclusive coding approach where all themes are coded to fit predetermined criteria and reflexivity (Shuttleworth, 2008); all key to ensuring that a subjective type of approach maintains trustworthiness. A case study approach was used for the next exploration to determine exactly how the AM affects the academy environment and its stakeholders.

## **1.6. Case Study**

The case study in chapter seven examines the impact of the Talent Development Self Navigation Framework (TDSNF) designed in conjunction with the AMs who participated in this thesis and is also underpinned by their professional daily interactions, detailed in chapter three

and utilised further in chapter four. The output of this research has been used in the development of an academy environment, training courses, and educational materials. For example, the EADP (Ecological Academy Development Plan) is designed and run by a professional organisation or, for bespoke training sessions for High-Performance (HP) leadership or Academy Managers (chapters six and seven). Additionally, the case study finding (Wilkinson and Grecic, 2021a) has been both published and disseminated to a larger consortium of fully professional clubs as lay summaries and suggested guidelines at an Academy Manager's National Conference in November 2020. The case is made that this research has been widely disseminated and has had a desirable impact on TDE practices.

This qualitative case study is guided by a critical realism position to enable me to explore the TDSNF and delivery of an academy manager within their talent development environment. The research goal took a different approach moving away from the complex problem to one that is grounded in a general theory of understanding to improve a given situation, such as evaluating the TDSNF with an AM operating inside the domain of empirical experiences. This pragmatic case study method is designed to create research that is practitioner-friendly, rigorous, and systematic. Robertson and Sibley (2018:27) described this method as responsive to practitioner needs, by directly linking to the actual high-performance practices of the AM via the individual case. This method will be based on understanding human experience to add and inform the literature within TDE and formal academy manager education in a fully professional setting.

Documents, observations, and conversations with the academy served as the data sources, with the coding of themes as the main form of data analysis strategy. I adopted a problem-based approach to learning and linked new knowledge to the AM's specific HP context. Qualitative case study research is characterised by researchers spending time within the environment of interest and using a series of tasks so they can remain in touch with the activities of the case and be continuously reflecting on and interpreting events (Baxter and Jack, 2008). Throughout this case study, I needed to record observations through reflections and ask others for their observations. To align with Stake's (1995) recommendations I prepared for narrative interviewing during a series of tasks, by ensuring multiple data collection methods are utilised.

To enhance this pragmatic philosophy, embodied pedagogical inquiry-based activities are used and designed to engage groups or individuals, along with supporting questions, prompts and probes. These tasks will be primarily focused on participants' perspectives of the TDSNF tasks, their perceived value of an approach to the TDE, underpinned by a pragmatic

philosophy, and the perceived value that the TDSNF and tasks could add to the TDE and stakeholders' development (such as academy managers, academy coaches, senior coaches, players, and parents).

### **1.6.1. Embodied Pedagogy Approach**

One of the main reasons for undertaking the embodied pedagogy approach to data collection methods is to recreate the real-life cognition that the participants face in the workplace, as well as to spell out effectively the decision that any interactions shape what the mind can do. This intentionally resembles the daily interactions they have with the academy workforce (volunteers and professional coaches). This endeavor will inspire collaboration between like-minded peers experiencing sophisticated discussions, flexibility, and variability within an EP task.

To track the use of Embodied Pedagogy (EP) in the data collection practices, this thesis examines further efforts to enact EP whilst identifying the challenges and benefits of these modes. Additionally, the efficacy of practical intelligence described by Caliskan and Baydar (2016) primarily depends on the original unprincipled engagement with a perceptual environment that can only be discovered by and become meaningful to an embodied agent and will reside in an adapted version of Radulescu and Vessey's (2008) domain of empirical experiences. Here, the thesis will draw upon multiple sources of evidence to justify the position of the research aims.

Embodied pedagogy is suitable particularly when the phenomenon to be studied contrasts with that of a controlled experiment and is characterised by a complexity that places it beyond the control of the author. More broadly, EP is described by Forgasz (2015: 116) as a "holistic approach to teaching and learning". According to MacIntyre and Buck (2008), EP redefines issues that relate to the mind, body and emotions. Therefore, in the context of this chapter, EP will help examine individual attempts to enact this procedure in the data collection practices allowing me to develop further the AM's understanding of the challenges and opportunities surrounding the EP tasks, themes, and potential outcomes. Specifically, Nguyen and Larson (2015: 337) describe three elements of EP that they draw upon to define and analyse the various applications of the concept in practice:

1. Bodily and spatial awareness of sensation and movement: In education, this might include, for example, focusing on physical classroom organisations or understanding how a teacher or learner's body language impacts teaching, learning and communication.
2. Unification of mind/body in learning: This refers to the attention that teachers pay to their emotions and bodily sensations as part of the information that makes up their pedagogical reasoning or upon which they draw when reflecting on experience.
3. The body's role as a sociocultural context in teaching: In teacher education, this might include guiding students to pay critical attention to how they read their students' bodies as the physical markers of gender, race, and sexuality.

These three elements of EP resonate throughout the studies within this thesis. By recognising my influence and practices as a coach developer I was enthusiastic about introducing them more explicitly as aspects of the processes for developing accurate data collection during these interactions. This is where 'I', the lead researcher, also functioned as a facilitator to help draw on my own sensory experiences. In the remaining chapters, I explore the possible difficulties and document the progress in bringing EPs into future practice, for the development of AMs. The studies within this thesis are conducted in a real-life context and thus have the potential to uncover new emerging themes, issues, and circumstances in which the findings are valid.

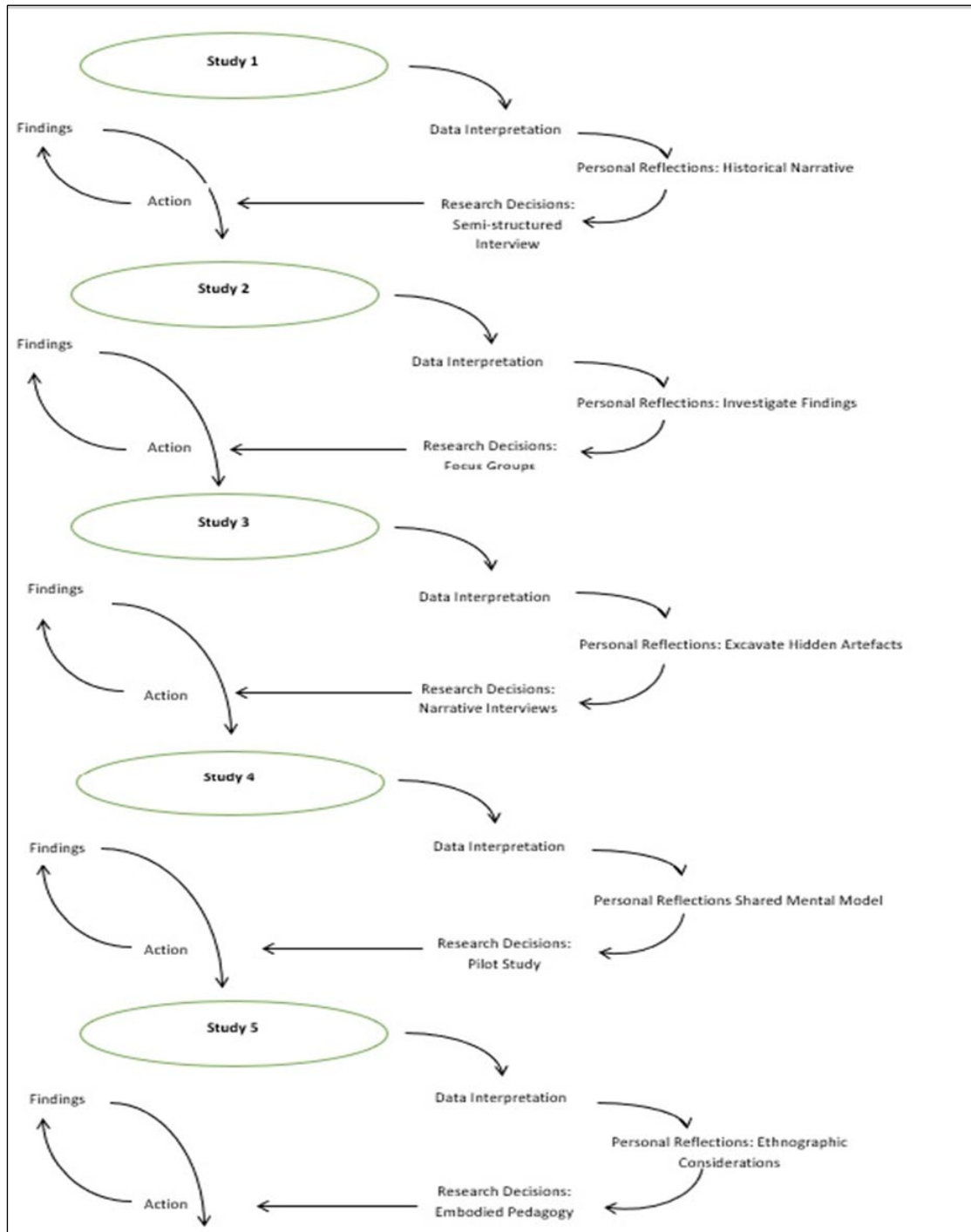
Operating from a non-traditional research paradigm (critical realism) may be perceived to be pushing the boundaries of established research 'acceptance', or what Bourdieu (1990: 20) defines as a coincidence of the extrinsic and intrinsic structures which provide the illusion of immediate understanding, characteristic of practical experience of the familiar world. This can be understood as a way of doing things and a way of understanding. Bourdieu (1990) alludes that the aforementioned Doxa is commonly found in all communities, as they create a set of practices and conceptual understanding that has become familiar and comfortable. These commonly held beliefs are then disseminated and transmitted within those communities. Notwithstanding this, Silverman and Marvasti (2008: 295) posit that research is of good quality when it satisfies the following criteria:

- a) It thinks theoretically through and with data.
- b) It develops empirically sound, reliable, and valid findings.
- c) It uses methods that are demonstrably appropriate to the research problem.
- d) Where possible, it contributes to practice and policy.

This research cannot reject such criteria if it aims to influence practice and policy. To reject the criteria would weaken the impact and outreach of such narrative studies. The AM has a pivotal role in achieving both RO1 and RO2, therefore the case study in chapter seven describes the synthesis and evaluation of the lifetime of HP sport and current AM practices. Uncovering a very personal and professional experience and clarifying story exploration, is achieved by challenging assumptions. Exploring an experienced AM leads to a natural and compelling insight by myself as the lead researcher and probed by the thesis supervisory team. Telling, sharing, and writing stories are prime human ways of understanding, communicating, and remembering. Finally, this thesis additionally draws from the spatial dispersion of research cases in both a professional academy and the population that manages them. Therefore, the aims, findings, new agents of change and recommendations explored in this thesis have the potential to affect a wider scope of sports and the professional development of academy pathway personnel within the United Kingdom.

In summary, this multi-method design will allow me to evaluate research findings based on their practical, social, and moral consequences, identifying that they are not value-free. This approach also allows for the research findings in this thesis to be translated into a language that is relevant for the specific stakeholders (Creswell *et al*, 2007). The findings can provide useful tools such as the TDSNF for the task of exploring an AM's development needs. The philosophy adopted for this thesis will enable the results to inform future observations and experiences, through the creation of a new knowledge domain. To do this AMs and NGBs need a practical framework, which is built upon throughout the following chapters.

## 1.7. Research schematic model



**Figure 2:** The development of the research process towards a PhD

One of the most well-known tools for assessing what I did, what I found, what I needed next and what I decided upon during the entire action research process is a schematic model (Figure 2). A major advantage of this schematic is that it helped me both evaluate the

effectiveness of my methods and articulate the nuances in-action, on-action and post analysis.

*Study 1* was a reflective narrative against TD concepts, where I found a disconnect from theory to practice which I went on to explore what this looks like in today's real-world context. To obtain further in-depth information on the current TDE quickly, *Study 2* used a focus group approach with the academy workforce, and to ensure that I reflected the research philosophy I developed tasks to help shape focus group interactions. The subsequent findings provided key areas of focus and potential gaps in knowledge. To gain a detailed understanding and application, I needed to dig deeper. Therefore, *Study 3* used in-depth interviews with several AMs against the framework of key elements from *Study 2* (the TD Helix) to ensure the reliability and validity this method provides. Results highlighted various roles and challenges to AMs practices as well as their developmental needs. In order to provide rounded, detailed illustrations of the findings led me to the development of resources for an intervention actioned through a pilot which became *Study 4*. Samples were analysed and an amended protocol was then put into action in a case study which became *Study 5*. The choice of activities were driven by the research philosophy and the importance of embodiment within the process. Reflections from the case study participant and myself led to the development of action planning documents and the recommendations for future research and practice.

The following section will provide a rational and academic underpinning to my reflective practice as a core competency in the process of becoming a successful researcher. In this thesis, the reflective commentaries' focus was to evaluate the influence of my own reflections. Participation in the data collection produced an effect through reflection on each of the different studies. To help manage the significance from each of the research projects, the design of the action research was supported through a schematic diagrammatic process, as this helped to illustrate the flow of process thinking. At this point it is worth mentioned that within the reflective commentaries I will loop back and forth between past, current and future studies in a hope to remain consistent with the spiral schematic.

The function of this schematic was developed to aid understanding about the organisation of different projects, the activities, the points of focus and the influence I had on the participants. A flow diagram seemed the best approach for this thesis. There are many models that could be considered in this regard, that can supplement the basic process of action research with other aspects of the study. In this study, I have taken and adapted a spiral model of action research as proposed by Kemmis and McTaggart (2004), as I felt that this model helps to depict a cyclical process that moves beyond the preliminary plan for change. This spiral schematic also emphasises revisiting the initial plan and revision based on the initial cycle of

research.

This current model recognises that the research takes shape during data collection, as knowledge emerges from my own observations. As highlighted in the schematic, the need for my own reflections must be focused on situational understanding and implementation of action, initiated organically from real-time issues. The schematic design and mode of delivery supported my own social validity within the data collection process, the adherence, and reflection improvements required throughout the study. Moreover, the process of research with the initial reflections and conclusions became benchmarks for guiding the next research points of focus. This current spiral schematic emphasises the flexibility in planning, acting, and observing stages to allow the next project to be both connected and naturalistic.

There were several strengths of this schematic, including a suitable delivery format that enabled the identification of changes in the level of my own reflections, and the usefulness of recording participants reactions and perceptions as a self-reflective way to improve the data collection methods. For example, I must not be part of tasks and data collection or, as a fully qualified coach and successful talent development professional I cannot hint at knowing some of the solutions...such as, some of my thoughts I had to manage are, *Why have they (participants) never done this before? In all the courses they've been on, why is it they cannot see it? or this should really be an important part of their daily work.*

Considering these two influences, my own and the participants' responses; the knowledge formation that orders and organises the data collection environments is based on my experiences, instead of an objective or neutral reality. As I constructed knowledge, the interactions between the participants, the environment and myself, where communication, negotiation and meaning making become a collective developing knowledge, I developed a relationship with constructivism because I am actively engaged in a process of constructing knowledge based on the data collected in the research process.



## **Chapter 2: Talent development for a professional academy: observations and analysis from a career in rugby's high-performance environment**

### **Background and context**

Many research theories and frameworks have been proposed to describe the TDE in a variety of sports and other high-performance domains. None of these, however, have suitably described the context from my own experience in high-level rugby league during a career that has spanned 40 years as a professional player, club and international coach and talent manager and more recently as a consultant and researcher. This chapter concludes RO1 and in turn, helps set the scene for the rest of the thesis with its presentation of current TD literature concerning common features that have emerged from this domain. To identify the nature of the challenge for an AM involved in the development of talent at a professional academy, a series of personal reflections and then illustrations of how these areas are operationalised in rugby league based on my own experiences. What transpires is a clear mismatch between theory and practice and a glaring lack of appropriate support for those who lead in this domain. This chapter, therefore, proposes the need for a new talent development and rugby league-specific framework that can guide and support those who operate within the rugby league TDE, all key ingredients needed to establish RO2 and RO3.

### **2.1. Introduction**

TD is a well-researched topic in many high-performance domains. This is extremely evident too in high-performance sports (Abbott and Collins, 2004; Coutinho *et al*, 2016; Ford and Williams, 2012; Güllich, 2014; Johnson *et al*, 2016; Martindale *et al*, 2005; Wolfenden and Holt, 2005). Here, studies have attempted to explain the process in detail so that others can learn lessons to replicate its assumed success (Collins *et al*, 2016a; Hardy *et al*, 2017; Rees *et al*, 2016; Tucker and Collins, 2012). Such studies range from a focus on the personal characteristics of the individuals involved in the talent journey (Christensen, 2009; Collins *et al*, 2016b; Gledhill *et al*, 2017; Jones and Lavellee, 2008; Jones and Mahoney, 2014; Le Gall *et al*, 2010), models and frameworks to explain the journey (Bailey and Collins, 2013; Balyi *et al*, 2013; Côté and Vierimaa, 2014; Gagné, 2000; 2003; Gulbin *et al*, 2013), the transitions taking place (Alfermann and Stambulova, 2007; Stambulova, 2009a; Wylleman *et al*, 2004) and the environments required to support successful nurturing of those who have been identified as 'talented' (Davids *et al*, 2017; Henriksen *et al*, 2010; Larsen *et al*, 2012; 2013).

Improving the TD process is a critical focus area for a very large and diverse range of rugby league stakeholders. These range from the sport's National Governing Body - the Rugby Football League (RFL), elite professional clubs competing in the Super League (the sport's highest level of competition in the UK), right through to a plethora of grassroots amateur clubs, service areas, schools, colleges, universities, and related associations. Playing a pivotal role in this pathway are rugby league's elite academies (for 16 to 18-year-olds). All academy programmes seek to optimise the efficiency of their TD pathway, especially those with fewer resources that aim to maximise the development of their elite athletes to remain competitive. These academies are assessed in their ability to achieve this through a bespoke TD accreditation - The Academy Accreditation (RFL, 2017). The process is focused on three key areas: the quality of leadership and management (Academy Managers' ability to connect brand, cultures and playing methods to junior environments such as scholarship players, Embedding the pathway initiatives and primary rugby league strategies); how well academies meet the needs of players; and the delivery of the player development system (specifically, are players physically ready for senior teams?; do they have well-established techniques already pressure proofed?; a detailed game understanding, good decision-making skills; strong psychological profiles and a range of coping and confidence-supporting skills).

In recent years there is a growing research output emerging from the wider professional rugby environment (Hall *et al*, 2015; Ross *et al*, 2015; Rothwell *et al*, 2018; Smart *et al*, 2014; Taylor and Collins, 2019). Many generic TD models and ideas are still being utilised to guide professional practice in the sport. What follows is a brief review of the key generic TD features which have influenced the rugby environments within which I have operated. Personal reflections are then provided to analyse just how reflective is the reality confronted by those who work in this environment compared to the academic theories of best practice that are supposed to underpin it.

## **2.2. Methods**

Prior to the data collection, the study received ethical approval from the research ethics committee of the Director of Studies' institution. In consideration of the need for the research to be ethically sound, approval was granted from the Ethics Committee for Business, Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences (BAHSS) references number BHASS 557 FR on 14<sup>th</sup> May 2018 to carry out with the work intended for chapters two, three, four and six, (Appendix A). In line with university procedures, the details of each study were fully explained to all participants before commencement and their informed consent was gained before data collection commenced. In addition, UCLan protocols for data protection and data security were adhered

to throughout the study.

This chapter took its qualitative influence from Jenkins' (2018) paper *Collaborating with coaches and their teams in youth and collegiate sport in the US: An interview with Dr Andy Gilliam*. This chapter's idea found support from Sparks and Stewart's paper (2016) on the pedagogical value of personal narratives and built upon my previous work using qualitative research narratives (Grecic, 2017; Grecic and Palmer, 2013; Wilkinson, 2014). Although conversational interview research papers are published in sports (Pedersen, 2011; Zhu, 2018), Jenkins' paper adopted a staged interview, with distinct categories assigned, and was used to enable coaches, parents and sports performance practitioners to gain a better insight into Dr Gilliam's work and experiences so that learning could be taken. This methodology is not new in the TD domain, which this chapter has as its focus. Often retrospective interviews have been utilised to shed light on the athletes' path to sporting expertise (Côté *et al*, 1995; 2005; 2006; Diogo and Goncalves, 2014), and the coaching behaviours required from those working in this environment (Côté and Sedgwick, 2003). This chapter presents the findings of an interview between my second supervisor, himself a coaching practitioner who also works in TD and myself. The focus is on my own extensive experience from a life operating in this domain. These lived experiences presented as personal narratives provide a lucid counterpoint to the prominent academic research which introduces each category.

## **2.3. Talent Development Characteristics – The Highs and Lows**

### **2.3.1. The focus on players' attributes**

When considering the player's attributes that require a successful progression in professional sport, many sporting organisations have traditionally adopted a simple model allowing them to target the technical, tactical, physical, and mental developmental areas. Here, each area is profiled to determine the minimum desired and optimal standards that successful athletes in that particular sport should display (Gledhill *et al*, 2017; Hill *et al*, 2015). Sporting 'curricula' are created which can guide the coaches and athletes towards the 'best-fit' configuration of skills (English FA, 2019a; RFU, 2019). Within such models, physiological factors for performance are often at the forefront of thinking (Li *et al*, 2014), whilst physiological testing and understanding of athlete genetics are also being promoted to reduce some of the current uncertainty in Talent ID (Suppiah *et al*, 2015). In performance sport, many physical markers for successful progression have been identified (Higham *et al*, 2013; Hoare, 2000, Le Gall *et al*, 2010; Robertson *et al*, 2015), that are also adopted for recruitment and selection purposes.

Concerning mental skills, over 20 years ago, Côté, (1999) and Simonton (1999) both identified several desirable psychological characteristics for young athletes. These included the attitude, emotions, and desire to achieve success, as well as the ability for them to employ mental skills within their performance. Similarly, such attributes have been evidenced in guiding and supporting athletes during the transition (Collins and MacNamara, 2012; Larsen *et al*, 2012; MacNamara *et al*, 2008), and providing support for effective and stable performance (Abbott and Collins, 2004). The identification of skill transfer and performance attributes have been acknowledged within talent literature, specifically, the ability for individuals to evidence mental toughness after experiencing difficulties (Bullock *et al*, 2009; Vaeyens *et al*, 2009). Psychological characteristics in developing performance excellence, such as toughness and resilience, have also been identified due to their significance in recognising elite potential and certainly as potential indicators for future success (MacNamara *et al*, 2010; Van Yperen, 2009). Within rugby research, these psychological indicators have been related directly to the player's success and transition, whilst their lack therewith, contributes to their deselection and dropout (Cresswell and Eklund, 2006; Rothwell *et al*, 2018; Taylor and Collins, 2019).

Thankfully, the common 'four corner' model – technical, tactical, mental, and physical, (for example see – English FA, 2019b) has more recently evolved to encompass the social and personal skills required to support a more holistic view of athlete development (Henricksen and Stambulova, 2017; Wylleman and Rosier, 2016). Utilising Lerner's 5 C's of Positive Youth Development (Holt, 2008; Lerner *et al*, 2009) and research into player welfare (Anderson, 2011; Henry, 2013; Ivarsson *et al*, 2015), coach-athlete relationships (Kidman, 2005; Jowett 2005; 2007; Jowett and Poczwardowski, 2007), and career exit transitions (Alfreman and Stambulova, 2007) sporting organisations have moderated their 'core' focus by considering how their athletes' social and emotional intelligence can be developed alongside the more traditional player attributes.

**Question: How do professional clubs select and develop their players? What characteristics are they looking for?**

*Historically in the real world of professional rugby league, all professional academies have adopted what is globally known as the 'style of rugby' which they want to play in matches, and they look for players or look to develop players who can 'fit in' to this style. This style (which has usually emerged from years of socialisation into the culture of the club) forms the curriculum on which training sessions are planned and players' performances are measured against. The elements of the club's style of play usually include areas such as a sports craft criterion (techniques and tactics), positional needs, physical requirements, and current views on rugby leagues' mental skill standards.*

*This also evolves at intervals during the season, with new rugby-style videos being produced as a guide for practice showing clips of the players performing the skills correctly in each of the curriculum criteria. Interestingly, rarely personal dispositions and potential are accounted for, but often appear in discussions between certain coaches.*

*What clubs are looking for in a player and the expectation of players' attributes look completely different from club to club. Typically, coaches will provide compelling examples of how the players they have selected can easily adapt to the club's playing style and how they seem to easily 'buy-in' to the curriculum on offer. In reality, the players' acceptance may simply be due to a capital gains view and the attitude of 'I'll do that because the coach will pick me.'*

*Something else to consider is that although many clubs and organisations I have worked with have invested a great deal of time and resources into testing the physical capacities of their players this has often been delivered in a poorly considered manner for the needs of the sport and the player themselves. Some clubs confidently adhere to a battery of generic fitness tests and have a pre-conceived idea of the skills needed to excel, and some are still using a skill testing model such as passing 10m off the left hand and to the right or selecting players on height, and weight metrics. In some cases, not reflecting the demands of the sport. Additionally, many clubs pay lip service to the psychological and social development of players without putting any psycho-social development plan in place. Their curriculum or coaching method is just about guiding players to follow patterns or to comply with a style rather than become problem solvers in the game. Workshops on Grit, Growth Mindset and Resilience by sports psychologists do take place but often here players simply sit, listen, and get bored and there is little or no follow-up on the training field.*

### **2.3.2. Talent Management knowledge base**

Research identifies the critical role of leadership within the TD environment. Organisations may employ Performance Directors, Academy Managers, and Heads of Service (for example) to lead the development of their athletes and the increased performance of their organisation. Regardless of their titles, the people occupying these posts have a crucial impact on all areas of the sport's talent pathway in their role as performance leaders. Performance leadership has been defined 'as a process whereby an individual aims to influence a group of individuals to achieve a common goal' (Northouse, 2010: 3). Indeed, Thorpe and Holloway (2008: 88) outlined the general aims of performance leadership and management, which are 'to share understanding about what is to be achieved, to develop the capacity of people and the organization to achieve it, and to provide the support and guidance individuals and teams need to improve their performance'. In a sporting context, Fletcher and Arnold (2011) noted that these performance managers' duties commonly include the development of a vision, the management of operations, the leadership of people and the creation of a culture. These in

turn serve to shape the organisation's environment, expectations, behaviours, resources, recruitment, and deployment, as well as on-field playing style and subsequent performance evaluation.

With such a diverse range of knowledge and skills required to carry out their duties successfully many sporting leaders are ill-equipped to step into such high-pressured roles where their high-stakes decisions have massive implications for athletes and the careers of their staff (Cruickshank *et al*, 2014).

Research suggests that support is required in many diverse areas to help prepare and develop leaders in their roles. For example, helps in establishing an approach, understanding roles within the team, developing contextual awareness, enhancing personal skills, and strengthening relationships (Arnold *et al*, 2012). If rugby league academies are not mindful of the performance leader's needs the individuals tasked with such an important role could have a catastrophic impact on the club's talent pathway.

**Question: Who are the 'academy managers' in rugby, what do they need to know, and how do they gain such a role?**

*Heads of academies in rugby league are the academy managers of our sport. Most do have rich internal representations of how things should be handled when they are confronted with real-life complex coaching situations. However, where uncertainties exist concerning the given information, where a multitude of various behaviours can be exhibited, and where possible constraints might be presented within their new roles as academy managers, I've found that many leaders do not have the requisite abilities, experiences, or role frames to cope. Management process skills... human resources reviews, personnel audits... and identifying the skills required for success by the coaches and athletes is a key feature of their role but it is much more than this. To be precise, player and coach recruitment and their own personal development is a poorly resourced gap. When I've worked with many newly promoted academy managers, I've noticed a lack of succession planning regarding more experienced players nearing retirement, Academy coaches and support staff who will move on to bigger and better roles. I remember on many occasions this lack of succession planning, a lack of recognising potential gaps in the senior playing roster, had a negative impact on the club. For example, if a team might need a hooker... because of retirement... they weren't thinking about who is best around, where that player is now, how to attract them and where the next second, third and fourth best were in that position. Even if this conversation was taking place there was a complete lack of connectivity to the first team's visions, the organisation's long-term aims or how the identified players' disposition and personality were aligned to the historical representation of the club's archetype.*

*When I think about how my own professional development was supported by the Academy Managers, I would reflect that all the leaders I have worked for didn't spend any time understanding my own needs as a coach. They didn't or couldn't facilitate a plan to develop me, to expose me to challenges and experiences that would help me grow.*

*In my experience, the academy managers all seemed to appreciate the way coach education provided their staff with some basic grounding, with enough working knowledge to start their coaching, however, they lacked any kind of process model as a method of understanding the complexity of practice design and practice within the very different challenge that rugby league academies present. From my perspective, I don't think many of the leaders I encountered were ready for or well enough equipped for their roles. These leaders could have been the lynchpin of the club, the cultural architects driving their vision and mission, the life and blood of the club with influence at every level of performance. Instead, due to a lack of knowledge of the role and complexities of the Academy environment and how it is governed by the RFL they often left me feeling that I was being managed by people that didn't care, weren't knowledgeable enough and couldn't provide me with the challenge and the support I needed, and probably the catalysts from which I sought out my own development needs.*

### **2.3.3. Talent coaches' role frames and philosophy to practice**

There is a common assumption that coaches who bear the most influence on the day-to-day actions of athletes must be high-performing and experts in their roles. Much research has been undertaken to determine the knowledge and behaviour of such coaches (Abrahams *et al*, 2006; Cushion and Jones, 2001; Cushion *et al*, 2006; Lyle, 2002; Nelson *et al*, 2013). Despite the debate over the terminology used to describe them (what does the word 'expert' actually mean in high-performance sport?) the common features of practitioners who operate in the talent domain included a desire to facilitate learning, a commitment to long-term development, extremely high standards for both training and competition, a high ability to plan and deliver training sessions, and a high level of declarative and procedural coaching knowledge (Nash *et al*, 2011).

For a fuller debate on the coaching competencies and knowledge required to work at this level see Nash *et al*'s work (2012) on determining evidence-based criteria on which judgments of coaching expertise can be. What seems evident however is that to operate successfully at this level, talent coaches should constantly be critically reflecting on their practice, their impact on their athletes, and how they can make future improvements. To do this effectively, I must promote the importance of coaches' understanding of their role and scope of influence. Gilbert and Trudel note the importance of such role frames as coaches can use them to help them

interpret situations and make coaching decisions (Gilbert and Trudel, 2004). Bateson's (1972) analogy of a picture frame has been used to illustrate the idea of delimiting certain features of a situation, based on an individual's frame of reference; and this has been employed by Gilbert and Trudel (2004) and Schön (1983; 1987), to interpret how academy coaches frame their role considering dilemmas of practice. This is paramount - dilemmas of practice are the mechanism by which any reflection or engagement with experiential learning is triggered (Schön, 1983; Trudel and Gilbert, 2006). Indeed, Schön (1983) argues that role frames will filter information which is most salient to the practitioner, or in our case for these academy coaches to engage in unique problem-solving, but only the reframing of a situation through experimentation will develop their long-term personal growth.

**Question: What role frames do talent coaches adopt in rugby academies and how have you found their levels of knowledge and coaching philosophies?**

*In my experience the coaches I have worked alongside display many of the 'expert's' attributes such as clear role frames and detailed knowledge of the sport.... They have however demonstrated many under-developed areas. In particular, I've witnessed; a lack of reflective techniques to support decision making, an inability to fully understand integrated development methods, poor skills at facilitating change, for example fitting to a clubs' 'style' of play and a worrying lack of relationship management skills. They need more support in this area by being exposed to other fields that directly impact the environments and people they interact with. They need help to learn about how concepts from social psychology, organisational psychology, and anthropology which can all help them in their role.*

*Many Rugby League academy coaches I have worked with would quite rightly consider themselves an expert coach and take their TD role extremely seriously. In my opinion, the word 'expert' has become synonymous with the word 'professional coach' in this area of practice. Unfortunately becoming recognised as an 'expert' here requires much more than just the attributes listed by Nash and others. In rugby, you need to be an expert not only in learning but also through the socialization of what the sport, the club and the culture require of you. I've seen many 'expert' coaches fail due to their lack of being able to 'fit in'.*

*Of course, the ultimate goal for all academy coaches is player performance. This involves looking at something to improve, devising a plan, evaluating it and deciding whether it will work. Some become coaching innovators, starting to set the trends and pioneer new ways and methods of coaching within rugby league. One of the most important abilities however is reflective practice. Learning how to self-critique enhances the ability to judge the past, the present and even, in part, the future. For me, I believe this is vital for coaches to reflect on the success of any given training session, game or competition and a thread within academy coaches that is underdeveloped.*



*A common theme I have witnessed many times in coaches is their focus on identifying the importance of constantly trying to search for new information that could give them the edge and improve their practice. Unfortunately, though much of their previous development had come through such means as knowledge of the clubs' playing styles, reading books, encounters with sports scientists and other coaches and experiences outside sport but rarely was the historical evaluation that influenced the growth of the club within the game of rugby league.*

*Coaches should have the ability to identify areas of strength and weakness using evaluation tools and then adapt their evaluations in the form of specific goals, thus setting targets to achieve before the next training session, but this simply isn't happening. Dynamically linking sessions synoptically cannot be seen. Instead, everything is still delivered in silos with a complete lack of an integrated method between the coaches.*

Because the role of the coach significantly impacts upon the learning process for young players, all elements of this process are extremely important. How coaches develop trust with players, and how they can demonstrate empathy and care for their players is essential to support here. This should be part of any analysis of coaching behaviour and should be central to evaluating coach effectiveness. What is needed therefore is a type of systematic approach that can assist the sequencing and interrelated steps to improving the coaches' own coaching practice, thus a dynamic, organised, systematic and deliberate approach to improving their players.

#### **2.3.4. The talent pathway's organisation**

The multidimensional nature of talent requires purposeful and considered training provision and organisation (Henriksen *et al*, 2010b; Martindale *et al*, 2007). This process starts with the initial identification and recruitment of talented athletes and continues through many transitions into and out of professional sport (Alfremann and Stambulova, 2007; Stambulova, 2009). Current measures to assess talent identification and development (TID) however have been widely criticised in the application of understanding and acceptance of appropriate measures to predict talent (Baker *et al*, 2018; Collins *et al*, 2018). Specifically, Suppiah *et al* (2015) identified issues with current TID processes, noting anecdotal reports where Olympic athletes were overlooked for elite performance and associated TDE programmes based on TID assessment. Despite the importance of TID in the professional Rugby League, there remains a paucity of evidence that could help guide academy coaches. Certainly, the mechanisms that underpin TID are not fully understood by many academy coaches.

In addition to enhancing awareness of TID to start the pathway, any successful organisation must clearly understand how it will manage the transition between the various stages of an athlete's career. It must also recognise the valuable input stakeholders will have in the process, as well as how it will provide additional support within the academy pathway structure, such as education and training, and sports science support (Li *et al*, 2014). Academies also need to be clear on how they will provide multiple entries and exit points within their pathway, but they also need to appreciate the impact sometimes simple pure luck may have on the entire process. Indeed, Vaeyens *et al*, (2008) identified the effect chance can have on potential athletes, (and coaches) suggesting a help or hindrance approach. According to Bailey (2010), this is of great importance as unsuspecting good luck can act as a catalyst in sports participation and progression. This growing body of literature investigating talent transfer can improve the management of young academy players' careers and only enhance any sport's talent pathway.

**Question: How well organised and aligned have you found the rugby talent pathways within which you have worked?**

*In the current rugby league academies, player transitions are not a gradual well-planned process but rather the outcome of a scouting, trial game or any other selection event. There is a lack of connectivity within the pathway. Rarely do coaches meet and discuss what the club need, spend time discussing players' potential, what they've got and what they need, and look further than just putting a team out for an Academy game. Traditionally, the time spent on the pathway sits between 1-3 years depending on the entry, but the players and their academy manager don't always work together to negotiate challenges or provide the support needed to help the athlete both survive and then move on to the next environment. The players' success in coping is often subscribed to the belief that work on specific technical, tactical, mental, and physical performance domains are the means to best prepare the player for their role and navigate traditional issues around college, school or work commitments and the lack of available support from specialised coaches.*

*In my experience, the development of the total person is a high priority by many to support the transition from junior to senior level in high-performance sports. This is a complex process that involves a unique mix of genetic and environmental influences which at the moment are only occasionally considered by most clubs at a strategic level. Linking to some of the other talent factors discussed previously, without knowledge of the essential rugby league attributes such as the psychological characteristics and how these influence the development of young professionals it is extremely difficult to educate the senior rugby managers and CEOs that a growth mindset, grit and coping with the rigour of an elite environment will play pivotal roles in aiding their players' progression to the senior squads.*

*For a successful pathway to be created and managed the mental, physical, technical and tactical development initiatives programmed by academy managers are central. I have found however that many rugby league TDEs are not connected to organisational structure and aims. For this to happen will require a shift for the club and pathway from merely developing the players' competitive skills, to the total development of the person. This will support the humanistic coaching and holistic attributes needed to play at the senior level, but many organisations may not be aware of this imperative.*

### **2.3.5. The environment**

The success of performers and the development of athletes are often attributed to the environment in which they flourish (Suppiah *et al*, 2015). The TD environment (TDE) across performance domains is identified by Martindale *et al*, (2005) as a critical factor. It also highlighted the acknowledgement of contextual differences in performance (MacNamara and Collins, 2015). Ivarsson *et al*, (2015) evidenced the value of collaboration and harmony between the different environments the athlete finds themselves in as being key to their development. For example, the club, school, and home environments maintain similar values to provide security for athlete development.

Research by Abbott and Collins (2004), Durand-Bush and Salmela (2002), as well as Williams and Reilly (2000), noted the importance and the great extent to which the full range of social environments support athlete potential and retention in elite-level sports. The range and quality of social support can be a key factor in the success of the TDE (Burns *et al*, 2019; Knight *et al*, 2018). Suppiah *et al*, (2015) warn however that one must always consider what actual success is in TD, which is determined by a plethora of bio-psychosocial factors. This highlights the risk that any incompatibility between stakeholders such as the parents, peers, academy coaches, senior coaches or CEO beliefs could have on the TDE and the potential success of the TD process.

**Question: How have you generally found the environment in which you have worked in rugby league?**

**And... Would you say that your experience shows the talent environment needs to be a humanistic and holistic one? and is this what occurs in practice?**

*Yes, of course, that is vital. It will require a mind shift, but it is understood by the young coaches who are now entering this environment. Unfortunately, this isn't the norm now. Really.... some environments are toxic. If you were to go in you might see clashes between the Academy Manager and the Academy Head coach about operations,*

*player relationships etc. Sometimes players are brought in based on personal recommendations from ex-players, and friends of the manager without any sensible data gathering having taken place on the player. This caused conflict, 'why is he here?', resentment and further clashes.*

*The environment must be inclusive and holistic. There is a need to embrace all stakeholders such as parents, schools, and peer groups not just club employees. Clear consistent messages from significant others are very important for the players. There is a real need to manage this process through parent workshops such as with the 'Embed the Pathway' initiative, schoolteacher liaison meetings, individual development plans shared with everyone, and top-level support and leadership. Lots of support is required to best prepare the young players, for example, Mental Health support like with 'State of Mind', physical injury and rehab support, career transition support, financial advice, family support etc. This support needs to be the right support engineered by the academy manager so they can form an adaptive transitional period for the players who ultimately develop internal methods to match the variety of demands they will face. Simple things such as goal setting for their playing performance, developing career plans or meeting deadlines on their industry or educational projects can all be effective. Until recently these areas have received limited attention in rugby league pathways but are definitely needed.*

### **2.3.6. Promotion of positive relationships and social interactions**

Longitudinal TDE has also been associated with strong coach-athlete relationships, specifically during the latter stages of development (Li *et al*, 2014). Previous research dictating the extent to which coaches should acquire understanding through interaction and communication with players (Carlson, 2011; Henriksen *et al*, 2010a; Martindale *et al*, 2007) indicates that Rugby League academies should be supported and encouraged to maintain effective relationships within the delivery structure. Indeed, perceived pressures in TDE have been suggested to be resolved through effective communication and better relationships (Li *et al*, 2014).

Many theorists now promote a more caring emphasis within coaching practice in order to promote a more holistic development of the athlete (Dohsten and Barker- Ruchti, 2018; Purdy *et al*, 2016). Gilbert's 'Coaching with Care' (Gilbert, 2016), many new caring pedagogies (Velasquez *et al*, 2013), and Grecic's C.A.R.E curriculum (Grecic, 2017; Grecic and Ryan, 2018) include an explicit focus on developing emotional, relational and social competencies to enable athletes to not only survive but flourish and thrive in high-performance sporting domains (Brown *et al*, 2018; Knights *et al*, 2017). There is also an associated body of work that not only promotes positive psychology to support young athletes but also explicitly seeks to develop 'happiness' in them as an anchor for their careers and a counterpoint to the

pressures of being the main actor in sporting talent pathways (Carr, 2011; Mann and Narula, 2017; Narula, 2016; Seligman, 2012).

**Question: How would you describe how relationships are typically developed and managed in rugby academies?**

*Senior players, coaching staff and the historical brand of the clubs all help develop behaviours that form the boundaries of culture. But within those boundaries, it is vital to treat academy players well, and consistently. The academy has never been harder or more important to a club's future. Players dream of being a professional, often sacrificing their education or jobs in the hope to gain a contract for the senior team. Unfortunately, the reality is nothing like the dream these young players had. The physical and mental pressure, the challenge from older players who are fighting to keep their contracts as the new young batch of players enter their domain, is stifling. The developmental ethos of youth rugby, of friendship and understanding, disappears in the harsh reality of the professional sport. Pressure for results changes coaches' and support staff's actions and interactions. Players fall in line, afraid of speaking out. Often their love of the game subsides as does their mental well-being. Players hunt out escapes and sadly some intentionally give up, intentionally make clumsy choices or blame coaches for their non-selection. Ideally, the academy and club should embrace these individuals and put their well-being and happiness first. I don't see this happening very often. In reality, most players feel a sense of unsafety and that the doorway to selection will only open if your relationship with the coaching staff is based on you doing and saying what the coaches want to see and hear.*

*What's rarely mentioned or discussed amongst academy coaches is how to improve players' social and emotional skills. Yes, plenty is spoken about sports craft or mental states to play at the next level but not a player's ability to confidently hold conversations with a diverse range of people that they may meet during their career. The social and emotional development of young academy players is important to prepare for the next phases of life like a career, teammates, family, and relationships. Educating coaches on how to nurture and develop these social interactions are essential layers of the environment that I think are missing. Mental wellbeing should be as important as passing the ball. It all starts with teamwork which is an area all academy coaches have an abundance of knowledge about. Unfortunately planning these social interactions isn't as evident as their focus on the simple sports craft of rugby. Social and emotional skills are essential; communication, leadership, respect for others, fair play – abiding by the rules and laws, developing friendship bonds for life and positive psychological development are all cornerstones good professionals need. The more they care for their teammates, the more likely they are to care about, and attempt to understand, people in general. When players have understanding and empathy, they are more able they become to translate the world through someone else's viewpoint, not just their own. Done well, and nurtured by the coaches and the environment, these players have the potential to achieve great things*

## **2.4. Conclusion**

This chapter has presented the literature associated with the key features of the TDE as I have experienced them. Personal reflections have then uncovered deeper layers of professional practice and presented a very different picture of what one might presume is happening in Rugby League's talent pathway, specifically in the HP Academy stage. What is evident within the *Focus on Player Attributes, The Talent Manager's Knowledge Base, Talent Coaches' Role Frames, The Talent Pathway's Organisation, The Environment, and the Promotion of Positive Relationships and Social Interactions*, is that there appears a huge theory to practice gap by all concerned parties. These results explained the fact that both managing and developing these areas present the nature of the challenge for the AMs' (RO1). With such extremes evident between my own experiences and the best practice guidelines from generic sports literature and research, what can be done to bridge or at least reduce the knowledge-practice gap? It appears that the common agent of influence across all factors is the AMs who provide leadership, management, education, and direction of travel for their staff and players. It would be prudent therefore to start here.

## **2.5. Chapter Reflections**

What is crystal clear from these accounts is that the nature of the environment is extremely bespoke to the sport, the country and indeed the club or locality in which it exists. What is emerging is that perhaps a series of resources to shape and guide AMs and the decisions they make concerning each TD factor may provide a useful road map to guide their actions. It appears the nature of current support is too generic for clear application therefore a bespoke rugby league tool kit should be developed and shaped by the AMs themselves with the flexibility to be adapted to each club or person's specific needs.

### **2.5.1. Next Steps**

No previous study has explored these key ingredients of a successful AM within a professional academy (RO2) and more research is needed to understand the specific rugby league AM's role in more detail and the current demands, expectations, and pressures. From this, a gap analysis could be created to identify the areas requiring the greatest support as well as highlight the desired outcomes of such support. From here the exact nature and type of support, as well as what this would look like in practice, could be articulated and plans put in place to source, develop, or create any associated resources. Only then will professional rugby

academies have the bespoke leadership and management knowledge and understanding that they require. In doing so, they can begin to operate closer to their full potential and provide their people with the environment, expertise, and support that they deserve.

My knowledge of this environment informed the utilisation of the coach development workshop practices for optimal data collection experiences, in turn, this needs to be consistent with some of the strict NGB's KPI guidance for TD. By maintaining teaching and learning in acknowledgement of the AM's professional duties as an experiential notion to inscribe subjectivities. That is, the experiential expert is both a representation of the self (the researcher) as well as a mode of creation in the progress of an AM. In addition, this is contingent upon the environment and the context of the AMs when they are continuously and radically connected with "their world, with others, and with what we make of them" (Ellsworth, 2005: 4). This integration would examine the experience of learning about the narrators (AMs) performance and practices. This narrative inquiry can be considered fields of scholarship with their distinct histories and values; need to be drawn together and consider how AMs are constructed and understood in the context of personal development within a high-performance role.

The aforementioned also needs to encompass the traditions and cultures of the sport within the local, regional, national and international environments. The performance of these AMs throughout these domains must have an interdisciplinary field of inquiry that integrates concepts and research approaches from a wide range of fields, but they must embody such areas as culture, sociology, anthropology, and philosophy to fully identify with environmental factors and the actions needed to enable the AMs to thrive. Therefore, it seemed logical to align with a suggested paradigm of critical realism. Of course, designing tasks and workshops similar in nature to these 'real world domains' follow the practice that is the style of delivering traditional coach education, such as schooling, teaching, and learning which are among the most scripted that coaches know. Applying a narrative interviewing approach in this context, one might say that "educator" is a regulatory norm that operates to inscribe, constitute, and materialise certain peoples' professional duties, their bodies with the habits, behaviours, expectations, and powers expected of, and granted to, a rugby person but from a professional educator position or in this case myself as a primary investigator is explored and executed in the following chapter.

## 2.6. Chapter 2 reflexivity commentary

On the question of navigating between the past and the present, I found myself as the narrator explaining the everyday nuances such as: a where and when; a here and now; or there and then, to help the interviewer believe it would be wise not to judge my story (in this case my response) as anything but true. After all, they had just walked into specific parts of my real-life experiences, either good or bad. Consistent with Lingard (2015: 252), who highlighted three areas to maintain such intense conversations to position my research exploration as a compelling conversational turn, I reflect that my answers and narratives must do three things: 1) Identify a problem in the world that people are talking about, (2) Establish a gap in the current knowledge or thinking about the problem, and (3) Articulate a hook that convinces participants (in this case the interviewer) that this gap is of consequence. In fact, being able to examine my feelings, reactions, and motives toward the research aims helped influence what I said next or what I might think myself as a researcher during the future data collection events.

Balancing my reflections-in-action and reflection-on-action as a researcher (Munby, 1989) is clearly a powerful skill that can help to improve my understanding of why or what may need moderating from my behaviours in future research projects within this thesis. This advanced reflective skill helped me develop the ability to think about what I have done after I had done it, and to evaluate my reactions and outcomes. This additional information can enhance the subsequent research projects, planning my own research behaviours, accounting for my personality, professional reputation and positioning on certain sensitive issues developed into explicit knowledge. This knowledge-on-action allowed me to learn from the interactions during data collection and to plan for future improvements. For example, I can recall a sick feeling while answering the questions; I recalled getting into an argument that it caused irreparable damage to a relationship with a colleague, and he decided to leave. However, it is important that I probe my memories for clearer examples to my initial response, in a sense reflecting on my answer, checking my dialogue in preparation for the subsequent question. There were both uncomfortable memories and fond ones, which have clearly influenced this thesis. Furthermore, because the next chapter of the thesis was becoming clear during these interactions, I was revising future arguments and my research approach because of this practice. I resolved to ensure that I would be aware of the emotional impact of my questioning in the future studies.



## **Chapter 3: An investigation into the talent development knowledge and practice of a high-performance coaching team**

### **Background and context**

The second empirical study of this thesis brought about an investigation into TDE within the youth-to-pro transition of professional rugby. This chapter aims to investigate the interplay, knowledge, and application of appropriate concepts for the AM and coaching staff who work specifically with youth academy rugby players to facilitate the transition to the first team squads. Exploring how the key ingredients of successful AMs' (RO2) both empower and equip their players and staff with effective resources to help them navigate and negotiate the TD challenges (RO3) can play an important role in addressing the issue of support, training, and development of their workforce. A systematic understanding of how AMs contribute to stakeholder development is still lacking, therefore an investigation into chapter two's findings of *Focusing Player Attributes, Academy Managers' Knowledge Base, Talent Coach's Role Frames, The Talent Pathway's Organisation, The Environment, and the Promotion of Positive Relationships and Social Interactions* is vital to establish future studies (RO3 and RO4). Furthermore, up to now no detailed investigation has been done within this area of wider TD research.

Data was collected and analysed thematically. A series of workshops are delivered in order to present a range of recognised theories and concepts to participants. Then, a focus group was used to explore each TDE in more depth. Findings suggest that those currently working in professional rugby's TD transition stage have a series of gaps in their theory-to-practice translation which are limiting the successful creation and operation of TDEs most conducive for their players. These especially relate to the co-generated themes of *organisational connectivity, philosophical alignment, psycho-social nurturing, workforce development, and legacy building*. This chapter concludes by recognising the fundamental role that regular education and training for coaching staff has in any aspiration to create effective TDE (RO3). It also recognises the overarching responsibility that the AM has in how to best fill the gaps, not just within this transition stage but, also, throughout the whole talent pathway (RO4).

### 3.1. Introduction

TD is a popular subject for research in general (Bloom 1985; Ericsson, 2006; Gagnè 2000) and particularly in sports (Balyi 2002; Côté, 1999; MacDonald *et al*, 2006). The recent academic focus has moved towards the investigation of the environment in which the development processes take place (Henriksen *et al*, 2010; Larsson and Nyberg, 2017) and the specific life stage of the athlete (Alfermann and Stambulova, 2007; Wormhoudt *et al*, 2018). In the sport of rugby (union and league formats of the game), numerous studies have sought to expose the most impactful markers and practices by which players should be selected and developed to facilitate their transition from academy players to professionals (Cresswell and Eklund 2006; Hall *et al*, 2015; Hill *et al*, 2015; Jones and Mahoney, 2014; Rothwell *et al*, 2018). Unfortunately, research has also identified professional practice and player traits/characteristics that have a detrimental effect on this transition (Stambulova, 2009; Taylor and Collins 2019). Through a reflective personal narrative approach, chapter two demonstrated a clear disconnect between the TDE information available to coaches who operate in this domain. In this chapter, the findings presented the core tenet of TD research and compared how they were operationalised by the academy and first-team players, coaches, managers, and sport science performance support teams. In this context, the specific areas of TD identified were:

- A focus on players' attributes.
- Academy managers' knowledge base
- Talent coaches, role frames and philosophy to practice.
- Talent pathway organization.
- The environment (and how it is developed)
- Talent pathway professional's promotion of positive relationships and social interactions.

Chapter two's findings revealed that in each area I had experienced, there was a clear mismatch between how the theory was applied to practice by all those working within this context.

To investigate this phenomenon (theory-to-practice divide) in more detail, it was decided to purposefully target a professional rugby club in the North of England, and in particular the staff (Academy Manager, Coaches, and Sport Scientists) that have responsibility for the transition

of its players into professional rugby. In recognition of the various formal (qualifications) and informal personal development in members of this group would have undertaken (Cushion and Jones, 2001; Jenkins, 2018; Lyle 2002), a brainstorming TD workshop at a club was proposed to expose both the academy staff's shared mental models and individual differences in knowledge and experience within the group (Cushion *et al*, 2006). Here, I note that the coaching role in sports has been investigated extensively (Abraham *et al*, 2006) and therefore one must have made a conscious decision to explore the knowledge and understanding of the wider team that supports player development during the transition stage of their career (Stambulova, 2009). Of course, the AM's role in this context is also important to define. As the leader of the transition stage staff, they are ultimately responsible for defining the roles of those within the group and influencing them to achieve academy objectives.

Indeed, Burke *et al*, (2005) noted that an AM, defined as the pattern of behaviours expected of individuals in each social situation, is a structural and crucial component for effective function and performance in teams. The main purpose of a coach in a team's performance is, according to Lyle and Cushion (2017), to achieve competitive goals by influencing numerous performance variables. Therefore, a coach's ability to positively influence players and the team is critical for successful player development. This investigation was therefore focused not just on relevant declarative knowledge of the team and its application, but also on the roles, responsibilities, goals, and leadership methods adopted by the academy transition stage coaching team to best facilitate the successful player transition. Overall, these findings strengthen chapter two's recommendations.

### **3.2. Methods**

Prior to data collection, the study received ethical approval from the research ethics committee of the Director of Studies' institution. In consideration of the need for the research to be ethically sound, approval was granted from the Ethics Committee for Business, Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences (BAHSS) references number BHASS 557 FR on 14<sup>th</sup> May 2018 to carry out with the work intended for chapters two, three, four and six, (Appendix A). In line with university procedures, the details of each study were fully explained to all participants before commencement and their informed consent was gained before data collection commenced. In addition, UCLan protocols for data protection and data security were adhered to throughout the study.

A focus group was convened with the professional rugby club to dig deeper into the initial findings from chapter two. A total of eight transition-stage professionals were included. These

individuals included junior and senior academy coaches, first-team coaches, the Academy Manager, and sport science support staff who were employed by the club throughout the duration of this study. The focus group interview was selected as the most appropriate method to gain group insight into the phenomenon (Breen, 2006). Researchers (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2012; Smithson, 2000) adopted a participant-observer position to facilitate deeper debate and discussion around topics relevant to this study, and additionally to help the decision-making involved in taking up the participant-as-observer position rather than becoming too involved and influencing behaviours as would be the case if one was an observer-as-participant. Focus groups are widely accepted as appropriate in situations where the research is aiming to generate new ideas and/or examine current practices, both of which were the intentions of this study (Liampnttong, 2011; Stewart *et al*, 2007). In line with calls from Morgan (2015) for more innovative uses of focus group research, the decision to set up four repeat visits to the group to allow participants to reflect on concepts discussed and inform the direction of future meetings. Congruent with established focus group practices, I took on roles of facilitator and observer which required the recording of not just verbal input but a myriad of nuanced behaviours, such as body language and delivery tone and impact (Morgan, 1998).

Whilst focus groups are meant to enable rich, in-depth discussions (Tourangeau and Smith, 1996), they also pose potential issues as well. Some participants might be lethargic and dull while others are dynamic and involved. In this case, being careful to manage group interactions in a way that allowed all participants to have a voice without imposing personal views or ideas on the discussion was essential. Also being conscious that the context in which the group existed could be a limiting factor. The participants, who work closely together to support the athletes within the club, may find it stressful and challenging to discuss issues that are close to their hearts. In this case, it was often their professional practice, values, and beliefs. The context might also yield unwanted bias as subjects try to impress both myself and the group, or simply answer with what they perceive to be the socially acceptable response (Vaughn *et al*, 1996). Indeed, within this context, an unequal power dynamic is also present due to the inclusion of participants with different positions in the club's coaching and management hierarchy (Academy Manager, Lead coaches, Head of Sport Science, etc). Considering the above challenges, both creating and maintaining a supporting and safe environment in which participants could 'check and challenge' each other's views without the fear of repercussion was key. I designed some careful 'scene-setting' and introduction activities required to develop trust and rapport and establish the discussion protocols within the group.

### **3.2.1. Participants**

The project followed the influence of Staller (2021) and used purposeful sampling in order to select staff that operate within the transition stage. Convenience sampling was used to identify a professional rugby club known to the author. The club and participants were contacted before focus group meetings, supporting information was agreed and consent forms were signed. This was also an opportunity for the author to reacquaint themselves with the club and its staff, the procedures involved and to clarify the purpose of the study (Wagstaff *et al*, 2012). Primary inclusion criteria for the club staff reflected Erickson and Gratton's work (2007) which defined a high-performance professional as someone working with highly skilled athletes in a sports environment which focused primarily on outcomes. Specifically, this required participants to be employed full-time in the transition stage, be professionally qualified (Coaches, Analysts, Managers, Physiotherapists, Strength and Conditioners) and have a designated role in player support within this particular TD stage. All participants satisfied these criteria with all possessing over ten years of experience working in the transition stage in rugby. Input at this stage varied between participants but included dedicated coaching time (a combination of on-field practice sessions and off-field support such as leading footage of games reviews/previews, mental skills workshops), physical development sessions (strength and conditioning, rehabilitation, prehab), and individual/group planning activities. Institutional ethical approval was received before proceeding with this study. Grounded in an embodied approach that engaged the participants during workshops by utilising interactive and collaborative tasks allowed participants to develop a critical awareness of differences and shared experiences, connect everyday practices to larger power structures, and generate performative enactments of social transformation. This chapter is tremendously useful and will help the designing of future workshops, offering clear structures, meaningful goals, and critical outcomes that recast research as kinetic, personal, and deeply relational.

### **3.2.2. Procedure**

The focus groups took on a workshop approach, with activities to stimulate debate and consideration of the main themes identified in the previous research. A series of four repeat visits were scheduled and dates/times were agreed upon. Each workshop was introduced by the Academy Manager who stressed the value of the activity and the positive benefits it could bring to the club's overall coach training programme. Interestingly, the staff perceived these workshops as a collaborative starting point of their time together rather than being finite events

that they would move on from. More on this later.

One example of a workshop task I facilitated was 'The Transition Timeline'. Here, the group was asked to construct a pathway timeline to highlight the positioning and influences upon their transitional stage. The task was structured so that age-related concepts were linked across the separate age bands and environments (e.g., U14, U16, U18, Junior and Senior Academy, First Team). This timeline (with age bands) was pinned to the wall on flip chart paper with the participants instructed to fill post-it notes with essential attributes and needs of players/teams without consultation (passing, speed etc.). They then stuck these alongside the corresponding age band/environment on the timeline. Next, I provided an extended task where each age band/environment was split into four quadrants based on traditional thinking about positive player attributes such as technical, tactical, mental, and physical. The participants were asked to revisit their post-it notes and move them to the quadrant where they believed it was best placed. Then I led discussions to facilitate individual and group reflection. They were introduced to a variety of academic TD research and theories which had been applied in different environments. This was used as a tool to stimulate intra and inter-sports comparisons and prompt further group analysis and debate. All input and comments were recorded to capture the group's physical output from the timeline tasks.

Another example of a workshop task aimed to co-create rich data was 'Developing the Environment' task. This involved drawing a series of concentric circles on a whiteboard with participants prompted to fill in as many aspects of the TDE that they had, could or should influence. This task was designed to help participants discuss, share, and reflect on their unique and important roles and how each added value to the overall development of their players. Crafting diagrams, charts and pictures could consider rich possibilities for recreating their working conditions. Their collaborative performance is an ideal way to engage research questions and is an emergent practice that involves a series of tasks and compositional choices. Later, the importance of self-awareness was introduced as was the concept of increasing personal control over their behaviours. This task was used to get participants to think about their roles and interactions within the TDE as well as a prompt for them to consider how they were the architects in designing the transition stage TDE in which they operate. The expectancy-value theory was introduced here too in respect of how positive coaching behaviours can lead to increases in athlete enjoyment, self-esteem, and performance increases, as well as multiple dimensions of support for example, emotional, informational, tangible, and relational (Côte *et al*, 2014).

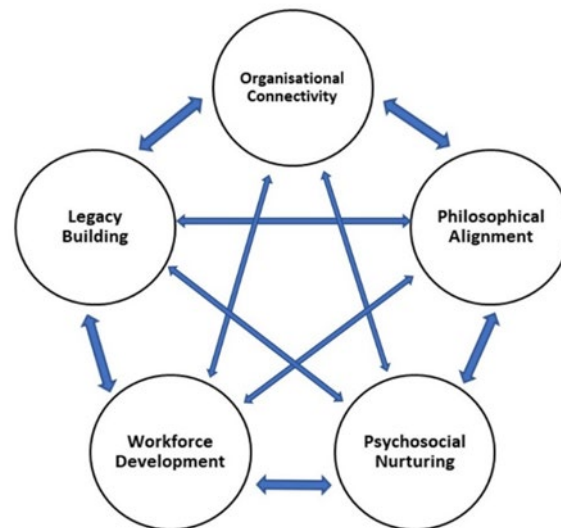
### 3.2.3. Data analysis

Thematic analysis (TA) was conducted on all data from each of the club workshops. Workshop task outputs e.g., whiteboard, flip chart, post-it, notes and diagrams were recorded at each event. These additional resources were utilised as a stimulus for group discussions rather than serving as primary data sources collected for content analysis. Focus group discussions on each task were recorded and transcribed verbatim. TA then took place in accordance with Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step protocol. Firstly, I familiarised myself with the data, reading and re-reading the focus group discussions. During this stage, interesting items were noted for later consideration. General codes were then allocated to capture and identify these interesting points from the data. Codes were then clustered into bigger groupings and the relationships between these clusters were considered. These larger groups were then reviewed and refined into the finalised themes with vivid examples selected that would best illustrate them in context to the original research aim and wider TDE literature, all of which are displayed in Figure 3 (p71).

Thematic Analysis (TA) was selected as the most appropriate analysis method as it provided me with a flexible means by which to describe, summarise and interpret the data. However, it is important to consider the reflexivity involved in this procedure. To answer the research question and dig deeper into the phenomenon of TDEs in professional rugby, I adopted a deductive, critical and constructivist lens by which to unpick and interpret what was going on at the club. In particular, the inductive nature of this chapter is built upon the TD categories identified in chapter two's findings and the workshop tasks consciously designed to elicit discussion around these topic areas. The critical lens resulted from the desire to draw meaning from the participants' responses rather than simply appreciating their experience of the environment, taken from my reflexive position concerning this phenomenon.

Finally, applying a critical realist's theoretical perspective to appreciate how TD topics are understood and framed by each of the respondents (Radulescu and Vessey, 2008). Upon reflection, the workshop tasks we designed worked effectively in stimulating areas of debate and uncovering layers of both individual and team understanding. In the subsequent discussions, I adopted the role of a critical friend and questioned both the teams' knowledge and professional practice. This highlighted many gaps but also identified valuable areas for development. Within any group task, the activity acknowledgement is made visible and moved to the centre of empirical experiences. The activity outcomes are perceived as inscribing

people’s relationships, engagement, and interpretation of multiple ways and histories of being, experiencing, and living, in the domain of CR experiences (Radulescu and Vessey, 2008). The results of this process and the themes actively generated can be seen in Figure 3 (p71). This group of staff was experienced and had worked with some of the best junior players in their region. Furthermore, these coaches had tremendous work experience within their different areas of expertise.



**Figure 3:** The Rugby Transition Helix, a thematic analysis of TD concepts & issues

### 3.3. Results

In this next section, the results of this study are discussed, and the findings analysed. The major categories co-generated from the focus group discussions are presented. Each category’s underlying organising concept is then described with select quotations provided to enable the reader to better appreciate the data that led to the final categories.

#### 3.3.1. Organisational connectivity

This theme encapsulates and reflects the holistic TDE theory that not only promotes clear linkages within the club from top to bottom, but also from the club to its external stakeholders. Here, issues were identified such as a lack of handover protocols between the different playing stages; the absence of the Director of Rugby’s input lower down the talent pathway; lack of knowledge about first-team culture and Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), varied contracts with feeder schools and universities, unclear working protocols between playing and non-



playing support teams, and a lack of engagement with the wider community and players' parents.

During the 'Developing the Environment' workshop task, the lack of integration and utilisation of parental support was identified as a major area of weakness. When reviewing the workshop's diagram, I noted the inclusion of the 'parents' label and probed deeper by asking about the team's experiences of working with parents and what consideration had they given to involving parents at the different stages of the pathway. A participant explained he had been at a club that made a conscious effort to do this, but also, others that tried to marginalise parental input,

*Yes, I mean, we need to see the other side of the coin as well, I'm not saying that is wrong or anything like that, to involve players' parents, but I have seen the two kinds of player development approaches... obviously, I knew which one, I sort of like, where I got the most success. One for the kids and it's the one where we share information with the people the players depend on the most... the mums and dads*

His colleague intervened. He had worked in other sports and noticed missing TD elements and support that he would like to implement at this club:

*I like little things like the resource pack for parents they have in rugby league, it included things like letting parents know why the coaches were getting players to speak to each other and making them watch and then feeding back to each other, erm, identifying what they thought was good and what they thought they could have improved. Erm... I thought that was just... that was great, and it got everyone to buy into it, erm, rather than saying... the voice of the coach just saying how this should be done. Certainly, informed parents on training approaches.*

Members of the group highlighted the prominent challenge for them with parents getting involved with many issues around games and training that they perceived as having a negative impact on their children and the programme and possibly controlling every aspect of their child's development, A coach from the group noted:

*I've had the conversation about what I do and how parents see it when I started here and it was like, look make sure you're harder on X this year than any other kid because I'd prefer Y parents not to come up to me and say that you're all favouring him because he played for England Academy... that sort of thing.*

The group also discussed how a general lack of knowledge around the game among parents and the developmental processes of the rugby staff often led to small issues being inflated. This ultimately affected their son's performance. A senior coach gave an example:

*Parents can see what we do as negative. I'll pull a player aside and tell him why I did it, you know, do parents need to know why? Yes... but they don't need to know how I delivered this, do they? I'll give a player a hard time in front of everyone but the reason I gave him a hard time, I'll tell him after, sort of thing, but I don't describe this to parents... often the player will agree and then like tonight, his mood has changed...I often think if his parents softened him up and criticised what I did.*

Another member gave a further example of this issue when he described his use of weekly 'best player awards' to motivate and reward his players:

*I have to be very careful that I don't favour anyone, giving our best players and stuff. You have got to be aware of that because the parents are so sensitive, they pick up on anything, their imagination runs wild and before you know it a divide between players can happen...(The coaching process) is a hard boundary, where you can be too tough on one or too supportive of another (player) but that's because they are all different, different things motivate them and it is these subtle coaching skills parents don't get.*

The participants even described situations when unhappy parents had taken things into their own hands and raised an issue with the club management. One coach recalled:

*I can remember a great session, despite a poor result and I pulled a player aside to discuss a matter before I even opened my mouth he asked if I had received a communication from his parents? I said no and asked why? He had been the victim of a bite and while he complained to me, they thought I was too harsh. He had some excessive leg pulling from his teammates that had upset him. I was immediately frustrated that the parents hadn't come to me with the concern rather than contacting (the Academy Manager). I took it personally too but in reflection, we have no clear structure around such issues, and I thought my 'come off or carry on' was enough for a rugby player...how do we address this?*

One participant intervened here too:

*This highlights how roles became muddled, yeah, the parent had justified the coach's poor behaviour and the coach explained the need to be unfair in their eyes. This instance highlights how coaches needed unconditional parental support which he did not receive due to the fact we don't speak to them...we need to keep the roles clear and separate in the coaching space and the only way to do this is by educating them (the parents).*

These examples of the group's interactions with parents and players highlight the importance of the club developing a holistic TDE that values, utilises and maximises the input of all stakeholders in the process. Also, discussions about the pathway timeline, transferring players

from one environment to another, and when exiting the club, confirmed a need for a complex and dynamic system that staff can call upon to quickly generate help in supporting them and/or the players as they cope with the multifaceted challenges, they are likely to face. Within this context described, selects, and outlines a task that involves a heightened awareness of the relations between the performed self, the performed character, and special relations. Using this data to experiment with this method and approach to the analysis, with the support of the reflective processes of the participants is embedded in the current pedagogical practice.

An organisation that can provide and promote support rapidly in response to any such challenge was a common request from the group. Much theory supports this need and offers suggestions of what such an environment would/should look like. Work by Martindale *et al*, (2005; 2007) emphasised the need for effective TDE's to provide systematic, planned, integrated, long-term focused, inclusive programmes which ensured those within it were consistently sending and receiving coherent messages of support. Henrikson *et al*, (2010a; 2017) suggests a TDE where all interactions between key figures in a player's athletic and non-athletic life are considered to have implications for the holistic development of that person and group. Meanwhile, the professional duties model (Figure 5, p92) of effective talent pathway management, based upon a club's philosophical congruence and actions, also emphasises many of this study's thematic cross-linkages, such as; the need for a clearly articulated vision and mission (Legacy Building), carefully aligned planning and operations (Organisational Connectivity), considered workforce education and deployment (Workforce Development/ Psychosocial Nurturing), and explicit evaluations against agreed performance outcomes (Philosophical Alignment).

### **3.3.2. Philosophical alignment**

This theme included clusters of data related to the different views, beliefs and models driving coaching and player development at different levels of the club. Issues were identified regarding the lack of consistent and openly communicated factors on which to base the club's talent pathway identification, recruitment, progress, and professional practice. There was evident confusion over the vision and mission of the club and how the transition stage connected with the developmental focus of the early pathway stages and the required performance outcomes of the first team squad. Discussions centred around what type of player and person each pathway stage would be seen as model examples of their work.

This debate focused on the attributes each stage sought to develop, and how these were built upon in later stages, such as future coaching programmes, other possible connections

between their creative practices, lived experiences, and the ongoing communal work of developing talent. Ideas on emerging generative lists prompt us to consider mental technical models, physical activities, fundamental wants, and personal passions as consequential staff performances that re-value the embodiment within the club's cultural and social terrains as critical spaces of learning and knowledge production for an AM.

These discussions highlighted a lack of a shared mental model across the pathway and emphasised the difficult position of this group of transition stage players as they try to navigate the path between the younger stages' creative and humanistic focus and the pragmatic, contrasting transactional model espoused by the first team's staff. One coach explained how he has to serve two 'masters' with how he coaches within different parts of the pathway:

*It is definitely the hard thing, it's going to be... getting people to have conversations with the hierarchy and stuff like that, it is probably the most difficult thing, coaching that way (Academy and below) is different to how we coach at first team and I have had these conversations and I do want to find like the balance between erm what is right and what is wrong in that sense, well what do they need, what do they want?*

Another member added:

*When I am implementing the senior coaching style, that is going to be different... yes, I need to stick to it but sometimes you get a little bit kind of scared in a way, I need to... well I know, but I need to get this line right, I need him to run this tactic because he's going to go over to the first team and I suppose yes that is my worry really erm coaching that way.*

A sports scientist in the group developed this theme further:

*It reflects on us too. If a player can't do what they (first team coaches) want they come back on us, 'what is this shit you've given us... they can't catch or run, what are you doing over there?*

A manager in the group joined in the discussion to support the work of his teammates:

*Yes, but if you just did what they want and need the players wouldn't develop as they do. They would just know one way and if that doesn't work for them, what next? So many wouldn't be playing for England now if that is all you did.*

Another member of the sports science support team aptly summarised the main issue felt by the entire team when he explained:

*It's easy for some of us. We know how strong, how fast, and how fit the player needs to be to get into the first team. You guys are working in the dark and the posts are always moving when new players get bought so maybe the first team needs to play a different way.*

The examples above relate to Rouse and Morris' (1985) work on the importance of shared mental models in teams. Here, it is obvious that the club coaches' ideas, values, and beliefs about player development need to integrate not only with each other but with those responsible for driving the first team's playing style, culture, and outcomes. Clarity is required on many aspects of the TD journey, from the markers selected to base player recruitment, selection, and deselection, through concepts of learning and practice design, to relationship management behaviours employed by all those in the pathway. In this specific context, where a player is moving up an age group or on to the first team, the selection is not without difficulty. Playing styles, philosophical alignment and luck all play a part. However, a philosophical statement that is aligned with the club's philosophy would be useful. It would force coaches to examine how well their behaviours align with the overall needs of the players and the TDE the club is striving to create. Philosophical alignment, therefore, links to other co-generated themes in so much as it should underpin the actions of those located at all levels in the organisation, offer a clear vision and mission for practice and drive not only the macro level planning of the clubs, but also the micro level relationships between players and coach. More on this final point a little later.

### **3.3.3. Psychosocial nurturing**

During 'The Four Quadrants' follow-up task in the timeline workshop, data highlighted a suggestion that there were large gaps in the teams' knowledge and appreciation of players' mental, tactical, and social skills. What became evident was a lack of bespoke training programmes systematically embedded into the players' development programme focusing on these areas. Great emphasis was evident on the physical and technical areas but, apparently, at the expense of a more holistic focus on their players' growth. Important areas seem to have been overlooked such as the 'soft skills' of relationship building, communication, and leadership. There was also an absence of cultural awareness of both the club and the first team environment to which the players were aspiring. These observations and concerns were voiced not just in respect of the players but of the coaches coming into the operation at all levels of the organisation as well.

During workshop discussions, the group was prompted to dig deeper into their understanding

and focus on their players' mental skill development. Discussions about players' self-organisation and the game model implemented during the transition questioned the need for more of a focus on creativity, resilience, and leadership. The collaborative task approach invited the academy workforce to extend metaphors of practice sessions and reveal ideas from their thoughts and past lives to strike a deep chord with their pedagogical growth around teaching young players about rugby. These seductive interactive tasks tap into a desire to embed these pedagogies that are creative, critical, performative, and communicative, and relationships that invite each staff member to become co-agents in dynamic teaching and learning processes that imagine and enact their normal working conditions. A junior academy coach responded first:

*Erm yes I think there is... this area (transition stage) does bring some like people to the fore with some developing as leaders, they would have picked up a lot of kind of, within the small sided games becoming like problem solving, you've seen who was the leaders out of the group and you can identify who they were and I think that only encouraged their confidence to take into games and when it did come to backs against the wall or it did get a bit tough, they were the ones that kind of like stood up and players sort of followed their lead, but yes so I think yes, that was definitely part of it.*

However other coaches intervened and questioned whether these things just happened or whether the team themselves facilitated their development. One senior member of the group mused:

*When do we (the coaching staff) ever get around to implementing this mental skills model that is directly connected to a game model? If we like how we want to play, we just do it.*

At this point, I probed: Do you have a mental skills model? I mean are you periodising your mental skills programme to coincide with your periodic training plan'? One senior academy coach responded:

*Not really. We run a goal setting workshop, they are linked together but there's not much transfer, I think if we can implement a model during practice, I think not only does it give players a better experience, but a bit also more enjoyment within the game which is important because if they're not enjoying it then they're not going to be sticking at it during games or even when training gets tough.*

Of course, psychological factors are incredibly important to athletes' development and research has identified the development of psychological skills as a determinant of elite performance. The work of Orlick and Partington (1998) identified psychological factors that distinguished successful athletes from their less successful counterparts, whilst Gould *et al*,

(2002) found that successful Olympic athletes were more committed, focused and engaged in extensive mental preparation than less successful performers. More recently, research by Aine McNamara and Dave Collins has proposed a Psychological Characteristics of Developing Excellence (PCDEs) model (e.g., McNamara *et al*, 2010, Collins *et al*, 2016a) which provides the foundation and framework for coaches to develop their players' psycho-social and psycho-behavioural skills. This can offer support as players try to navigate the challenges they will face as they progress into elite professional sports. Embedding such a model and periodising its delivery over the course of a player's career, pathway stage, or season is not an easy task. It is here that Psychosocial Nurturing links to the other generated themes from this chapter. Such an important fundamental of player development has obvious implications for the *Philosophical Alignment, Organisational Connectivity, and Legacy Building* of the club. However, we note here the key role that Workforce Development will have if positive gains are to be made in this area. In particular, highlighting the work by Collins *et al*, (2014) which highlighted academy coaches' inability to articulate mental skill training for players and, indeed, emphasised the gap in support for academy players while they transition through the empty spaces between talent pathway stages.

### **3.3.4. Coaching workforce development**

This theme spanned various environments and topics covered in the workshops including how pathway coaches, volunteers, the transition coaches themselves, the managers and sport scientists could and should be best supported in their work and careers. Clusters were formed around the varying needs of the staff operating within the different stages of the pathway and as well as how these requirements related to the agreed player attributes and the burgeoning match tactics present at this stage of player development. Through discussions, it was clear that this theme was the most connected and integrated with the others and would ultimately underpin the success or otherwise of the club's transition model.

When workshop conversations moved on to how the environment could be best developed and what this would require, several issues were highlighted that would only be resolved if a planned and coherent programme of staff development and training could be established. Their familiarity with collaborative, and physical tasks is now immersed in their engagements within the activities, learning and facilitating are becoming self-perpetuating and clear. For example, a manager in the group explained,

*I think going back to the whole development model, it helped with that in terms of - this is how we will encourage them to play the game... then how can we encourage our*

*coaches to coach them to be able to play the game in this way... but I am not sure how much our coaches understand this.*

A senior coach explained the need to focus training and development on all the coaches in the pathway. He noted the need to be aware of:

*... coaching them (coaches further down the pathway) to coach how to play the game in the future, not the game of the past that they may have played, and not the game of the present (that they are coaching now). When challenged as to why this was an important part of the club's development he replied. "Well... (this is needed because) we are coaching our players to play the game of the future".*

Another member of the group seemed less sure, however:

*Erm... but with (our playing style) I don't think we have got the flexibility to be able to do that...yes, lining the coaching development with learning and development again is critical for the way that we are going.*

He was also realistic in his reflection of what is currently happening at the club and the mismatch between the coaching philosophies of those in the pathway with the first team staff:

*I think it (considering the development needs of staff) will probably cause more meetings because it is new and are we in fact aligned to the senior coach's views on this...we all know that we are not.*

When challenged on how the group needed to proceed to improve the environment at the club and the development of all those within it, a senior coach made a telling request:

*I hope one of the biggest things we can take away from this is we need to put in a realistic action plan for those things, things like coaching to the coaches (so that it can be made to happen) ... certainly a lot of that focuses around (our junior programme) and (the need for) having a well-established connection with senior teams' philosophies.*

These examples highlight many interconnected issues which closely link this theme with *Philosophical Alignment, Legacy Building and Organisational Connectivity* (Tosti and Jackson, 2000). Linking back to chapter two, it is noted that many academies 'lacked any kind of process model as a method of understanding the complexity of practice design and practice within the very different challenge that rugby league academies present.' Again, clarity over the roles, vision, game model and philosophy of the programme would aid all involved and could shape the type of training and information-sharing the coaches describe in the data above.



By identifying the skills required for success in the club's bespoke TDE, learning and support could be targeted. What this would look like and how it could be facilitated would however need further consideration. Within the focus group discussions, participants indicated that their current coaching/personal development programmes provided intentional learning opportunities through nationally recognised professional qualifications, along with years of unintentional experience within professional rugby. Unfortunately, neither of the above were coupled with reflective processes around the TDE they are actively involved in. Even when opportunities arose to align learning episodes and professional practice, they were not seized. For example, a senior coach explained how he had been sent on a mental skills training PCDE's seminar. Although he had found it interesting, *"there was no follow up and I've not done anything with it"*. This chapter and the previous one both contribute to our understanding, which emphasised this issue when they stated that within this transition specifically, the AM's, players', and ACs' 'own personal development is a poorly resourced gap'. Indeed, it has been shown that coaches prefer to learn from a variety of sources (Lyle and Cushion, 2017) and that efforts could be made to guide academy coaches so that they may transform their current understandings and experiences. These new practices could be crucial for improving support across a multitude of environmental facets within the academy (see themes - Table 1, p93).

### **3.3.5. Legacy building**

This theme encapsulated discussions related to the purpose of the programme, the group's mission, vision, and desired outputs. Linking back to other topics like the modelling of an archetypal player that reflected the club's values, stakeholder engagement, coach development and education, the debate moved toward the future and the impact the group were having at the club. The group agreed their overarching intention was to provide a great player/learner experience and an aspiration to develop good people that would go on to represent the club in the wider world.

This activity and task involved holding and releasing ideas, sensing, immersing, leaning into, struggling, supporting, resisting, taking on, and reaching out to each member through engagement in the learning spaces. This revealed plenty of beneficial debate around the *Organisational Connectivity* such as the stages, linkages and positive experiences whilst transferring players from one age group /environment to another, right through to the senior professional level and beyond. Accordingly, I probed deeper by asking the group how they could accomplish this whilst gaining wider support from the senior management and owners at the club. One manager initially responded:

*So the plan that we should be putting together, should be about that, as evidencing the financial benefit, the advantages for the club in taking that approach in terms of its engagement with the whole internal community, part of that virtual cycle of engaging the community, supplying the academy, supplying the first team and then getting more people playing in the end so it is how... the challenge now is for the wider club to understand the importance of getting that right, getting those transition programmes right and understanding that they have got to develop a whole person because that is what... players parents, family, communities want to hear, it is the heads, hearts and minds.*

All participants agreed with the sentiment of building an inclusive, holistic development model that supported players throughout their entire careers. As discussions advanced, the group identified issues and examples that they needed to consider. One of the coaches shared a conversation which took place the previous week regarding the level of support and its effectiveness that he was offering his players and whether this changed as the players progressed through the pathway to higher levels:

*We had a discussion this week about X and Y (two brothers who are players) still academy lads, do we still look after them as an academy because the first team players play for their country at the top level?... well, yes, they are 18 years old! They have still got a lot of stuff that they need wrapping around them and you know that is important as well for that message to go out there because you know they are the people that could fall off the cliff if we don't keep looking after them now. I don't think they will because they are well rounded guys but... you never know what could happen while they are in that space.*

I drilled deeper into the type of support currently on offer and the stage of development in which the support model or framework was located. A senior coach responded:

*I think so, one of the things from banging away here is we don't put in a realistic action plan for those things (long term development, support for transition, and an exit strategy).*

Later, the same AC considered how the group of staff could progress from this point in time, with what they had shared and reflected upon as a group,

*Well because it is a new area or even a new role and you want to do everything first time around, realistically we are not...so I think there are certain elements we need to (focus on). Focuses on scholarships to the academy and having a plan of what do we need to do this year and then we can build on it. We need to decide what (are) our fundamentals we need to get in place first and foremost and then where we go after that.*

This theme could be described by an aspirational term repeatedly mentioned by different members of the group; overall aimed to develop 'good people'. What this means and how it can be achieved, were explored within this theme's interconnections with Philosophical Alignment, Psychosocial Nurturing, Workforce Development, and Organisational Connectivity, all tenets of the domain of empirical experiences (Raduescu and Vessey, 2008). An interesting focus however was the group's intrinsic motivation and their hope to build long-term and positive relationships with each of their players. With this aspiration in mind, referring the reader to Côte and Gilbert's (2009) integrative definition of sports coaching, who proposed that the quality of such coach-athlete relationships is determined by the degree of closeness, and commitment to the relationship, complementarity, and co-orientation between both parties. These attributes were highlighted in the group's responses to many of the workshop tasks, especially in the type of environment and working relationships they desire to create. Such an environment also supports the basic need of every athlete to belong to a social group whose members are mutually supportive (Carron, 1982). However, reflecting further on this theme's linkage with Workforce Development, and Organisational Connectivity, Williams and Kendall's (2007:1157) research in similar sporting domains found that 'more work needs to be done to facilitate this transfer of knowledge effectively' and that 'better communication may be needed for areas such as sports science, to have any significant applied value'. If such coach knowledge and communication could be embedded in a formal training and succession plan, it could form a work development guide and inform the evaluation of both staff and players.

### **3.4. Conclusion**

This chapter aimed to dig deeper into the ingredients, knowledge, and behaviours of those working in rugby TD (see, RO2), nesting inside the 'domain of empirical experience' (Hoddy, 2019; Hu 2018; Raduescu and Vessey, 2008). This study's previous research findings in chapter two identified a clear mismatch in TD theory-to-practice within this environment. Therefore, this study sought to explore the ideas, opinions, beliefs, and reflections of those rugby professionals who influenced player development. This was to verify, disprove or identify additional areas of interest from this thesis's previous findings.

The transition stage of a local professional club's academy was targeted as they are directly accountable for players' transfer from junior to professional status. A focus group method was determined to be the most effective means of gaining group views of current practice. These focus groups assumed a workshop format delivered by me to prompt consideration of the key themes from the previous research. Findings supported the thesis's initial work as the group identified clear gaps in their professional practice relating to *Organisational Connectivity*,

*Philosophical Alignment, Psychosocial Nurturing, Workforce Development, and Legacy Building*. These findings, and the resulting themes, support a wide body of research that promotes the effective implementation, management, and communication of numerous operational and humanistic underpinning concepts. At this point, however, making it clear that the position as the researcher who conducted and co-generated these themes through thematic analysis. Data was scrutinised and evaluated from the position of informed rugby coaches, TD practitioners and researcher professionals. Furthermore, being informed by established theories that promote best practices in elite sporting environments by nurturing and maintaining truly holistic TDE.

Additionally, consciously holding a sophisticated epistemological stance which in this rugby context promotes creativity in learning and the generation of new ideas that aim to stimulate the constant evolution of the sport. The benefit of having a group collaborative approach to collecting data is that I become the educator by moving between the data collector, the group leader and then the participant. In this sense, the relationship is equal. Furthermore, participants can experience a moment of self-exploration. By using group tasks, participants will have the opportunity to reinvent themselves and the language, whilst generating individual meaning.

Despite the findings from this chapter closely characterising those from previous work in chapter two, this could be considered a positive outcome. Considering how the themes have generated the debate about TDE in a RA and how the transition is managed, an interesting finding from the process itself was the attitude of the participants. All greatly valued the workshop exercises and quickly realised their collective weaknesses and gaps in knowledge and application. All commented on the importance of taking part in more similar activities and hoped that this would simply be another step in their learning journey. They commented on their many previous learning experiences and their lack of pragmatic TD application and, or relevance to the specific transition stage requirements. In fact, *Workforce Development* was the strongest theme developed and highlighted the immediate need for further education not just for players, coaches, and officials, at all levels of the club, BUT most importantly, for themselves as transition professionals if they are to maximise their impact on this developmental stage.

### **3.5 Next steps**

What transpired from the whole focus group exercise was the pivotal role that the academy

coaching team and manager were being challenged to play across many stages of the club's pathway, not just within the transition stage for which they were initially employed. Indeed, during workshops the AM commented on his evolving role in the club and recognised that he would be the one tasked with creating and developing an effective TDE to ensure the positive transition, be it in and out of the sport, for all the club's players.

Up to now, far too little attention has been paid to how TD professionals develop effective resources to help navigate and negotiate the challenges academy pathways present (RO3). As a result of this process, the AMs requested additional support and advice on how best to understand this complex role but also implementation of a bespoke model for the club and this will serve as a starting point for both the following chapter and future work in this area.

### **3.6. Chapter 3 reflexivity commentary**

With respect to the insider-to-outsider concept of facilitating workshop tasks to produce data, I embodied and adopted the practices and behaviours of the professional academy. Even as a researcher, I treated the academy's different challenges and each emerging issue itself as an entity of its own. I also acknowledged that I am aware of their own entrenching rituals while working together, and the different practices that each expert may embrace whilst working in multidisciplinary teams.

I could empathise with the lack of support for the duties they carried out, including the cultural demands placed on them by the club's own hierarchy. Nevertheless, my role as a researcher also raised methodological dilemmas, such as how to address senior members as well as the lesser experienced staff. After all, I was successful in managing and organising such staff in the past in my own role as an AM, therefore I could identify with their own organisational hierarchy. When discussing empathic distance and emotional triggers, Sukhera (2022: 414) discloses that usually there is a struggle to maintain an empathic distance and not to disclose personal material to avoid risking any involvement, thereby compromising the researcher's perspective. Here, this was extremely difficult when I wanted to discuss the possible answers to the academy's issues, particularly when I received such warmth and generosity, for example, the AM invited me into their lunch breaks, and started to call me mate.

To limit certain situations such as, thinking on my feet, reacting straight away, or influencing the participants on what to do next, I revised my reflections-on-action by looping back to the last study to consider what could I do differently next time, taking time to process these areas and how I could plan strategies into my research methods and aims. A good example of this

is how I positioned myself during the warm-up activities; rather than trying to push or encourage them to become engaged or see viable solutions, I left them to feel their way into the discussion, even when there were long spells of uncomfortable silence. When the participants made eye-contact with me, I just offered a smile in return. At one point a participant asked, *come on Stu give us a starter for ten...* Maher and Tetreault (1993: 18) suggested that by operating in this fashion, I could increase the trustworthiness of conclusions about the data, and it is only possible because the participants are constructing their own knowledge.

Understanding the impact and danger of becoming too close to the data, I thought carefully about my future data collection. It appeared to me that semi-structured interviews for the next research project would be the best method to limit any influence on the data collection made. In reflection here, I looped back to this current study; by establishing a framework for the questions posed to be as open-ended as possible, to avoid yes and no, or rehearsed answers. Furthermore, my questioning techniques encouraged the participants to communicate their underlying attitudes, beliefs and values that are so central to this method. Constructing their own knowledge and guiding me to become engaged in the meaning making process is an ideal outcome, as it would lead to me forming interpretations from their interactions, as opposed to me becoming far too immersed in their enthusiastic responses. In this regard, and just like constructivist action researchers, the constructions of knowledge will be affected by their individual and professional ideas and values, as well as the ecological context in which they work (Biesta and Tedder, 2006).

Remaining consistent with the spiral schematic, I couldn't help but start to plan future data collection interactions, moreover, how it has become important that I consider my personality, my feelings about TD in professional academies and finally the participants' perception of my place in the sport. By presenting my positionality in the data collection process, I am signifying the type of socially constructed new knowledge I will be using to make sense of the data produced. Ultimately, I would ensure that my words and body language did not influence the data collection process.

Reflecting upon this current study I found that by watching debates become intense, noting the changes in tempo, body language and raised voices, convinced me that they would never have taken place if I were at centre stage as a traditional researcher. My skills as an experienced facilitator helped immensely as this ensured that the participants' existing relationships flourished. I encouraged this by creating a relaxed and comfortable environment for them with my wit and humour that I drew upon once the discussion moved outside the bandwidth and scope of the research that I had designed. For example, if one participant

became boisterous, dominant, or even too assertive while another member switched off, became quiet and disengaged, then I would subtly interrupt with a joke, or a prompt for a comfort break. These breaks allowed me to find space to update my observations on their non-verbal interactions or the impact that the tasks had on the group dynamics, as well as to document the general content of the discussions, a practice encouraged by Przybyłek *et al* (2020).

Understanding the participants' perceptions is central to establishing how and why people respond to conversational issues in a certain way. Therefore, follow-up probes shifted my role because I felt it was vital to capture and clarify any grey areas, and rather than interrupt the flow of the group discussions I grabbed moments during breaks to refine certain points with individuals to make sure my own understanding was as accurate as possible. In summary, I found this data collection process the most compelling because using the focus group to generate discussions and debate around my research topic uncovered their collective views and meanings that underpinned my original questions, which in-turn helped them to challenge their own original views, including their experiences and beliefs.

## **Chapter 4: A Realist Framework Analysis of High-Performance Academy Managers' Duties and Roles: The ABC's and D's of Talent Development (Attitudes, Behaviours, Challenges...and Development needs)**

### **Background and Context**

The purpose of this chapter was to follow on from the outcomes of the previous findings by investigating the professional duties of Academy Managers (AMs) in a professional academy. RO3 aims are to critically investigate the interplay between the knowledge and application of best practice concepts as well as to identify potential gaps in provision and related development needs. The TD Helix from chapter three (Figure 3, p71) provided the realist context by which to explore AM's attitudes, behaviours and challenges when operating in the academy environment. Data was 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 an AM to have success in performing these duties were their academy and senior professional coaches. Additionally, in line with the FA method, typologies were created to describe the diverse roles AMs perform. *The roles were cultural architect, succession planner, life coach mentor, sports craft teacher, and character builder*. This chapter concludes by highlighting a deeper investigation into RO3, more specifically the AM's developmental needs and how bespoke support is essential if they are to successfully overcome the multiple challenges face whilst performing their professional duties.

### **4.1. Introduction**

This chapter has focused on TD in professional sports, and expertise development in young athletes is a growing area of interest in both research (Holt and Mitchell, 2006; Jones and Mahoney, 2014; Martindale *et al*, 2005; Philips *et al*, 2010; Taylor and Collins, 2019; Till and Baker, 2020; Vaeyens *et al*, 2008; Van Yperen, 2009) and the public domain via a plethora of social-media content providers (for examples see, Talent Equation, Believe Perform, Perception Action, Twitter posts, blogs).

In the main, attention in the TD area has been channeled 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 TD, more recent work has moved to explore these aspects in transition phases; in particular, the transition from junior to senior performance (e.g., Collins *et al*, 2016a; Finn and McKenna, 2010; Stambulova, *et al*, 2009; Webb *et al*, 2016; Wilkinson and Grecic, 2019). 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 AM. With a specific focus on professional rugby league, this exploration 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, for example, academy staff (professional and volunteers), parents, schools, and the young players themselves.

Acknowledging the growing body of research on how to develop the most conducive TDE for professional sports (Gulbin *et al*, 2013; Henrickson *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 *et al*, 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*, 2020; 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 run by the RFL, DPP run by the RFU and other centers of excellence) and upwards into the First Team professional environment (Côté *et al*, 2007). As such, their reach, scope, and influence are felt in all aspects of the game. In general AMs bring to bear their influence through the provision of resources and high-quality services (Nicholls, 2014; Rothwell *et al*, 2018). 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, sports scientists, psychologists, video analysts, strength and conditioners, physiotherapists, etc.) whose job it is to directly select and nurture a group of players from a variety of backgrounds such as schools, the community game, local academies and other sports (Hollings *et al*, 2014).

Making the right choice of personnel and deciding upon the most effective professional development programme for each person is an extremely 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. Previous studies within this field (Wilkinson, 2014; Wilkinson and Grecic, 2019; 2020; Thomas and Grecic, 2020) uncovered the range of factors that need attention by the TD team 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 professionals' application of best practices 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* which all helped formulate a new understanding as described in chapter three. Ultimately however the key finding of this thesis's separate studies has been the over-arching responsibility the AM has in deciding how best to proceed to 'fill the gaps' in the TDE, not just within the transition stage (16-19) but throughout the entire talent pathway. Despite their centrality to the club, the community, and the TD 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 chapter, therefore, is to build upon this thesis's previous TD research by exploring in more detail the AM's attitudes, behaviours, and challenges in order to gain a better understanding of the AM's professional duties, their readiness to perform them, and identify any support and development that may be needed.

## **4.2. Methods**

This study adopts a Critical Realist (CR) position in its appreciation that an objective reality exists beyond that which is observable (Bhaskar, 1998a), here, within the professional rugby league's domain of TD (see Figure 4 for consideration, p90). 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 three 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 chapter, the interest is in exploring how Rugby League TD structures influence the AM's 'actions' (duties, roles, responsibilities) 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 (1978) initial work 'A realist theory of science', and Julian North's (2017) book on how CR can be applied specifically to sports coaching.

#### **4.2.1. Participants**

To gain insights into the professional duties of AMs in an HP professional sport, full-time professional rugby league AMs were purposefully sampled based on their current role in the sport. Following personal contact with myself, the seven 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, were qualified at a minimum of UKCC Level 3 and above, had coached professionally before taking up the AM role, and had been professionally involved at the senior professional level of the sport for over 20 years (n=22 years).

#### **4.2.2. Data Collection**

To collect rich data on the AM's experience of the TD environment qualitative methods were deemed most suitable. Semi-structured interviews were 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 in professional academies himself as both a full-time coach and academy manager, at local, regional, national, and international levels. In these roles, he 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 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 development opportunities. 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?" etc. 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?" "How does that work then?" "Who or what influenced that?" etc. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Field notes were also made during the interviews and used later to support the data analysis stage's descriptive validity (Maxwell, 1992).

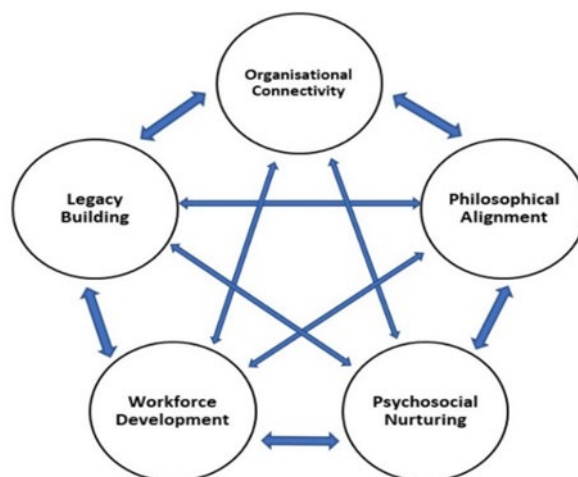
### **4.2.3. Data Analysis**

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 (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 these were present in this chapter due to the nature of the participants, the time-sensitive pressured environment in which they operate, and the pre-defined areas of work that were being investigated.

Framework Analysis is a 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). 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 concerning main themes, concepts, and categories (Ritchie *et al*, 2013). The five stages of FA, according to Ritchie and Spencer, (1994) are:

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

This study followed each stage in turn. 1. Familiarisation – my own reading and re-reading of each transcript and making reflective notes in the margin of each script. These notes related to personal experiences when operating as an AM but also how the issues and concepts discussed aligned with current academic thinking in TD. 2. Charting / Mapping – here are the priority categories from chapter two’s findings into TD which are used as the Framework to guide the study’s analysis (see Figure 4 below, 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 this study’s previous work and themes generated to explain the complex TD processes, systems, and structures that AMs must navigate with their teams. 4. Both I, and my second supervisor then analysed the ‘indexed’ data grouped together in each area to triangulate their workings and develop a realist understanding (Maxwell, 2012). Here clusters of raw data that related to common concepts were first grouped together 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. The five mapping and interpretation (then the new Theoretical Framework for the Professional Duties of an AM), the interactions and meanings were described and summaries of interpretations were 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 4:** The Rugby Transition Helix, a thematic analysis of TD concepts & issues

#### 4.2.4. Validity / Trustworthiness

Aligned to the CR paradigm is a suggestion that the research is based on the key tenets of CR, which is its'; practical utility, ontological plausibility, and empirical adequacy (Ronkainen and Wiltshire, 2021). As this is a qualitative study, it follows Maxwell's (2012) suggested interpretive, descriptive, and theoretical validity criteria for qualitative research. We also ask the reader to note Nowell *et al*, (2017) work depicting that to be accepted as trustworthy, qualitative research must demonstrate that data analysis has been conducted in a precise, consistent, and exhaustive manner through recording, systematising, 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 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 academic rigour (Ezzy, 2002). Each phase, and the decisions made, can easily be viewed, and amended if necessary. At each phase, the analysis process can easily be referred to the original data, thus facilitating the inductive and iterative approach that is characteristic of qualitative research. Indeed, Framework Analysis (FA) provides the research 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 to make 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 coding and charting enable me to look down at emerging themes (thematic analysis) and look across cases (case analysis), which can help to identify patterns (Gale *et al*, 2013). Furthermore, as it is continuous and iterative, it provides me with the ability to move backwards and forwards across the data, which helps them to become more familiar with and immerse themselves in it (Smith *et al*, 2011), ultimately 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 myself (Ronkainen and Wiltshire, 2021).



**Figure 5:** A CR presentation of the AM's TDE in Professional Rugby League

### 4.3. Results

Following the initial indexing to the categories within the TD 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 fourteen lower-order themes. These in turn were amalgamated into four higher-order themes to provide a high-level overview of AM's professional duties as illustrated in Table 1 on the next page.

In summary, 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. Due to the limited scope of this study however, and the desire to illustrate and understand the key actions and events relating to the AMs' work, this chapter will describe and explore the four higher-order themes in detail, those of; Developing and Maintaining a Positive Culture; Implementing a Holistic TDE; Supporting Staff Development and Learning; Managing Up and Down the Pathway.

Higher order theme	Lower Order Theme	Emerging themes
Developing and maintaining a positive culture.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Creating a vision</li> <li>Reflecting the club traditions</li> <li>Connecting staff to the purpose</li> <li>Managing conflict</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Psychosocial Development</li> <li>Community identity</li> <li>Brand, DNA or Playing Style</li> <li>Shared Mental Model</li> <li>Micro Cultures</li> <li>Cooperative Learning</li> <li>Motivational climate</li> <li>Parent Partnerships</li> <li>Meta Perceptions</li> </ul>
Implementing a holistic TD environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Creating self-sufficient players</li> <li>Character building strategies</li> <li>Developing coaches' sports craft</li> <li>Planning a mental skills program</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Adaptability</li> <li>Self-regulation</li> <li>Coachability</li> <li>Shadowing/mirroring</li> <li>first-team approaches</li> <li>Valued based coaching</li> <li>Autonomy</li> <li>Meta Perceptions</li> <li>Occupational positioning</li> <li>Coach-athlete relationship</li> <li>Challenge, trauma and learning theories</li> <li>Critical analysis</li> </ul>
Supporting staff development and learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Building Coaches TD knowledge</li> <li>Developing collective self-efficacy</li> <li>Establish a culture of continuous learning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Coach CPD</li> <li>Skills Profiling</li> <li>Multidisciplinary teams</li> <li>Emotional Intelligence</li> <li>Position specific</li> <li>Spiral curricular</li> <li>Commitment and accountability</li> <li>Social and Coaching networks</li> <li>PJDM</li> </ul>
Managing up and down the pathway	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identifying resources and planning</li> <li>Managing player transition</li> <li>Sharing information with stakeholders</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Self-determined learning</li> <li>Teaching and social practices</li> <li>Mentoring players</li> <li>Pathway expectations</li> <li>Routines, Rules and Expectations</li> <li>Reflective practice</li> <li>Volunteer coach development</li> <li>Liaison with parents and schools</li> <li>Support for representative teams</li> <li>U20s</li> </ul>

**Table 1:** Analysis of Themes relating to the Professional Duties of an Academy Manager



### 4.3.1. Developing and maintaining a positive culture

Here 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 stakeholders' 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 reflects the club's tradition which comprises of 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...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 number 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 about 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 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 were not a consistent picture at all clubs. AM3 noted that he still had much work to do, describing his team as 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”.*

#### **4.3.2. Implementing a holistic TD environment**

The focus of this theme was the importance of placing the player and his needs at the centre of environments that provided appropriate challenge and support to enhance all-around development, preparing 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 AMs 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-centred’ during the interviews and wanted to embed this philosophy within a holistic TD model. They highlighted how they try to align to some of the TDE best practice tenets when describing how they are encouraging independence, sacrifice and empathy, an understanding of individual differences and

encouragement of adaptability. However, the discussion moved on to whether the 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 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 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 and 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 and senior team coaches), and coach-athlete relationships (Côté and Gilbert, 2009; Gilbert and Côté, 2013) that were essential in establishing their optimal TDE.

### **4.3.3. Supporting staff development and learning**

As is clear that the ability of AMs to upskill their teams is essential for them to establish the culture and holistic TDE blueprint they desire. Findings from all the academies were highly focused on the art of educating and developing players, but the AM’s 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, and 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 a highly 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 AMs 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 AM2 sounded concerned about the ability of this coach to engage in continued professional development,

*“In terms of this being built it 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 psyche 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 program to develop our academy coaches (but) it is very ad hoc”.*

This was a recurring theme that many gaps concerning support for learning and development identified in this thesis previous chapters of a rugby TD performance team were 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 considering these challenges, as well as the resilience

that they had had to show to overcome these challenges. A quote by AM1, 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”.*

#### **4.3.4. 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 Lavalley, 2003) as has the integrated and systematic environment required to facilitate optimal progression (Henriksen *et al*, 2010a; 2014; Larson *et al*, 2013; Martindale *et al*, 2005). The AM’s 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 AM’s 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, as well as the why, what, and how of the programme effectively to all involved.

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 define 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 me to probe deeper as to why this was the case, which received the following response, “well common sense tells you if it’s an 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, is 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 suit 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 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 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.”*

## 4.4. Discussion

This chapter aimed to investigate and ascertain the main actions and events during the execution of the professional duties of AMs within professional rugby league. As such, having 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 within the AM's teams played in 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,

*"[TD coaching] is a multifaceted job calling for a variety of competencies 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 players to prepare for life after sport...yes its sounds complex, but I am telling you if they're [academy coaches] not prepared to learn how to do this optimally they're [academy coaches] not for us".*

Indeed, in line with Framework Thematic Analysis practices, the data has 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*, *Succession Planner*, *Life coach and Mentor*, a *Team Leader*, and *Character Builder*, all rolled into one, each with definite challenges and accompanying development needs to help them manage the chaos within the domain of empirical experiences. These will now be described below to best illustrate the range of professional duties undertaken by AMs in these various roles.

### 4.4.1. Cultural Architect

During the last twenty years, professional rugby academies and their organisational culture need to be considered in the context of a modern sporting management team. 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, such as 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 on how different sections of the organisation give different meanings to relationships with the academy, and how its population gives 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, including 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, 1) to set out and communicate a clear vision to their teams and stakeholders, and 2) 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 keep 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 personnel (coaches, sports scientists, administrators) that were under their wing. They sought to achieve this by purposefully influencing senior personnel at the club and utilising sociocultural factors such as the club's community identity, its traditional playing style, its public brand and its historical origins to manipulate resources to ensure those decision-makers focused on helping the AM, coaches and volunteers provide the best possible transition experience for the players, whether this was ultimately within and outside their club (moving from the academy to the senior teams or leaving).

Cultivating progressive environments and humanistic cultures in professional sports can only increase player awareness and well-being and improve the professional practice of those involved. In this chapter, AMs noted that in 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, and their transition and encouraged their disciplined conduct 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 have 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.

#### **4.4.2. 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 their 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 that their role required in the development of coaches was varied, due to the complexity of the role based on the need for the 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 domains. Wylleman and Lavallee (2003) 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 three areas and the athletic level. It is this varied array of needs that the AMs must struggle with if they are to effectively develop their future workforce and decide what form this training should take to have the most benefit.

According to the Academy Managers, externally 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 of 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 must consider when trying to align their training and development offer to their personnel in the context of the club's succession plan and the time the AMs have available to them to achieve results for the club.

#### **4.4.3. Life coach Mentor**

Within the realm of 'supporting staff development and learning,' the AMs described many elements of training that could and would have benefited their club. The sociocultural connectivity, in the case of a professional rugby club and its community programs, involves the construction of new identities as the individuals become enculturated into a community of learners including players, parents and 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 about 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 to ensure an environment exists that is conducive to coach and TD, 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.

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 a greater relational affiliation with senior and volunteer coaches. AMs believed their coaches "lived and breathed" the academy life throughout their entire experience and had a 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 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' 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.

#### **4.4.4. Sports Craft Teacher**

All the AMs spoke about the importance of creating a TDE 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 technical, tactical, physical, and mental skills, but 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 and assist 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 '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.

#### **4.4.5. Character Builder**

The role of the AM in successful TD environments goes far beyond the training of players. 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.”*

AMs' 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 chapter 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 need to be supported so that they can develop their teams to articulate their philosophy (for example, values and beliefs) coherently 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. 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.

#### **4.5. Conclusion**

The chapter aimed 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 some of this project's previous findings, synthesising similar concepts and formulating new thematic ideas. What is discovered are the findings that are much broader and richer than this study's initial remit. Through the detailed responses to the 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 the *cultural architect*, *succession planner*, *life coach mentor*, *sports craft teacher*, and *character builder*.

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

- a) Developing and maintaining a positive culture.
- b) Implementing a holistic TDE.
- c) Supporting staff development and learning.
- d) Managing up and down the pathway.

What was clear, however, was that all the participants, despite their vast experience in the sport, identified their own needs for support and professional development. For example, uncovering 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 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 the context in previous research (Taylor and Collins, 2019; Thomas and Grecic, 2020; Wilkinson and Grecic, 2019; 2020), it is clear from this chapter's findings that more bespoke support is required to improve AM's performance and improve their own coaches' effectiveness to attain more positive player outcomes and bridge the gaps between the domains of CR.

#### **4.6. Next steps**

The significance of this chapter 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 provide a template to inform other sports. The priority is to design a tool that acts as a community of safety (Super *et al*, 2016) for the AMs' and coaching workforce, which is also underpinned by their professional duties. Consequently, making RO4 exploration even more interesting.

Upon achieving RO3, one interesting finding was the idea of a shared mental model or SMM, elaborated upon by Lyle (2002) regarding how such models can be used to describe the components of a complex phenomenon and the relationship between those components. Such a transactional model innately shared between the entire organisation's rugby workforce will not only guide both future investigations and the designs of such tools' but also connect, synchronise, and coordinate the development and actions of the AM (RO4). This new agent of the AMs' learning and how they can best support that of their teams and players will be a key topic of future TD research. This chapter has also highlighted the important ecological context for those educators aiming to enhance the skills, characteristics and knowledge that AM professional development relies upon (RO4). Two potentially exciting agents of change are described in the next chapter, through the design of the groundbreaking TD tool (RO3), its design, and the procedures and methods used to help deepen this investigation.

#### 4.7. Chapter 4 reflexivity commentary

I hoped this research was not complete without further questions arising from it, and it either merged or proved what the earlier research projects had concluded. Consequently, as a PhD researcher, I do not in any way claim I have achieved closure for my research but only a facet of truth supplies direction for the next research study. I pay homage to the complexity of reality in which these AMs work as they work relentlessly in isolation. In turn, how little these single practitioners know in relation to a broader community of learning and education, all helped steel my resolve to help their profession. Greenhalgh *et al*, (2018: 5) offered a clearer understanding of my own perceptions by suggesting that when interpretation is discussed, this refers to an analysis that is perhaps perspectival, with the interpreter transparently positioned in order that I could understand why a specific perspective, selection process and interpretive response was chosen in relation to the question at hand.

Once again, remaining consistent with the spiral schematic I looped back to my knowledge-on-action from the previous study, which helped inform me that to gain a better understanding from interviews and discussions, adopting the role of a moderator was the best choice. With so many experts involved, easing and sometimes moderating our conversations and interactions now seemed obvious. Establishing expectations become vital at this point, for example before presenting the findings from the previous study to the participants, and in the spirit of self-reflexivity, I acknowledge my standpoint as an educated and experienced rugby academy professional. This led to an open discussion on our shared positions, here I was able to offer a statement describing my epistemological position as well other potential influences on research such as my personality and management characteristics. I believe this enabled me to challenge and compare responses from other anonymous AMs yet also separate me from the predetermined list of questions, whilst allowing the AMs the freedom to express their views in their own terms.

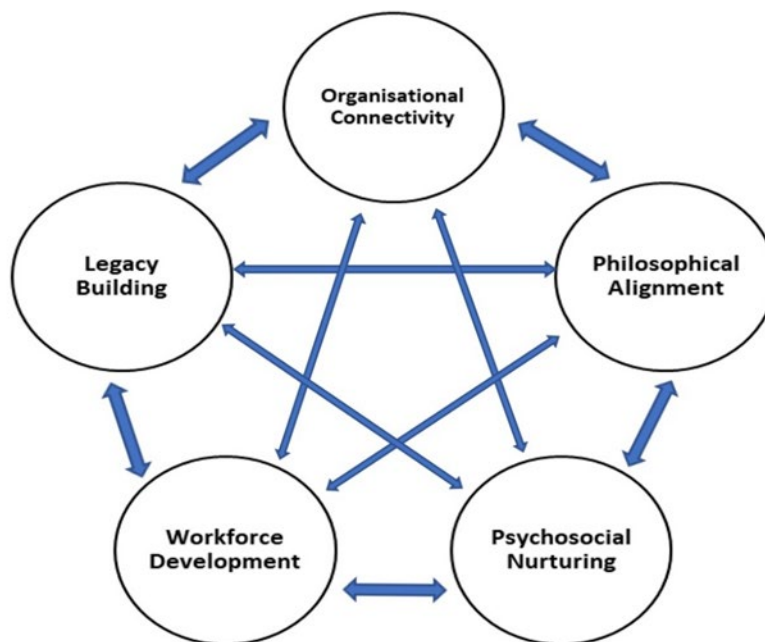
These findings are reassuring since traditionally the AMs are very private about their views, systems and club cultures. Therefore, while planning for my future investigations, it might be possible to use a more engaging method, such as small groups or perhaps physical tasks in which the AMs can investigate their original assumptions and responses with peers or myself. Ultimately, breaking new ground in data collection.



## Chapter 5 (Part 1): The Primary Concern of the Academy Manager in the Rugby Academy

### 5.1. Introduction

The developments around the professional duties of the academy manager (AM) in this thesis have highlighted the need to explore how the emergent themes in chapter four can be characterised. Results could make powerful contributions to understanding the TD within a professional rugby academy (Wilkinson and Grecic, 2020; 2021a). Before this investigation, it is necessary to clarify exactly what is meant by the *interplay of the AM professional duties* emphasised in the previous chapters. The main professional duties (Table 1, p93) which were concluded in chapter three clearly sit outside any traditional conceptions within national leadership systems and coach education provisions.



**Figure 6:** The Rugby Transition Helix, a thematic analysis of TD concepts & issues

#### 5.1.2. Recap

The results from chapters three and four suggest the need for more long-term, systematic, and sustained methods to delve deeper into rich data captured within the practical expertise

required of the AM. This would assist the achievement of RO4 and act as an agent of change within the development of AMs and their ACs. Correspondingly, RO3 and RO4 state a bespoke club or organisation-specific model that encompasses how an AM orchestrates environmental relationships and coordinates these interactions to develop their interdependencies will be of great interest within TD. Additional analysis also identified various roles the AM has, such as player *psychosocial nurturing and the cultural, cross-cultural, and contextual aspects* within a club. These will be central to this chapter.

What was clear from previous results is that additional help bridging the domains of CR is needed for AMs to successfully navigate this multifaceted and arduous environment. Hopefully, the design of the new professional academy TD model will see them better equipped for managing varied stakeholders and achieving organisational goals whilst still supporting the development of all those around them (academy workforce and players). The practical challenge of coach development is the alignment of the academy environment and the club's sociocultural factors while remaining connected to current conventional coach development/educational contexts. Equivalent encounters from this thesis include mentorship processes with academy coaches (ACs) or participating in micro teaching-based critiques of pedagogy. Bespoke professional development, especially with a non-rugby staff member, placed extended demands on the teaching experts, which in this case is the AM. This is a potentially daunting task for any AM without coach education training.

The skills to implement foundational principles that provide a framework/checklist of considerations for the design, implementation, and evaluation of player development systems within a rugby academy are all completely new responsibilities for the individuals commonly placed in these positions; these individuals often tend to be former performance coaches and/or ex-professional players who are moving into the academy environment. Coincidentally, this was the background of the participants in this thesis. The design of a new professional academy TD model, if applied appropriately, can act as a guide throughout various contexts for development, such as the competition conditions and constraints evident in any region, club, coaching group, and practice session. Guidance or advice on how an AM may rationalise TD methods developed for/within other environments or sports is an issue. Furthermore, uncritical, and unadulterated application of successful models from other sports, national and club systems should be avoided. A concept that works in one context may be distracting or even detrimental in another. Crucially, we posit that because of current AMs' knowledge, NGB national support systems and/or the transition of academy players, appropriate ecologically mindful systems are not allowed, or even encouraged, to flourish.

Academy coaching and player development in either rugby code is conditioned by the same processes which impact wider human development. Yet, player development systems literature only occasionally or implicitly refers to theory and evidence from the existing body of human development research (Henriksen *et al*, 2010a; Martindale *et al*, 2005). What was evident from the findings shared in chapters two, three and four is that AMs are currently operating in rugby academies without a deeper understanding of these important factors. Many are lacking the requisite training and support to confidently execute the abilities necessary to be successful across every required area within an elite development system.

To become an effective AM or academy coach for that matter, one must promote a mastery-oriented climate, foster fun and play, encourage social interactions and promote growth opportunities (Côté and Gilbert, 2009). Moreover, they must also act as mentors, role models, friends and community leaders who promote the personal development of their participants where none might be available. There have been several detailed ethnographic studies of teaching development practice that elucidate the practical and aesthetic work of the craft worker which could certainly help direct the data collection methods (Bell and Wilmott, 2020; Cunliffe, 2011; Van Maanen, 2011). 'The aim ... is not only *to acknowledge the existence of social contexts ... but to dwell on the actual processes* through which people are trained into communities of practice' (Grasseni 2007: 9). More specifically, it must be noted that there is well-intentioned coach career development support available from NGBs' which takes the form of community TD programmes. Such as 'Sky Try' and 'Embedding the Pathway' in Rugby League and 'Development Player Pathway' in Rugby Union. Yet these support sessions for pathway coaches and players only include standalone workshops on either games-based practices, psychology, nutrition, and tactical assessment (player profiling) with user-friendly coaching resources to leave with.

This governance supports the sports general systems and has a clear idea about how success factors can be achieved. This includes a long-term, staged approach, recognising developmental differences between younger and older players and attending to their physical, psychological, social, lifestyle, movement, and sports craft (technical and tactical) characteristics. The problem lies within an understanding of how an AM utilises selection methodologies to counter the implicit gambles of the frequent and complex decisions that they commonly encounter; an example is academy players moving from one environment to another. National support system principles fail to recognise that these TDE are spatially and socially embedded and that effective environments are planned, resourced, and fully understood and adhered to by all relevant individuals and organisations (e.g., local leagues, clubs, academy directors, coaches, players, and parents). Finally, effective player

development is underpinned and indeed brought to life by a skilled and committed workforce, most notably, the AM and their ACs.

The feedback from the previous chapters, two, three and four, is that despite all this being available, the AM feels more bespoke content and responsive or accessible professional development resources are required to meet their situationally defined needs. These practitioners must be highly alert to the problems when reading and interpreting existing research and integrating ideas into practice. More importantly, there is a limit to what an AM, coaches and players can realistically control. The model (Figure 6, p110) suggests that an AM and their development will necessarily be subject to a range of influences and forces. This means stakeholders must accept that their interventions will only be successful under certain indeterminate conditions. Consequently, the player development systems they design have to be flexible, adaptable and above all patient (Martindale *et al*, 2005). Ultimately, these decisions will either explicitly and, or implicitly affect the success of all academy objectives. Within the realm of human development, there are three classic theoretical positions (Noble, 2008):

1. Genetically determined/centred development.
2. Environmentally determined/centred development.
3. An interactionist position between the two.

As previously noted, positions one and two should be viewed more as tools for exploring the possibilities and limitations of the interactionist approach within the continuum. Notwithstanding this, positions one and two have influenced the minds of practitioners and, to a significant extent, endure within much of the public consciousness, albeit propped up by questionable scientific and media practice (Dupré, 2003; Noble, 2008). This literature suggests that effective player development systems have a clear view of what constitutes successful outputs and outcomes, or what is known as the performance model, such as the model born from this thesis (TDSNF). This is particularly true when observing trends around the identification of a clear philosophy and culture which includes ideas about effective playing styles and player characteristics, all of which have been consistent within this thesis's preceding studies.

Previously, the participants applied humanistic principles to their coaches and players by asking questions that guided learning and requesting feedback about various individual and team matters. Yet, the problem identified occurs when both players and ACs are moving on to senior environments where they experience an established constructivist culture enhanced by senior coaches. The most obvious finding to emerge from this chapter is that there are

wider sports provisions in mainstream coaching, such as sports leadership frameworks, NGB mentoring courses, and UK sports coaching programmes, which are commonly met with criticism by AMs as being incompatible with their specific needs (Wilkinson and Grecic 2019; 2020). This research suggests that rugby academies have clear gaps in content and theory-to-practice transfer. These supplemental courses, sadly, are not adequate support mechanisms for the bespoke challenges facing this academy pathway population.

In the realms of sports management, several more current career development frameworks exist to help guide the selection and achievement of various competency-based elements of professional practice, which are all tenets in CRs *domains of real*. An example would be the CIMSPA (The Chartered Institute for the Management of Sport and Physical Activity) which supports aspiring, current and sector-leading managers and employers with manager qualifications, entry-level manager qualifications, leadership and business, engagement, operations, customer service and partnerships. Notwithstanding this, it was established that the criticisms of these support frameworks by participating AMs are based on the unidimensional nature of these mechanisms as they fail to recognise and respond to the individualised socio-cultural needs unique to each professional academy.

Rugby is a physical activity and therefore depends on embodied interventions for correcting or improving performance and production. All rugby personnel are exhorted to 'see themselves coaching' and should be encouraged to treat their professional development as an object of critical scrutiny. This results in a dialogue of gestures, metaphor and technical talk as the coach educator attempts to verbalise or otherwise convey the sort of effects to be essayed. Conclusively and predictably, participating AMs differed slightly because any proposed training intervention for coach development passes through a lens that is tinted with their club's DNA or brand (e.g., the club's community reputation) and their personal experiences on how to promote TD in rugby. Correspondingly, they will all develop their coaches differently. Some will choose workshops whilst others may seek out other means of support that can successfully change or improve coach behaviours and attitudes. In the subsequent section, an examination into the extent to which personal support for AMs' focuses on developing their own sports leadership and management skills, enabling a workforce to utilise a positive approach to coaching, fostering a positive environment and including participants in decision-making and self-monitoring processes. The above is all in line with suggestions by Smith and Smoll (2002), Smith *et al* (2007) on how to increase youth's self-esteem, self-worth, competence, enjoyment, and adherence to sports.

In sports such as youth rugby, research has increasingly conceptualised player development

as a multi-layered, complex, and an emergent process involving dynamic and non-linear interactions of multiple variables such as genetic and environmental; physical, psychological, social; luck, etc. (Bloom, 1985; Button, 2011; Helsen *et al*, 2000; Phillips *et al*, 2010; Simonton, 1999; Singer and Janelle, 1999; Vaeyens *et al*, 2008). A review by Baker and Horton (2004) identifies a range of influences on performer development including genetics, time devoted to training and practice, psychological enablers, and access to social resources such as coaching and support from the family. To better understand the mechanisms of a rugby academy pathway and its effects, this chapter provides new insights into the AMs' creation and use of knowledge as this establishes the context for these applied environments. Evidence from the previous chapters suggests that a great deal of rugby knowledge was reproduced and transformed through playing and coaching via tradition, custom and practice. Then, these are moderated by ongoing experiences, interactions, and reflections within and on the game.

The delivery of a bespoke embodied academy CPD to the coaching staff with an AM acting as an educator involves an intimate dialogue of bodies, gestures, physical demonstration and even contact (perhaps, just like the game itself). Therefore, a strong emphasis on what appear to be relatively minor physical adjustments can make large differences to an AM's performance. Their influence and daily operation can be changed by minor adjustments made to the theme they are teaching to the coaching workforce (e.g., see Salford Red Devils Coach Education Programme, 2022). Although there was perhaps higher education engagement than expected, it was with less outside influence such as any academic sources. Unsurprisingly, the data from the earlier chapters demonstrated that AMs' most formed knowledge is through years of top tier playing experience and less so from reflections of national performance leads (NGBs), football directors or senior coaches. This was especially noticeable in the playing style, player characteristics and development approaches.

The AMs' current knowledge was situated in the mental models and distributed cognitions of the coaching workforce in their contexts. Some missing components are specific operations such as small, elite project meetings between coaching leads and national-level coach educators in the NGBs', coalitions between football directors and senior coaches in clubs, and coach development strategies through wider group meetings and discussions within coaching communities of practice. To a lesser degree, the AMs mentioned drawing on coaching expertise and ideas from other sports, with an example being that rugby league might consult rugby union and vice-versa. As pointed out in the early chapters, there was also some diffusion of academic knowledge into academy environments through the sports science staff (including, sports psychologists, and nutritionists for example), which were usually standalone

workshops with little sustained, long-term development (evidenced by chapters three and four).

There was recognition among the AMs that ACs should update their knowledge regularly through a process of continuous improvement. Some AMs talked about implementing more sophisticated knowledge generation for coaches and challenging structures for players but stumbled upon the development of the coaching workforce. One AM mentioned his vision of a club's 'training hub' by bringing together a range of specialists which included technical coaches, head coaches, performance analysts and sports psychologists to evaluate and revise the club's player development practices. However, this plan was never supported. There are formal systems with the capacity for some performance coaches to be pushed forward onto national programmes that offer coach development and coaching opportunities, but these are exclusive and are not always readily available. At the same time, it was recognised that there were many forces of conservatism within the TD workforce. For example, as seen through the eyes of one of the AM's:

*"What was good for me then will also be good for you now"* (referring to the dominant paradigm in Rugby).

However, this notion was challenged by an approach which argued

*"Today's player is different from yesterday's player, and what worked then may not work now... and .... you can't approach kids in the way that your coach approached you.... this world has changed for young players.... they are a lot more entitled"*.

When delving deeper into the mind of the participating AMs, there appeared to be a general aversion to formality and written documents amongst the majority of those who participated. Additionally, there were noticeably different levels of formality between their TD systems. For example, one club had a range of published documents available for coaches including 'The Sale Sharks DNA' (2022) and an equivalent delivery programme for grassroots youth coaches operating at the academy entry-level (DPP). The impression given from the data from these academies is one of a box-ticking exercise with regards to the true purpose of the formality and documentation rather than to promote a shared understanding and agreement. Taken together, one could argue that this is an obvious limitation for academy player transitions as it can restrict practice and limit adaptability, flexibility, and innovation. Perhaps a method for formalising these common principles, without stereotyping players, of course, would help consistency across the academy environment.

The national support system for rugby had experimented with a more formalised approach, but it was subsequently rejected. There was a sense that formalisation could not capture the club's specific community identity and its development. This stemmed from the idea that following suit with other clubs and, or NGBs' was restrictive to practice and its ability to adapt and evolve. The national support system (AM and AC, CPD) strongly asserted that it does not want to produce players or coaches that play or coach the same way. AMs want to encourage unique, open-minded, educated, and flexible coaches who can intuitively adapt their approach to meet developmental and competitive conditions. They want support mechanisms that help coaches to individualise and improvise techniques rather than copying and pasting methods from generic lists and databases. The basis of this approach, ultimately, requires AMs to improve knowledge through coach education and communities of practice. The conduct of the coach developer in the suggested approach in this bespoke programme would be an intensely embodied one, where words, symbols, physical gestures, and practical activity are closely intertwined. The artefacts created from the activity should be characterised simultaneously by *embodied pedagogy* and *embodied authority* (Atkinson, 1995).

In terms of sharing knowledge, it was found that the NGB for rugby primarily relied on coach education/coach licensing with annual conferences or quarterly national AM gatherings being used to disseminate competition information, rules, and administration issues; guest speakers included to share experiences on TD and coaching. An annual two-day conference has been adopted by other sports as a good platform to share information with AMs and some coaching delegates. These are then developed into web resources (e.g., video clips) and magazines. Again, it is evident in the content of these support mechanisms that this national system is avoiding the production of coaches who coach in uniformity. Follow-up schemes, or opportunities for coach developers to work with other sporting leaders, club football directors and expert coaches, appear sparsely or in some cases not at all. The national system doesn't provide space for a culture of cooperation or sharing of ideas, which would encourage the different academies to form a tight, highly integrated community of practice. This current research should also go beyond simplistic or cursory applications of the work of Wenger *et al*, (2002) and their theoretical ideas by exploring and engaging with this theory in its complexity (Smith *et al*, 2017) during data collection.

In previous findings of this thesis, AMs found that coach development is consistent with McCarthy *et al* (2020) when stating they all had a desire to provide their coach education opportunities, documentation (e.g., codes of conduct and expectations), and opportunities for coaches to meet and talk (see chapters two and three). With some of the participants, there was a strong sense that informal meetings and word-of-mouth were the best way of sharing



ideas. Be it in formal documents (training ideas or academic papers), coach education, or word of mouth (mentoring, workshops, observations), the ideas promoted from within the academy environment were there to inform and guide learning for both an AM and their coaches rather than dictate it via NGB national systems. For example, in the Rugby Union system, there are no offers of formal guidance for playing style, player characteristics and development approaches and nothing is done to bind any club or coach to such initiatives.

Each participant provided a clear philosophy that concerned areas such as playing style, principles of development and specific drills and games. These ideas were not imposed on the club's senior coaches. However, the AMs remained aware of the national system's suggested approach, which is like many of the models that they have been using over the last twenty years. Upon comparison, it's apparent that these models are obsolete to current coaching and performance ideas. It is seen by AMs as a product of years of collaborative thought between the national performance leaders and clubs, that is, unfortunately, without high levels of shared understanding or buy-in.

Results from chapter four showed that participant knowledge acquisition was similar in many ways. Formal higher education, high-performance playing experiences and/or academy coaching experience provided them with some basic training around sports sciences, physical development, and pedagogy. Additionally, their knowledge base was developed further by acquiring additional information through rugby coaching courses, books, and the use of the internet (social media such as YouTube). Following consideration of the findings from previous chapters it was established that learning through a variety of contexts is key in coach education. Unfortunately, the participants identified that they lacked the resources to design bespoke methods for coach development due to their narrow pool of experiences (for example, reliance upon anecdotal narratives from playing careers).

The data collection activity and tasks during the case study will look to embody a source of instruction: participants are expected to develop their expressive acts partly based on imitating the displays of the tasks, scenarios, and interactions with colleagues. Links to critical realism will be made by interpreting what may take the form of ideas and motives, which are translated into visual impressions, movements, or gestures. The activities will highlight a variety of modes to communicate and display physical manifestations of a character's intentions borne from the completion of the tasks. The earlier chapters all concluded that the AMs' coaching workforce needs a bespoke delivery programme to enhance their knowledge through a range of formal, non-formal and informal learning contexts. This programme must consider the club's performance values in context with coaching clinics/ seminars, conferences, workplace

learning, practical experience, as well as prior playing experiences, reading and researching and practical observations and mentoring.

In one of the most prominent studies on TD, Bloom (1985) found that coaches are central to the development of expert performers and continued participation in sports. There is an increasing amount of research into coaching practice and how coaches learn their craft (Cushion *et al*, 2010). Coaching is influenced by three modes of learning – formal, non-formal and informal (Nelson *et al*, 2013). The sources of this knowledge as well as how they interact and contribute to other contexts within coach education are other prominent areas of research over the last two decades. A more recent study directly relevant to the role of an AM and their development identified the positive effects sport and leadership can have (Fransen *et al*, 2015). Yet, it was noted that the participants had limited knowledge of how leadership is associated with athletes' resource appraisals (e.g., self-efficacy) and performance, the underpinning mechanisms that explain such relationships and changes in relationships across a sporting journey. These are essential skills for these participants to possess.

Delving deeper into the roles and responsibilities of the participants of this thesis, the coach education backgrounds and sources of learning of experienced professional rugby AMs are met with indifference. All have undertaken accredited coaching courses in the last ten years highlighting a consistent trend toward formal coach learning. They have all indicated that they utilise a variety of self-directed learning methods with reflective practices via audio or video recording of delivery, serving as an example. They episodically interact with peers, but this is not deliberate. Furthermore, participants indicated that they felt their learning is enhanced by the development of communities of practice both internally and externally with other AMs' or senior coaches. This is yet another example of an informal learning situation highlighted by this thesis (Wright *et al*, 2007) that has no national or local procedures in place to implement these mechanisms.

Chapters two, three and four noted that managing an academy is a highly skilled occupation. Consistently, distinct trends amongst these participants were used to establish wide-ranging themes related to *Players' Transition; Legacy Building; Philosophical Alignment; Workforce Development; Organisational Connectivity; Psychosocial Nurturing*. This finding is contrary to current NGB services and support which have suggested that level three coaching qualifications (sports craft) and centralised development opportunities are enough to be successful in this position. A natural conclusion of these chapters is that the difficulties of AM job performance encompass not only their sporting craft knowledge base but also the complex, dynamic interplay between their young players, organisation, environment, and leadership.

The important role played by ACs, strength and conditioning coaches, sports psychologists, and other parts of the academy workforce in TD are now widely recognised (Bloom, 1985; Coutinho *et al*, 2016; Ford and Williams, 2012; Gilbert and Trudel, 2004). The management of these professionals remains a major responsibility for participating AMs'. The above has two implications; firstly, a workforce is required to support TD effectively and secondly, any effectiveness needs to be supported, developed, and monitored. As mentioned previously, there is a considerable amount of literature discussing coach development and education (Cushion *et al*, 2010). Navigating these studies can be a daunting task for an AM as they realise that player development is multi-layered, interactionist, and an emergent process that an AC needs to gain insights into how to link theory into practice.

TiD experts are universal in recognising the individualised nature of TD. For example, when I am being asked to define the characteristics of an elite player, considerable emphasis is placed on individual variability. In my narratives, my colleagues and I agreed that only through adopting a long-term developmental and inclusive approach could players be supported individually which would ultimately give them the chance to flourish and mature within a rugby academy. As previously concluded in earlier chapters, the need for flexibility in TD system design and coaching was also recognised by AMs. This extended to all aspects of playing style or brand, player characteristics, practice methodology and coaching behaviours. However, flexibility was particularly important regarding TD, and its associated learning environments. For example, in an earlier chapter, one AM discussed the idea of not making systems too strict and allowing for individual expression. A key feature of this research was the importance of AMs' developing coaches to be effective in TD. The AMs were the orchestrators and facilitators of the TD system working with the individual coaches and players, age groups, squads, and teams. They ensured the correct interpretation and application of the philosophies and programmes. This is likely to produce a high degree of variability within these interactions since there were different coaches, players and teams and philosophies and practice methodologies. As one AM described,

*"If a coach says to me that he plays in 'that way', he is not my coach. If he says, give me one week and I will tell you what way I want us to play like, he is my coach!"*

The development and education of coaches were seen as unequivocally central to an effective academy pathway in all these participants. Therefore, it is important to look at ways the AMs build relationships with coaches and players so that the education of the future coach is based on the delivery of a holistic development method that fully integrates all the components of the

TDE into its methodologies. All active AMs and their coaches (including volunteers) need targeted and strategic development for the academy environment to operate optimally.

The holistic nature of development in Rugby League is explained throughout these chapters which co-acts across many domains of professional development. This co-action is important if the findings and coaching intervention are to effectively address the transition phases of young academy players. This is best represented by the multidimensional model that has been developed within this thesis from the initial field research: **The Talent Development Self-Navigation Framework**, or TDSNF (Figure 10, p128). To help meet RO3 the values of this graphic will be operationalised during data collection from the next phase creating a visual representation of the shifting demands across a range of development areas. Follow-up workshops and interviews to make this graphic 'framework' will be used to invite AMs to self-navigate through the complexity of coach education in this highly competitive environment. This tool has a potentially important role in guiding this research and will continue in this manner when in the hands of the academy staff who, once it has been shown, can relate to it more readily. Hopefully, this will foster a sense of ownership and control as they prioritise their professional development (RO4). Consequently, this working graphic could be integral to an AC's development and will be at the heart of this next phase of research. Chiefly, this will be used to identify the different pathways through leadership development, coach education and coach development that they may take through time and to their best advantage.

## Chapter 5 (Part 2): Designing a method for applying the Talent Development Self-Navigation Framework (TDSNF)

### 5.2. Introduction

In previous chapters, this thesis has explored the professional duties of the Academy Manager (AM). It has highlighted a need for more long-term, systematic, and sustained efforts to mine the rich data available in the practical expertise of an AM, to help the development of academy coaches and their players. It was interesting that an organisational model for *player transition, coach development, philosophical alignment and sociocultural connectivity* research that can track AM responses around multiple factors could address issues of talent development (TD). Having a TD tool that helps guide such important aspects within a professional academy would be beneficial. In response, the next stage of this thesis is to develop the tools and framework by which to support AMs in rugby academies in their exploration, furthering the comprehension and identification of personal needs relating to the professional skills required to perform their jobs effectively. This is the primary objective of this chapter (RO3).

According to Sarantakos (1998) and Creswell (2013), a research design is a road map to be followed. Yet, no methods for assessing or supporting expert performance in the TD context of either AMs or their coaching workforce have been developed despite many calls for this to happen (Wilkinson and Grecic, 2020). Correspondingly, the TDSNF was created through a culmination of careful consideration and reflection of the data and findings in chapter four, the supplementary offered in this chapter (Part 2) and the data presented in the personal narrative within chapter two. As explained in the *methods philosophy* of this thesis, chapter five aims to provide a brief explanation of the TDSNF, how it has been constructed and how it can support the professional development and accumulation of the appropriate skills and knowledge of AMs. Consistent with critical realism (CR), those unobservable structures which cause observable events, and the social world can be understood only if people understand the structures that generate events. Therefore, as a researcher and facilitator, I will use a repertoire of tasks and activities that encourage participants to place and produce the responses in particular ways that have NGB guidance embedded. There is, for instance, a recurrent gesture that the researcher and facilitator encourage, by offering directions to move forward or backwards, prompting the participant to make a record of their response and to delve deeper rather than, for instance, answering yes or no. These tasks and scenarios offered to the participants are often made with encouragement and coincide with any explicitly verbal commentary.

In alignment with this current methodological choice, the TDSNF will be conducted, typically, through a qualitative examination of AM's developmental history, present practice, and future aspirations. To facilitate this, the TDSNF (Figure 10, p128) is structured and mapped out over stages so that participants can reflect on their professional development and the skills they require to perform optimally within their roles. The central tenets of the TDSNF are the six main professional duties of an AM (Wilkinson and Grecic, 2020) with each comprising a series of related sub-themes. Beyond these sub-themes lie a range of topics related to TD in its widest sense that will be used to stimulate thought and discussion. In this way the TDSNF is designed to stimulate AMs and coaches to self-report, retrospectively identify with TD factors, recall practice histories and design personal interventions based on their bespoke professional needs. The implementation of the TDSNF hopes to provide a ground-breaking coach educational tool as well as create a pathway to expertise for academy staff.

Contemporary research on sports coach learning states that many individuals are only willing to learn in certain ways and remain rigid in their approach to lifelong learning (Nash and Collins, 2006; Nash and Sproule, 2009). However, findings have emerged that learners working in the TD domain that have attended coach education courses desire active learning opportunities such as group learning, practical experiences, and mentoring (Nelson *et al*, 2013). The TDSNF offers a compelling solution for this challenge. Notwithstanding these possibilities, reflection upon Jarvis's (2004) early research on attitudes underpinning learning could show a potential obstacle to the application of TDSNF. The AM's stage in their life may impact their perception of whether sufficient knowledge and skills have been acquired for later in life which could halt their desire for continued education.

Weyringer and Patry, (2005) defined embodied pedagogy (EP) as learning that joins body and mind in a physical and mental act of knowledge construction. It is the intention to utilise EP tasks during practice design, data collection and subsequent discussions because it is common practice within the workforce to offer posture and the use of body parts that are vital to operating in a sports setting such as a rugby academy. AMs and academy coaches (ACs) may physically intervene, pushing and prodding each other and the player's body into an appropriate alignment and posture. The TDSNF, therefore, focuses attention away from the learning activity itself and instead on the desired professional outcomes determined by everyone. This process should prevent any frustration or eagerness simply to get to the end. Contrastingly, it hopes to foster a sense that learning is an accumulation of skills and processes that enables coaches to construct and develop the knowledge required for their professional practices (Cushion *et al*, 2010). This is just a brief example of how careful delivery can circumvent learner demotivation.

### 5.3. Scoping the application, process and exemplars

The TDSNF places the participant in the middle of the matrix and the starting point for an explorative guided journey. This is designed to identify their personal and professional development needs and to then agree and commit to a course of action that has perceived value in achieving the bespoke objectives. This journey requires careful facilitation from the designated researcher. This role is crucial for this research method and to reap the data surrounding developmental benefits and needed to create rich emergent themes. The CR side of the theory focuses on the existence of real mechanisms (North, 2017) which shape events so that extensive knowledge and understanding, grounded in theory and practice, in TD can be acquired. In addition, and of equal merit, are my authentic appreciation of the situational demands of the AM role and environment. These physical features of engaging the participant imply that an intensely embodied form of pedagogic practice is consistently emerging. The body will emerge with new behaviours and gestures towards the questions, probes, tasks, and scenarios. It is used to generate a repertoire of gestures and responses that convey practical and technical issues of task solutions. There is an embodied dialogue of words and gestures between the participant and me the researcher, which affects the shared, mutual attention on TD in a rugby academy. Resultantly, this is essential to create the most conducive context for the professional development episode to take place. One is built upon mutual respect, trust, and rapport with the participants (Molan *et al*, 2021).

To achieve this aim, the process of delivery requires five distinct phases which are to be completed as the participant and I work our way through the TDSNF Matrix. The different layers and elements of the matrix are arranged in groups to represent the following concepts. Phase One (1) is the inner layer around the participant which are the six professional duties identified in chapter three; these drive the direction and scope of the AM's work (Figure 6, p110). Phase 2 is the related sub-themes that emerged from chapter four (Table 1, p93). Phase 3 connects to the outer layers 3-6, multiple sections representing groups of related or interdependent concepts. These layers are topics that align with the sub-themes above that are both grounded in TD research and indicative of each AM (Figure 5, p92). Phases 4 and 5 are emergent and from the indicative content.



**Figure 7: TDSNF Phase 1**

### **5.3.1. Phase 1**

This requires the AM to discuss, describe and assess themselves against the six professional duties laid out in the inner layer (Figure 7 above). This process provides extensive situational information which will be used to inform my probes, discussions, and inputs. Here the participant is asked to consider each of these duties and describe their interpretations within their club and context. My role as a lead researcher at this stage is to seek additional detail and clarification of meaning and probe for examples that further illuminate the nature of the participant's understanding. In this context, my authenticity on the philosophical stance on what binds this thesis together, CR acknowledges the existence of a mind independent, structured, and changing reality rests on an ability to see and hear what technical changes are needed to encourage and instruct participants. This ensures that they can make those changes in their practice as well as produce responses and emotions in accordance with my questions and intentions.

### **5.3.2. Phase 2**

Next, I will direct the conversation with the participant through the sub-themes to enable the AM to make their connections between the layers (Figure 8, p126). This should move the learner deeper into their reflections and consideration of future needs. A key point here is that the linkages are not limited within the matrix (only permissible with helices that are in contact with one another). My own competence is displayed through the ability to produce an



immediate and spontaneous commentary on the participant’s performance and responses and the ability to offer practical advice. Moreover, the advice must be effective. The intention is that the matrix, task, and probes stimulate thought and discussion and will ultimately allow the participant to start the construction of their learning pathway based on their foundational wants and academy needs which is the focus of Phases 4 and 5.



**Figure 8: TDSNF Phase 2**

### 5.3.3. Phase 3

As lead researcher, my authority is also grounded in my biographically grounded experience in CR. This will be a useful framework for such areas of the social phase, for the participant to consider. Phase 3 topics will need to be addressed for a positive impact to be made upon their practice and their workforce. Consequently, my voice of experience is enrolled to give legitimate advice. This is achieved through anecdotes, rules of thumb and proverbial maxims and by reference to one’s own practical experience as a performer; it is also justified concerning other renowned TD practitioners. Here again, the AM can select topics to discuss and explore with me acting as the facilitator from any of the outer layers. The colours are simply being used to group related areas of practice and simplify the search process.



**Figure 9:** Example of Co-created Learning Pathway from the TDSNF exploration

#### **5.3.4. Phase 4**

This is when a final discussion will be conducted so that the AM can confirm the ‘learning pathways’ they have constructed from their different helix selections. For example, I will offer practical advice grounded in personal experience, mediated between explicit instruction and more personal, tacit knowledge. In this way, the AMs will have had the opportunity to plot their bespoke developmental routes by assessing themselves against their environmental needs and constraints whilst supported by myself acting as a critical friend who can check and challenge their selections. This can be linked to my own highly personal knowledge, conveying a ‘knowing’ form of authoritative advice (Figure 9 above).

#### **5.3.5. Phase 5**

Once the learning pathways have been established and agreed upon, specific goals and actions will be formulated between the AM, academy workforce and me. Here, I provide a pivotal role in not only supporting, communicating, and encouraging the AM over the agreed time frame but also in directing the AM to additional resources for consideration and implementation. After, we instigate a review mechanism dependent on the selected learning pathway as well as the participant’s bespoke requirements. Consequently, there is a semiotic chain to this form of data collection: CR domains interpret the participant’s performance within the activities and translate that into words and gestures; They then try to correct or improve that performance and therefore need to ‘translate’ their opinion into words and gestures. The participant then must translate those words and gestures into easy-to-read typologies and reports to link into the rugby foundational needs, the club’s DNA, and the academy’s national governance. Coincidentally, this is consistent with Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning cycle - 1. Concrete experience (they need to experience something); 2. Reflective observations (they are required to think about this experience); 3. Abstract C=conceptualism (they learn from this experience); and 4. Active experimentation (they tweak or conclude their responses).

Among the above descriptions, only summaries of the conclusions and implications are offered. This will therefore be covered in detail throughout the following chapter when we bring all the phases to life through the academy staff workshop, subsequent interviews, and key staff personal reflection. The following case study will suggest a future direction for effective TD schemes specifically for AMs and their coaching workforce working in the professional rugby league context.



Figure 10: Talent Development Self-Navigation Framework, or TDSNF full helix

## 5.4. Chapter Reflections

In the next chapter, the execution and presentation of the principal findings of the current investigation are described in detail. A *Case Study* seemed an appropriate design, to gain concrete, contextual, in-depth knowledge about AM's specific real-world whilst allowing the exploration of key characteristics, meanings, and implications of the TDSNF.

## 5.5. Chapter 5 reflexivity commentary

In building the intervention and the pilot in this study I did not assume there is a reality waiting to be discovered, nor that I will finally arrive at the truth. Nonetheless, what I would like to emphasise is that between reality and its representation is a process of knowledge construction which is cultural, partial, complex, and positioned within a social and historical context of the club and its AM. Greenhalgh *et al* (2018: 2) offered meaningful suggestions that when embarking on such a systematic investigation, the historical space within which my experience and knowledge are constructed is a singularly poignant connection to the AM's welfare, personal restraints, devolutions, the integrations of their professional duties, philosophy, and the organisation's own DNA.

Looping back on the spiral schematic to the earlier research points, I can see the correlation between my own experiences while working in these environments, the use of real-life stories has a long tradition within informal CPD and formal coach education. For example, I regularly share my own real-life stories to help candidates, or in this case participants formulate connections to theories. Therefore, to support the intensions of the TDSNF with narrative techniques, I aim to capture the AM's backstory, their flashbacks, flash-forward, and foreshadowing. Consistent with Bodily and Colby's (2023) advice, that by exploring their backstory refers to incidents that happened before these data collection events started, and any narratives' begin.

Therefore, it was vital that I plan engaging icebreakers so that the AM can reacquaint themselves with their earlier views and specifically go back in time to tell their own backstory around these sensitive views. While I had a rough bandwidth of research scope planned to help guide my reactions to the participants responses, (i.e., am I probing too much, and they become lost in their own reflections, or their body language is signalling that they need a break), I hope to use this much less as the study progresses because of how our relationship has flourished during the earlier studies. In this instance, I took on more of the role of a facilitator (Santos, 2023: 52) and simply let the participants discussions lead the process, particularly as it involves reflecting on their earlier views and the research findings. In this regard, I was present to help the AM navigate the discussions.

Interestingly, I found myself planning part of the next study. Taken together, the samples from the pilot will provide the AMs with the freedom to tell their story in a way that is meaningful to themselves. Their response will be the richest yet and filled with plots, sub-plots, characters, and the personality within the narrative will become clear. A good example was a follow-up

conversation within the pilot, where the AM discussed their club's own TiD policy compared with the research on international TiD, when the AM said, *these researchers' constantly talk about TiD globally, yet their findings never include anything that we look at*. Eventually, he exhausted the dialogue and needed a break.

Hence, it will be insightful in getting the AM to tell their story, revealing the gains from this in-depth data. While they will be willing to share their accounts, the revelation of truth, and the provision of a voice for participants (Creswell, 2012) will need to be moderated with well thought out questions, prompts and probes and supported with an agreement on managing their responses prior to the data collections tasks.

The pilot certainly helped me tweak and refine the phases and also give me encouragement that the EP intervention could establish whether the AMs previous views, values and beliefs are accurate and that they reflect the knowledge I had developed so far. The samples gained from the pilot went some way to easing my worries around how the AMs will interact especially due to the physical nature and embodiment of the data collection tasks here.

## **Chapter 6: A case study exploration into the professional duties of a high-performance Academy Manager: Creating an individualized learning plan using the Talent Development Self Navigation Framework (TDSNF)**

### **Background and context**

To progress the investigation into the professional duties of a Rugby League Academy Manager (AM) the explicit aim was to identify bespoke development needs through the operation of the **Talent Development Self Navigation Framework (TDSNF)**. This chapter adopts an original embodied pedagogy approach grounded in a critical realist view of the participant's TD domain. This chapter presents a full description of the framework's application as a case study example of the TDSNF in practice. Findings acknowledge how the facilitated TDSNF helped the AM reflect more fully on his 'real world' and 'foundational wants' and needs to co-create both an individual learning plan for himself and a TD development plan for his professional academy pathway. The main issues addressed in this paper are RO3 aims, with the feedback on the framework's content, structure, process, and outputs being extremely positive. Significant implications in adopting this approach more widely for coach education and learning are then presented.

### **6.1. Introduction**

Research investigating rugby Academy Managers' (AMs) learning experiences and personal development is a relatively unexplored area (see, chapters two and three). The AMs' multi-faceted job description, which includes internal and external leadership responsibility, and strategic and operational management activities, and is coupled with the requirement to deliver practical coaching sessions, makes investigation and recommendations for effective support extremely complex. Within the management and leadership development literature, a plethora of tools, models and interventions have evolved to support this ever-increasing market. Despite many being targeted at performance sports in previous chapters, the AMs found that none of these was perceived as fit for purpose (Wilkinson and Grecic, 2021). Indeed, even concerning the more practical on-field elements of their role, this sample of RL AMs did not see value in the support they had been offered. Nash and McQuade, (2014) highlight that this part is because the most effective mechanisms for educating and supporting coaches are still being contested, but this does not help the AMs who must deliver immediate results for their

employers. The debate over the content and form of best practice, therefore, continues in the general context of coach learning. Some studies have positioned the activity as a complex social system, where knowledge is produced based on coaches' everyday interactions within a particular socio-cultural context (Cushion and Jones, 2001; Jones, 2007). Jones and Wallace (2005) have described the common, traditional basis of coach learning as a series of competency based, taught, and assessed courses, which have mass appeal, are easy to administer and evaluate, that pass down information to candidates based on previous discourses. They also presented a counter position of more contemporary provision, however, that is focused on individualised, in situ, needs-led, flexible content delivered through a variety of mechanisms. The debate as to which approach is most effective continues but is even more prevalent within the High-Performance (HP) level of sport, the domain in which AMs operate, regardless of the recognition in coaching research and development that little ground has been made in proposing an appropriate reality-based, interdisciplinary approach to take account of their complex environment (Bowes and Jones, 2006). In response, it has been increasingly argued that the aim of coach learning should be to develop practitioners' 'quality of mind' so that they are better equipped to deal with the problematic and dynamic nature of their work (Cassidy *et al*, 2009; Jones, 2007). Encouraged by the previous findings in the HP domain (Wilkinson and Grecic, 2021), more work is needed to explore the most appropriate and effective methods to achieve such a valuable outcome.

As noted above the AM role is a very complex one that spans the disciplines of coaching, management, and leadership. This wide scope of work coupled with the unique nature of AMs' different contexts and environments in which they can, and do operate pose problems for large-scale, formal coach education programs that are promoted in many countries (Mallet, 2010). Therefore, this advocates the need for a more personalised methodology. Perhaps one that seeks to access and integrate AMs' existing knowledge with evidence-based research from their HP field to support their understanding of TD, determine how best to lead and manage it, and have the most positive impact on the issues that they face. Specifically, in the context of this chapter, it is believed that the adoption of an Embodied Pedagogy (EP), grounded in a Critical Realist (CR) appreciation of the HP environment that encourages learners to solve real-life problems utilising the TDSNF as this can offer a valuable new approach to AM learning.

As part of a wider Action Research (AR) programme, the findings from this case study will feed forward into future iterations and applications of these AM development frameworks. AR is a methodology that pursues outcomes of both action (change) and research (understanding). It involves cycles of reconnaissance, planning, action, reflection, and

interpretation (including the integration of theory), leading to improved understanding and learning (Tsai *et al*, 2004). It is this learning and understanding that one hopes to take and share by describing and reflecting on this experience of applying the TDSNF which has emerged and evolved out of this thesis's previous cycles of research.

## 6.2. The TDSNF

The TDSNF is a reflective and predictive professional development tool applied through a range of activities guided by an expert facilitator and underpinned by an embodied pedagogy (EP) approach. The process is split into 5 phases that take the participant on a 'journey' to explore, define, then identify their specific development needs which then leads to a co-created individualised and bespoke development plan and activities. A TDSNF diagram (Figure 11 below) is provided to help frame and guide the phases of this process.



Figure 11: The TDSBF full matrix



### **6.2.1. Phase 1**

This requires the AM to discuss, describe and assess themselves and how they interact with their team against the six professional duties laid out in the inner layer (Figure 7, p125). This process provides extensive situational information that is used to inform mentoring discussions and AM input. Here the participant is asked to consider each of these duties and describe their interpretations within their own club and context. The role of the facilitator at this stage is to seek additional detail, clarification of meaning and probe for examples which further illuminate the nature of the participant's understanding of their lived environment. The objective of this phase is for the AM to develop their TDE awareness so they can formulate a detailed self-assessment of their foundational wants and needs which concludes in Phase 5.

### **6.2.2. Phase 2**

Here conversation is directed to the layer 2 TD Enabler /Barrier sub-themes (Figure 8, p126) which are again based on this thesis' previous research with AMs (Wilkinson and Grecic, 2021b). The intention here is to enable the participant to make their own connections between the layers whilst referencing back to his own needs and that of his Academy and Club. The objective is to move the learner deeper into their reflections about their knowledge and practice to better consider their and others' future needs. Nb. linkages are not limited by direct contact, rather any layer 1 and layer 2 blocks can be explored if connected by the AM's perceived wants and needs.

### **6.2.3. Phase 3**

This phase exposes the AM to the key factors they have identified and how they are experienced and currently managed within the AM's environment. The participant is then asked to select further elements from the outer layers (Figure 11, p131) to identify the areas that need to be addressed for a positive impact to be made upon their own and/or their workforce's professional practice.

### **6.2.4. Phase 4**

A 'learning pathway' (Figure 9, p127) is now constructed using the different helix blocks selected in the previous phases. Prioritisation of needs takes place during this phase and the participant's previous learning experiences, preferences, resource availability and motivations

are discussed to inform the final stage of this process. In this phase clarification is sought on the scope of control the AM holds over each of these selections and who else can play a significant role in facilitating any required change.

### **6.2.5. Phase 5**

Once the learning pathway has been established and agreed upon, specific goals and actions are formulated between the AM and researcher. Here the AM is encouraged and supported to design a bespoke development plan for themselves and the workforce that they manage. The facilitators' role here is to help shape actions that will have value in the AM's specific TDE whilst also providing advice and signposting to appropriate learning resources.

## **6.3. Embodied Pedagogy**

A related focus of this chapter is also to utilise an embodied pedagogy (EP) approach in applying the TDSNF. The motivation is a strong belief in embodiment (for example, the importance of representing things in a tangible or visible form), and embodied pedagogy's role in joining body and mind in a physical and mental act of knowledge construction (Nguyen and Larson, 2015). EP has its roots in the work of John Dewey and his promotion of 'active learning' which encouraged students to utilise all their bodily senses to learn. EPs are described by Forgasz (2015: 116) as "holistic approaches to teaching and learning". Whilst according to MacIntyre and Buck (2008), EPs help redefine issues related to the mind, body, and emotions. In creating the TDSNF above, the intention has been to embed EP to challenge participants to handle this complexity as well, to connect to the domain of empirical experiences (Radulescu and Vessey, 2008) and reflect on their daily interactions with colleagues and players (Wilkinson and Grecic, 2020).

This research also explores another key element of embodiment such as, the embodied language system shared between humans and challenges the predominance of the participant's mind in theories of subjectivity. Hearing what the AM has to say within the TDSNF as part of the process of learning, designing solutions and disseminating findings aims to increase engagement. The potential benefits that flow from challenging and consulting AMs within this process are described as "involving students... in educational decision-making and listening seriously to their stories of experiences as learners [are] essential first steps in developing education" (Niemi *et al*, 2010: 139). As a final prompt for the reader, it may be highlighted that during the activities and conversations the focus of attention is on how the

participant's emotions influence the behavioural, cognitive, and conative aspects of their interactions with the tasks. Understanding these as experiences at the nexus of self-understanding and social relations that are “dynamic, unpredictable, and co-created” (Burkitt, 2014: 19) is critical to best facilitate a positive change. Therefore, to summarise one's use of EP in the context of this chapter, EP will underpin any individual attempts to enact the TDSNF, the procedures we adopt in this data collection practices, and it will allow us to enhance the development of a collective understanding of the challenges and opportunities surrounding the use of EPs in AM engagement.

#### **6.4. The need for the TDSNF**

The previous chapters (see, two, three and four) found the AMs to possess socially constructed practical senses and dispositions of expertise in their daily work. It was evident however that their experience of support available to facilitate the development of said expertise was not a positive one and did not have the desired impact on their practice. Many were critical of what they considered to be a *one size fits all* approach provided by the sport's governing body, its accreditation system, and 'bought in' specialists. Rather they reflected that they required bespoke programme content, shaped by specific time-sensitive pressures, reflective of the real 'lived' challenges that they faced within their own club's TDE. In response to these demands the TDSNF has been developed following this current review of the TD literature, exploration in HP teams, and further investigation with seven HP AMs (Wilkinson and Grecic, 2019; 2020; 2021a). Key findings from these studies identified that AMs are required to enact various roles (a select few: cultural architect, succession planner, life coach mentor, sports craft teacher, and character builder) to effectively complete the complex array of professional duties that their roles demand.

It was evident from the latest findings that AMs needed help to navigate the multifaceted and challenging environment in which they each existed with all its hidden and observable structures, systems and mechanisms bearing influence on their practice. The AMs in these previous chapters all noted that only if meaningful support could be put in place would they become better equipped in managing their varied stakeholders and achieving their organisational goals whilst simultaneously supporting the development of all those around them. Therefore, the purpose of this chapter was to test the TDSNF in practice utilising an embodied pedagogy approach with an AM currently active in the highest level of their sport.

The aims of this chapter were therefore:

1. To practically apply the framework utilising an embodied pedagogy approach.
2. To gain participant feedback about the framework's usage and value.
3. To identify further modification/development of the TDSNF.

## **6.5. Methods**

The chapter adopted a position of critical realism (CR) whilst conducting the research. CR is a branch of philosophy that distinguishes between the 'real' world and the 'observable' world in which we all exist. Initiated by Roy Bhaskar's work CR promotes that the 'real' cannot be observed and exists independent from fallible human perceptions, theories, and/or events that individuals experience or see (Bhaskar, 1978). Critical realism views one's existence as stratified, that is, consisting of three layers – the real, the actual and the empirical (Bhaskar, 1998c). It is the 'real' but often hidden bio-psycho-social worlds and their complex interactions that promote or inhibit the 'actual' actions, behaviours, events, and objects that are empirically witnessed or feel (Bhaskar, 2010). From this viewpoint, the study of the AM's development needs must first endeavour to fully understand the natural, social, and psychological structures that bear influence upon all the stakeholders within the AM's world to uncover why current practices exist and why alternatives may or may not gain traction from those involved.

Reflecting on my own experiences living in the real world of professional Rugby League and both myself and my second supervisor's extensive work in the Academy level of the Talent Pathway (Figure 5, p92) is an example of a CR representation of the world in which the participant exists and an aid to help unravel any hidden truths that he may hold. Despite little CR research having been conducted within this domain, studies by Julian North and colleagues in the sports coaching context have supported the existence and highlighted three key features of critical realism: (1) ontological depth; (2) layering and emergence in social practice; and (3) open systems and complexity (See North, 2013; 2017). Taking this frame of reference, one can identify a complex, multi-layered association of the AM interactions between the tasks and their professional duties. This adapted CR model (Figure 12, p136) of a framework by Radescu and Vessey (2008) depicts the description by North (2013, 2017) and an emphasis that the professional duties and relationships to the tasks can be understood to exist within a stratified, laminated, emergent, open system that contains an assemblage of wants and needs for the AM that have a relationship to rugby academy.

The AMs foundational wants that are intertwined with the academy development needs will

become new entities in TDE taking different forms such as physical, cultural, biological, or social. These all are tightly linked to the social relations and institutional structures of the professional club they belong to. It is therefore from this CR standpoint that the TDSNF is applied in this chapter.



**Figure 12:** CR Domain Model 'adapted' from Radulescu and Vessey (2008)

### 6.5.1. Research Design – A case study approach

A single case study approach was selected as the most appropriate method to first test the framework's application. The intention here is to provide a deep dive into the application and utility of the TDSNF with a single case study approach providing rich and detailed findings for myself to reflect upon (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Gerring, 2004; Sturman, 1997). This perspective enables the synthesis of the empirical domain with a critical realist understanding of the underlying reasons, mechanisms and structures that provide insight into a particular issue, and helps to develop ideas and hypotheses (Conole, 1993; Merriam, 1988). This current critical realist approach provides us with an opportunity to use this case study as an orientating structure, to analyse causal relationships and connections in a similar fashion to the work of North (2013a), in addition to Jones and Wallace (2005). In this case study however, the interest is in uncovering the hidden truths that bear influence upon the foundations of the AM's personal and organisational goals and wider bio-psycho-social and environmental influences that inhibit or enable the AM's professional development.

### **6.5.2. Participant**

Purposeful sampling was undertaken to recruit a single British high-performance AM. In line with the selection criteria applied in the previous chapter of HP AMs' to qualify the participant was required to have had more than ten years of experience working in this TD setting, appropriate professional coaching and management qualifications, full-time employment status at the club and possession of an AM role dedicated to supporting players in the transition stage of development. This case study's selected participant meets all the above criteria. He was also a former youth international who had progressed through his club's own academy system to become a professional rugby league player. Concerning the participant's coaching and management career, he had attended numerous TD workshops and projects thus demonstrating a strong awareness of TD theories and concepts. He had also been instrumental in developing pioneering TD projects and partnerships.

Through an initial scoping conversation, the participant described the practical requirements of his role as including dedicated coaching time, such as a combination of on-field practice sessions and off-field support (leading footage of game reviews/previews), delivering mental skills workshops, planning physical development sessions (strength and conditioning, rehabilitation, prehab) and leading individual/group planning activities with their workforce. As such, the participant easily met Ericsson *et al*, (2007) inclusion criteria to define a high-performance professional in the sport. For example, someone working with highly skilled athletes in a sporting environment that focuses primarily on outcomes.

### **6.5.3. Pilot Study**

A pilot study with a high-level ex-International and SL coach who was also experienced working in the TD area. The purpose of this pilot study was to explore any potential difficulties with the TDSNF's application. In particular, the focus was on how the participant would comprehend the different concepts, use of language, and delivery mechanisms for each of the different phases, all of which had been designed to be reflective of the AM's working practices. Initial results were very favorable however some confusion was evident, and clarification was sought from the participant regarding how to proceed with respect to Phase 2. Specifically, this phase could separate the sub-themes presented into those associated with cognitive, emotional, behavioural, and conative aspects of their work to gain a deeper insight into their emotions, behaviours, and environmental needs. These recommendations were considered and reflected upon before being accepted and modifications were made to the procedure

below. The participant also highlighted the perceived repetition and cross-over of the final two phases (4 and 5). Once again, this feedback was acted upon with a specific activity designed to allow the clear demarcation of both stages.

#### 6.5.4. Data Collection Procedure

As described above the modified TDSNF was applied utilising an EP approach and underpinned by a CR perspective of the participant’s environment. Institutional ethics approval was sought and received for this research project. To collect data, workshop activity-style tasks were designed, supplemented by semi-structured interview questions, scenarios, stories, questions, prompts and probes which all linked to the TDSNF themes. This dynamic strategy sought information about the participant’s expert knowledge but also how he applied and implemented such knowledge into his management practice. This approach provided an opportunity for the participant to add further information he felt important to the framework topic. During these interactions, all data were recorded through notetaking, an audio recording of the interview questions and responses, photographs of ongoing activities and their endpoints, interactions, post-it notes and activity card chains (see Figure 13, Photo Collection 1 below) which were all collected and stored in a secure hard drive but made available to the participant after the event for reflection and validation.

Where possible the participant’s raw data is presented verbatim within this case study. However, due to the highly competitive nature of professional sport and the sensitivity of some of the information disclosed, many examples have had to be amended to ensure confidentiality. Nevertheless, great care has been taken to ensure that those presented are still able to portray full meaning and offer a true representation of what was discussed and produced together throughout each phase.



Figure 13: Photo Collection 1

## **6.6. The Case Study**

Here the AM was asked to discuss, describe, and assess himself against the six professional duties laid out in the TDSNF's inner layer (Figure 7, p125). He was encouraged to list as many strengths as possible and weaknesses he perceived in his own operation of the duties and those of his team through which he worked to bear influence. He was asked to make as many notes as possible that could be used within this first phase but referred to throughout the case study intervention. This first activity was a departure point for encouraging the participant to think about his role as a talent developer in its widest context. This process provided extensive situational information, which was used to inform the discussion and facilitator's inputs. The task was also designed to activate awareness of any existing connections the AM had with his academy workforce (full-time coaches/sports scientists etc. as well as any volunteers).

### **6.6.1. Phase 1 interactions**

To facilitate active learning within this phase a "Build Your Ideal Player" activity was devised (Figure 15, Photo Collection 2, p142). This gave the phase 1 the professional duty themes (Figure 14, p141) a central point of discussion with the participant, ultimately, linking the creation of personal and/or workforce training needs to the six professional duties to attain their ultimate objective. In this activity, the participant was first instructed to reflect on the professional duties and his own post-it notes and describe how each could influence an aspect of the 'Ideal Player.' Here the facilitator helped the AM expand his knowledge of the professional duties by starting to relate to key TD Enablers / Barriers (Layer 2 items) which he would later build upon in Phase 2. The participant then had to arrange his selections to form the shape of an 'Ideal Player' with each element that he had discussed corresponding to a body part in some representational way. The subtle emphasis on trying to verbalise the framework's content through the lens of creating the 'Ideal Player' stretched the perspective of the participant to think outside of their immediate needs. The activity aimed to generate a more empathic view of a player's sports experiences (Tomm *et al*, 1998) and the overt choice of a player's body was an attempt to bring into life the embodied pedagogy underpinning the exploration, where EP aims to create the lived body, the body as linking self and world in an ongoing dynamic inter-relationship (Connell,1995).





**Figure 14:** The Professional Duties Utilised within Phase 1 of the TDSNF

### 6.6.2. Results from Phase 1

The participant found discussing the model's six professional duties to be enjoyable and extremely beneficial in organising his thinking about the various elements and the connections to his lived world at his own HP Academy. This was evident by the extensive post-it notes produced and linkages discussed from his white board jottings (see Figure 13, Photo Collection 1, p138). Reflecting on this initial part of the process he stated,

*“The advantages for the academy in taking this approach (focusing on the professional duties) in terms of its engagement with the players’ entire community...erm, it’s part of that virtual cycle of engaging their (academy player) community, supplying the first team and then getting more people involved. the challenge now is for the wider club to understand the importance of getting that development model right”.*

Once the AM felt that he had discussed and explored everything he wanted to, he was given the ‘Build Your Ideal Player’ task. Here again, the AM made vivid connections back and forth from the framework to his own professional practice and that of his team. He was asked to explore his selection for Head, Trunk, Arms, and Legs and link back to the professional duties and his exploratory post-it notes. An example of this during the activity when the AM explained his selections regarding the legs linked to Philosophical Alignment and Psychosocial Nurturing because,

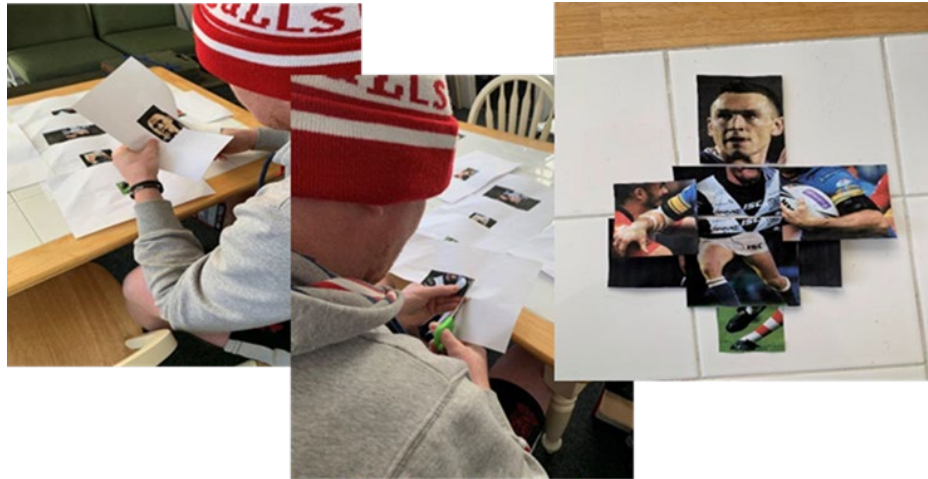
*“The Ideal Player’ is carrying the character and integrity of the academy, providing power in the same way his legs might when he’s playing, ...(this)would be ideal for these more experienced academy players to pass on to the new players”.*

This process of making connections was not easy for the participant. Often there would be long pauses in conversation and then a request for more detail or clarification from the facilitator. To stimulate a deeper appreciation, the facilitator would offer a range of prompts and probes. For example, when the AM was considering ‘psychological nurturing of players’ the facilitator asked the AM to go back to a time when he was in his players’ position by asking a series of questions for reflection,

*“What is your favorite playing memory? Ask yourself how did it make you feel when your mum/dad got involved in how you played? What did your mum/dad do or not do that got you frustrated?”*

The participant thought hard before sharing his feelings, more questions, and ideas to clarify his thinking.

Whilst articulating these points the AM was again encouraged to look back at his post-it notes and add any new insights or items, he wanted to discuss them in more depth later. Sequentially, these conversations led to phase 2 of the TDSNF. Interestingly in this phase the AM explained that discussions such as these were extremely rare, as this kind of knowledge-sharing seldom happened across his academy workforce. In fact, the participant stated that this was the first time that he had discussed coaching practices with people outside of his own group. It was fascinating to see the AM’s shift in perspective during this first phase. Specifically, the players’, coaches’ and volunteers’ educational processes play a significant role in establishing workforce connectivity and staff training. This contrasted with his initial view that managing players’ training and playing was all that mattered for him if he was to be successful.



**Figure 15:** Photo Collection 2

### **6.6.3. Phase 2 interactions**

Consistent with previously mentioned intentions to explore the 'domain of empirical experiences' (Radulescu and Vessey, 2008), the conversation with the participant was directed around the Phase 2 TD enabler/barrier sub-themes (Figure 8, p126) intending to support the AM to make his own connections between the layers: thus, moving deeper into their personal reflections and linking forward to identifying the AM's future needs. The participant was given a worksheet (Figure 16, p144) with a diagram of the matrix's first 2 layers. In response to the pilot study, the AM was guided through the process to see the different elements as grouped together as cognitive and emotional, behavioural, and conative factors influencing their TDE. From the three areas, the conative level served as the starting point to help them connect with the purpose (workforce development and psych-social nurturing), whilst the cognitive and emotional sections were used to progress learner cognition (organisational connectivity and player transitions) and the behavioural section concluded with some metaphysical tenets (philosophical alignment and legacy building). The chunking of sections was used as a reference point for discussion, specifically focusing on how the framework elements were only visible to the AM and others working closely within the academy.

Aligned with the aim of applying the framework by utilising an embodied pedagogical approach helped adapted the famous party game of 'Twister', where the participant was asked to place two or more of his limbs inside 3 or 4 individual shapes (Figure 17, Photo Collection 3, p146). Similar coloured shapes were spaced out on the floor. It was made clear that when discussing a theme, the participant must have one foot in their 'main theme' and the other limb in a

'foundational personal need.' For example, psycho-social nurturing of players (foot), mental skills (hand) and creating self-sufficient players (hand). In modern-day society, everybody is aware of the party game 'Twister'. Here the AM perceived a connection between themes, (and a more kinesthetic way of learning) where he was asked to describe how and why he had made those choices. To develop this activity and check for learning (meaning making), the AM was then given a hypothetical scenario in which,

*'One of their academy players was substituted out of a game for the reserves for poor play and criticised harshly by the senior coaching staff.'*

Based on this scenario, the participant was asked to describe what they thought their immediate words and actions might be.

Next, the participant was asked to consider one of the above sections and think about what their own thoughts and feelings might be in the scenario as well as how this would potentially influence their actions. The AM was then asked to place his limbs onto what he perceived as relevant themes within the model. Finally, he was asked to consider where he saw clear relationships and associations between the framework and the scenario, and to think about the themes within the model, his current understanding of his club's real world and what would /could he do to prevent something like this happening through his own actions and/or his academy programme.

This complex task's objective was to have the AM fully engaged in the activity where his embodied reactions to the tasks could reach a state in which his attention seemed effortless (Allen-Collinson, 2009). This task was also designed to facilitate an increased understanding of the importance of the TD factors within the academy as well as the relationship between the work groups (academy manager and their workforce) which were highlighted in the discussion about their behaviours, emotions, and thoughts and wants. This 'method' for deriving knowledge is perhaps better described as a phenomenological attitude, an orientation to the world, a way of looking, 'an attitude of attentiveness to the things of immediate experience' (Van den Berg, 1972).



**Figure 16:** TD Barriers and Enablers in the TDSNF

#### 6.6.4. Results from Phase 2

The first discussion in Phase 2 followed the AM receiving and looking at the Figure 16 diagram (above). This allowed the participant to make some early connections between the themes within the model. This was emphasised when the AM said,

*“So, the challenge from here is... well, erm...what does being an ‘Established Elite Player’ look like? We’ll (academy workforce) have a look at our programme and now we have broken that down in to three aspects that we are going to really focus on getting right as well as the continuous unfolding and rolling out the whole player development bits that will run underneath that, erm...we already cover three areas in terms of our reserve grade programme, our scouting system and our embedding the pathway strategy, those are the three areas...erm, but now we (academy workforce) focused on connecting to these to the inner 5 and making our 3 fit within these 5”.*

Then upon receiving the ‘Twister’ (Phase 2) instructions the AM was directed to physically make the connections whilst exploring each TD enabler/barrier in his own specific context. The facilitator noted each selection, and additional content from the discussions and these

additions were added to the post-it notes on the wall. The AM was then given the scenario to test his understanding. Upon listening to the scenario and looking at the shapes spaced out on the floor, the participant started by reflecting on their own game day/in-match behaviours. They described a range of coaching behaviours, from verbal aggression to encouragement, care, and support. The participant was instructed to list the different words and actions they noticed within themselves. These too were then added as post-it notes on the wall. These personal insights were key points of reference as the participant moved his limbs into the themes (Phase 2). This enabled a deeper probing into how the themes on the floor connected with some of the behaviours on the post-its. In these discussions, the AM attempted to describe both his own thoughts, feelings and foundational wants as well as consider which behaviours of his workforce might be associated with these. This activity ended with a discussion about what he had 'uncovered' and how this new awareness corresponded to the framework themes.

This AM's feedback about this activity supported this project's hopes for the framework's utility and that value of EP to raise the participant's sensory systems to replicate his daily working conditions, particular the part where he was able to visualise how his workforce would need to respond to the TD challenges he had 'discovered'. A closer inspection of the AM's Phase 2 results highlighted the participant's own process of becoming an effective AM over time, but he explained that this could be hampered markedly by his lack of **organisational connectivity**. This was clear when the participant said,

*"Without discussing it with other people (senior and volunteer coaches) erm...I just believe in not bothering them, erm...just get on with my job, whatever it is and just getting that understanding that actually no! it is all you know about rugby coaching, erm...if we don't discuss it and we don't agree a way forward in each of us (academy, senior and volunteer coaches) then it's not linked together, then we are always going to be pulling against each other".* The AM then reflected on the task and his discussions and explained, *"I think there was a bit of that (lack of alignment and connection) going on previously whereas this (task) could help knit that together a little bit more".*

Moving onto the presented scenario, the participant considered how his desire to see his players be successful in the senior teams might cause him to feel frustration and could have caused him to act in a way that would not have necessarily been productive for helping the player succeed,

*"I openly rubbish this type of coach, and his views both during and after the game, erm...in actual fact if I knew more about a number of things (psych-social, welfare, mental toughness) I could have helped prevent this."*

In addition, the scenario prompted the participant to consider the priority that he would give to designing appropriate challenges with high levels of support for the academy players. However, he also noted a clear disconnect between this ‘foundational want’ and his coaches’ current behaviours (which are providing confusing messages, delivering poorly considered coaching sessions, and portraying a stressed and pressured persona). The AM expressed his desire to change future coaching behaviours to be more congruent with his players and his team’s training needs.

In summary, results from this phase demonstrated that the labels, classification, and organisation of data required in relation to the TDSNF’s main themes, concepts and categories were all necessary for the participant to immerse himself in the activities. Moreover, it also demonstrated that the aim of the use of the EP approach and the framework had the desired effect which included, “*I am knackered, but this is ideal for me and my staff...fun too.*”



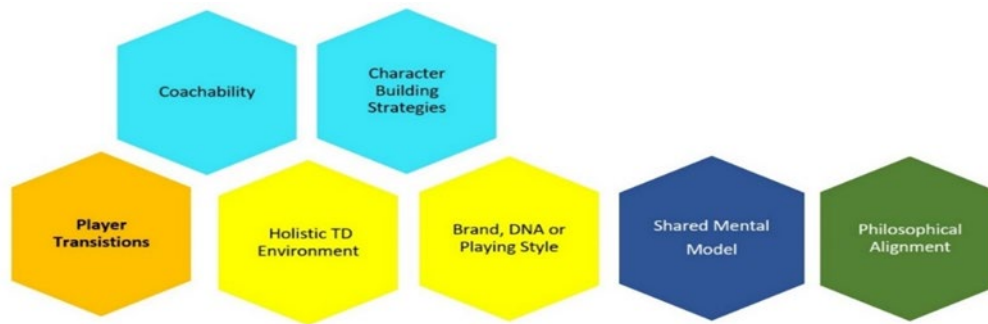
**Figure 17:** Photo Collection 3

### 6.6.5. Phase 3 interactions

The title for this task was “Blockbuster”. Two ideas from the sports coaching research literature were important in the design of this workshop activity: First, that coaches in youth sports operate as a part of a system (Werthner and Trudel, 2009), and second, that expert coaches adapt their involvement and support based on the development of their players (Sherwin *et al*, 2016). The purpose of this task was to generate discussion about how the AM’s actions reflected his ‘Player TD progression’ role while supporting the coach-athlete-succession triangle with players moving between the different environments in the club’s talent pathway), and how the AM’s role changes as their academy players and coaches develop. This phase was for the participant to consider which of the framework’s themes and categories needed to be addressed for a positive impact to be made upon his practice, and/or that of their workforce and ultimately their players. Here the active link with narrative methodology was once again expanded upon by drawing on the participant’s personal biography and his empirical, actual, and real worlds of practice.

Here, the AM was now asked to select themes from any of the outer layers that he would like to discuss and explore. The assorted colours in the outer layers are being used to group related areas of TD practice (tenets of TD) that had been established from this thesis’s previous exploration of rugby league AMs work (Wilkinson and Grecic, 2021). This also served to simplify the search process. Next, the participant received several small index cards that corresponded with the links they had made in the “Twister” activity (Figure 19, Photo Collection 4, p149), the facilitator having recorded all interactions and listed all the various elements discussed. The AM was then asked to prioritise the cards based on his ‘foundational wants’ that had emerged from Phase 1. This required the AM to rank order the layer 1 professional duties he had engaged with, select those which he identified had the most scope to have a positive impact on his world, and then by using the additional cards provided by the facilitator, map out how to get from this foundational want starting point to the specific areas of impact (TD tenets). This process involved the AM arranging, re-arranging, discussing, and discarding various matrix elements to plot their own route to proficiency in either sub-themes or professional duties which would have the desired final effect. During this activity, the role of the facilitator was to highlight all potential influences, knowledge and change agents that would be needed to have an impact in the AM’s world.





**Figure 18:** An Example of a Co-created Learning Pathway

### 6.6.6. Results from Phase 3

An indicative example of how the ‘blockbuster’ activity provoked AM learning was when the AM selected the professional duty of **philosophical alignment** to explore with the facilitator, leading to a **Co-created Learning Pathway** (Figure 18 above). After considering the different layer 2 TD enabler/barrier sub-themes and TD tenet elements (outer layers), combining, removing, rearranging, and looking back over the post-it notes and connections from the earlier phases, he concluded,

*“This requires supporting our staff development and learning, which in turns needs a culture of continuous learning, it must reflect the club’s traditional values and technical alignment to the clubs playing models...erm, all these are physical models, erm...more than just a paper exercise or a mental blueprint (shared mental model)”.*

The participant then combined his collective index cards and sorted the newly attained cards into the categories so that links above, below and side to side were made in relation to how he perceived each had importance or influence in his search for the desired outcome. During this process, he paused several times which prompted the facilitator to ask what the problem was. The AM explained that although he placed immense value in his choices, he did not feel that he had complete control over the successful application of the card’s topic and thus whether he should include it. To enable the activity to progress the AM was asked to consider his earlier notes again and whose responsibility it was to complete each part of the objective. Continuing this example, the AM then described,

*“**Sharing mental models** is a sport-craft coaching need (foundational want) and should be developed and delivered under the senior coach’s guidance, whereas **club brand or playing style** should be developed and delivered by the senior management or board of directors”.*

This 'ownership' theme was developed further in the next phase of this chapter. In conclusion, **Organisation Connectivity** is now a **Foundational Need** and a **NEW** agent. When reflecting on the results from Phase 2 and Phase 3, it was clear that the participant had found the activities and probes thought-provoking. An example of this can be seen when he asked hypothetical questions about the differences between how their academy coaching workforce may respond in terms of how their responsibilities might change once they have attended a bespoke training workshop,

*“This is a really important process, erm...this has helped me, erm...to see different sides of the club’s staff, erm... so, in the past I might have only seen like one side of the senior coach or CEO whereas this taught me to look a little bit different and maybe use them (clubs workforce) in a different kind of way, so that is opened my eye up to that and making sure that my coaches are not all going to have all of the attributes that you might want but just fill in the gaps in what they need and what they’ve not got but...erm, I like it... we have to create the environment where you can see that, erm... definitely.”* (Phase 3 task).

He concluded with a reflection on staff appraisals and found that the academy’s staff workload model is an ideal space for them to take on new challenges and roles.



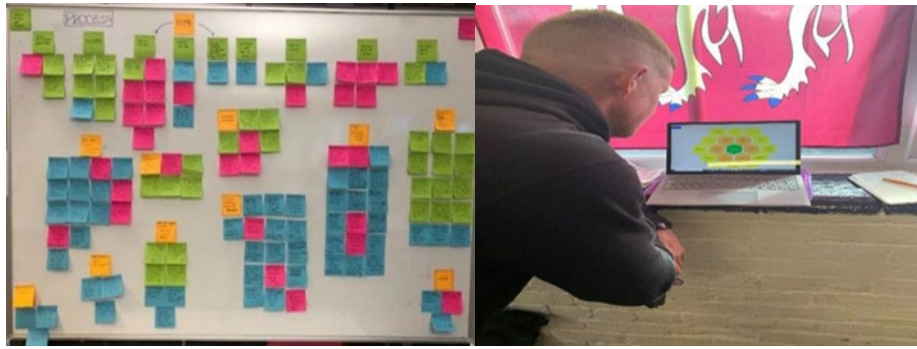
**Figure 19:** Photo Collection 4

### **6.6.7. Phase 4 interactions**

The main aim of this phase was for the AM to confirm the various 'action pathways' he had co-constructed with the facilitator and gain clarity on how to ensure they would have the most positive impact on improving their players' potential for progression. First, the AM was asked to assess himself against the selections he had made in Phase 3. In particular, he was encouraged to find any gaps in skills or knowledge and consider how these could be best resolved by himself or others. Linking directly to this task was a more detailed exploration of each pathway and who could best support the elements he had selected. The AM was also asked to articulate his own exact role in achieving each pathway's aim. The hope here was that this would also supply the AM an opportunity to reflect on his thoughts (via being directed to the post-it notes again) and provide time and space to plot his own bespoke developmental needs by assessing himself against his environmental needs and especially the 'gaps' that he would have to fill if his academy team were to be successful.

This activity was supported by the facilitator acting as a critical friend to check and challenge his selections. When probing, carefully designed questions are needed in preparation for any deeper investigation, which certainly helped this was a 'Task - Role Sort' activity was introduced to help the AM prove a deeper understanding of his foundational wants for his academy environment building upon that which he started to establish during Phase 2. Here the AM was asked to group the post-it notes collated from the earlier phases together to represent the different tasks that would need to be completed if the pathway objectives were to be achieved. It was hoped that this would also help the AM distribute tasks to specific people and groups within his club and team (Figure 20, Photo Collection 5, p151).

Following this task-role sort, the AM was asked to return to the question of his own part within the action pathway. Here the AM found the questioning confusing on what was being asked for. To help clarify the information needed the AM was given two further tasks to complete. First the AM was asked to supply a mission statement for his Academy and club. Secondly, based on the responsibilities and qualities he produced; the AM was instructed to think of a name other than "Academy Manager" that would define how they saw their role. Examples of roles brainstormed by the AM included "The Facilitator", "The Chief", "The Orchestrator", "The Holiday Camp Director" and "The Support System."



**Figure 20:** Photo Collection 5

#### **6.6.8. Results from Phase 4**

The conversation in phase 4 generated a good discussion on how the AM's role fitted into player TD progression whilst also fostering consideration of the changing roles he faces throughout the development of the academy player. During the 'Task Role-Sort' activity, the participant struggled to definitively link tasks with right staff roles (senior coaches, academy sports science support, academy coaches or CEO etc.). The follow-up tasks helped the AM make sense of his own purpose (mission and role) which then allowed a clearer allocation of responsibilities to other members of his club. Discussions covered a range of related topics but always circled back to help the AM confirm his own identity and role. As an example, when talking about athlete autonomy the AM asked, "*Am I the Facilitator?*". Here this was an explicit reference to him exploring his job as supplying both support as well as agency to his players and staff. Developing this point, the AM modelled what this could/should look like in his context. He further described his surprise at how many of his current tasks and responsibilities could be passed along to his coaches, and he noted how he could change and flex the specifics as his players developed,

*"This is never ending for me, erm... I must continually improve; the programme must continually evolve, and the coaches can either do the same or become experts with an age group by growing their knowledge in that range."*

This phase focused on preparing the AM to consider bespoke learning activities for their academy to achieve his desired outcomes (Phase 4) and was welcomed with mixed emotions by the participant. The prompt intervention from the research of 'drafting their own personal mission statement based on the role' provided them with a great opportunity to reflect and subsequently develop a greater understanding of their respective leadership beliefs and behaviours. In particular, the participant admitted,

*“It was good reflection, and sometimes you think that maybe it’s just a box ticking exercise that you’ve been doing over and over again for years, but now you’ve actually got to formulate it, erm... and do it. I’ve been doing this for all this time, but I’ve never had to actually tell anybody or demonstrate it in that respect...erm, God knows how I am going to sell this to our CEO so he can support it.”*

### **6.6.9. Phase 5 interactions**

The aim of this final phase was to utilise the results from the AM’s experiences in the previous 4 phases to co-create an effective and bespoke training course for the AM and his coaching academy team. This process started with the AM being asked to check his own summary of needs and wants against his Phase 4 card selections and the extended body of work he had created throughout the workshop (post-it notes, white board notes and linkages, build an ideal player/blockbuster sheet etc.). This review helped the AM and facilitator compare the themes and sub-themes with each other and clarify any last points of interest. Lastly, the descriptive summaries that were generated during the activities were aligned with the selected cards and incorporated into the conversation that not only justified the selected actions but supplied detailed explanatory accounts for the required interventions both personally and the AM’s Academy.

### **6.6.10. Results from Phase 5**

Following final discussions about the AM’s selections, the prioritised ‘action pathways’ were molded into a clear development plan for the Academy. Figure 18 (p148) offers an indicative example of how one area would be represented. In addition, an individual learning plan was again co-created for the AM (Table 3, p154). For each of these TDSNF outputs each matrix element (professional duty, TD enabler/barrier, TD tenets) is considered against how it can be best applied, improved or learned about in the case study’s specific context. Short-term aims have been identified with follow-up actions agreed upon. Clarity has been supplied over who will take overall responsibility, when a positive change will occur by, and importantly what training will be actioned to achieve the action pathway’s desired outcome.

As a final review of the whole TDSNF process, the AM provided this invaluable feedback,

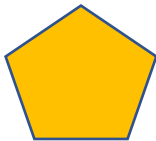


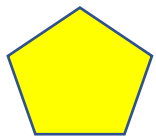
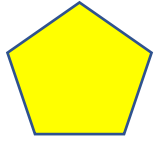
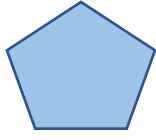
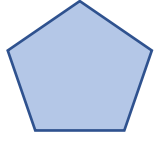
*“Having done these (tasks) I have more depth to our gaps in knowledge, which probably made engaging with the tasks (and scenarios) easier. Had we just talked about me and the academy in an interview, then I would have been a little bit nervier,*

*erm...thinking what's going on here?...Now I am into that mind set of identifying what would need to be done to solve these (the tasks)... a lot of that information that we'd discussed and re-discussed,...now, at first hand I could apply this to my list of priorities”*

Table 2 below is the AM outcomes from the entire task; the ‘Academy Ecological Development Programme’ from the Phase 5 tasks and subsequent discussions, which is based on the AMs priority action intended to improve the philosophical alignment of all Academy coaches and staff regarding what is needed for positive player transition to occur at this club. The AM prioritised areas selected from Phases 1, 2 and 3, short-term actions and key actors /stakeholders from role sort, follow up actions from discussion in Phase 4 all linking back to the role sort task which helped construct this learning system.

Priority areas for development	Short Term Aim	Follow up actions	Who supports the need	By When Example	How is this achieved
Player Transition	Meet with senior coaches	Design a Programmes for coaching staff and a Workforce Education Programme	Head of High Performance, Senior Coaches	ASAP	Collaboration with senior coaches
Shared Mental Models				Dec 21	Workshop Booked
Philosophical alignment				Jan 22	Workshop Booked
Holistic TDE				Feb 22	Workshop Booked
Brand or community reputation	Meet with CEO & Board	Academy Coach programme	CEO and Board Members	ASAP	Collaboration with CEO & Board
Coachability	Collaboration with academy coaches		National Course Information, Coaching Consultant and Head of Coaching	Nov 21	Training by Head of Coaching
Character Building			March 22	Training with Coaching Consultant	

**Table 2:** An Academy Ecological Development Programme exemplar

Priority Areas Identified during TDSNF Activities	AMs Foundational Wants	Academy Foundational Needs	Agreed Actions
 Player Transitions	Managing up and down the pathway. Building relationships with senior staff, designated staff to manage.	Senior staff to mentor academy, junior and volunteer coaches. Moderation of essential skills.	Phase 1: scoping meeting with a sample of entire workforce to agree essential environmental needs. Phase 2 to follow outcomes.
 Shared Mental Models	Developing a Sports-craft CPD Programme design and management	The entire club's rugby workforce uses the same coaching, training and performance methods.	Head coach to run a series of moderated workshops
 Philosophical Alignment	Multidisciplinary leadership skills and interdisciplinary management	The central language used by all staff, playing, training, coaching and TiD recruitment terms need to be agreed upon,	Scoping meetings with leading delegates and seeking external leadership mentors or valid training courses.
 Holistic TD Environment	Aligning evidence-based research to all activities, including senior management down to volunteers.	Coaching workforce having the ability to articulate and agreed TD model in their coaching, grading and programmes.	Contact University partner for ideal delegate to train staff or raise awareness of TD models and applications methods
 DNA/Brand	Programming all activities that is aligned to the club's artefacts and culture	articulation of the club's brand and constant alignment to the club's social cultural reputation.	Conduct research project with senior staff and ex-players on ideal player model
 Coachability	Developing tools and methods to engage the academy population that is receptive to feedback, to receiving constructive criticism and will use that feedback and constructive criticism to improve their performance.	Personal development goals that are underpinned to a culture of continuous learning	Design a TD tracking criteria and monitoring tool. Consult key coaching staff.
 Character building	Articulating values into programmes of humility, charity, authority, and inclusion principles.	Workforce charter design and management, including code of conduct.	Scoping meeting with key leading staff and builds a staff charter. AM to manage

**Table 3:** An example of an Individual Learning Plan

## 6.7. Summary of findings and discussion

In this chapter, the aim was to assess the potential for the TDSNF by exploring the dynamics of the TDE in professional rugby league academies by focusing on the key decision maker – the AM. Feedback from this participant indicated that he identified with the themes within the TDSNF matrix and that he perceived the tasks and the interview conversations to be relevant to his current AM role and enhancing of his professional knowledge. In addition, the AM appreciated the flexible nature of the workshop tasks, which he felt really supported and reflected his complex, dynamic environment. One that was characterised by his own and his club's values of him, a diverse Academy workforce and an extremely wide range of individual needs, both from players and staff. In all phases of the case study, the AM found that the learning conversations that took place during and following the framework activities were highly compelling opportunities to receive valuable formative feedback. The AM explained that he quickly realised that the intent of the learning conversation was not to unpick or critique his earlier actions, 'foundational wants or the management and leadership strategies applied in the academy environment, but rather to engage in the process of creating new knowledge together. The participant noted,

*"I was pleasantly surprised. I really liked the way it went. I was challenged, able to exchange ideas and learn from that process".*

Reflecting on the workshops and tasks outlined above, learning from social interaction, the nature of the guided tasks, participation in collaborative problem solving, and the process of reflecting on earlier experiences proved to be extremely valuable. This contributes to the existing body of literature and understanding that values the multitude of experiences that influence how coaches learn (Chelladurai *et al*, 1989; Gilbert and Trudel, 2001; Lyle *et al*, 2010).

Building on earlier findings (chapters, 2, 3, and 4) this present investigation into the application of the TDSNF has once again uncovered data that show how an AM operating at an HP and professional level must overcome many variables whilst planning and executing numerous management and leadership skills. The data from the participant proved how an AM must aim to fulfill various roles to effectively execute a range of professional duties. This supports this thesis' earlier findings on the roles that AMs must play if they are to succeed in this most challenging of environments e.g., cultural architect, succession planner, life coach mentor, sports craft teacher, and character builder (see chapter 4 for a fuller description of each role).



From these findings, it appears that the success with which an AM perceives their ability to succeed depends on their knowledge of their sport, knowledge of their individual performers and appreciation of the skills necessary for elite performance in their specific academy setting. Additionally, an AM's interpersonal skills, which will enable them to effectively engage with players, coaches, teams, and the ever-increasing numbers of support staff, are also seen as key determinants of their success. Clearly, the challenge for any AM involved in the initial stages of a player's development is to put himself in a position where he can help the player quickly acquire the specific skills required for them to progress. Knowing exactly what these are in the player's lived world, communicating this effectively and getting all those involved to be aligned to the same TD tenets would seem the most pressing challenge.

Throughout this chapter, consistently highlighted the use of embodied pedagogical concepts that link to this research methodological challenge. Specifically, how to gain more depth in one's own understanding by enticing deeper thinking from the participant to help us and them connect the most relevant theory to his personal world and the invisible but real structures that underpin it (Radulescu and Vessey, 2008). From earlier experiences, promoting EP's value in shining a light into the AM's real-world domain and that in the future, this should be considered when exploring all areas of learning and how this facet can be best constructed in the HP domain. The success of the EP activities illustrates the propensity for these concepts to support AMs in their learning journey. When viewing these unique individuals through an embodied pedagogical lens acknowledge how an AM's individual experience is an inherent feature of learning, how cultural influences enter and become part of the learning process and how power relations (the organisation's workforce infrastructure) shape their learning experience.

As noted in the Introduction, EP emphasises the holistic, social nature of learning and the role of experience, the body, and its senses within it. It encourages the development of the social skills involved with engaging in purposeful dialogue, a willingness and ability to negotiate and compromise and the understanding of democratic processes involved in making and enacting collective decision-making, all whilst making learning enjoyable. Additionally, EP in the form it has been applied here can truly support learning how to learn, supplying a more positive inclination towards learning as well as the valuable social skills that are likely to be carried on further into life away from the training field. The process for which is planned and delivered this TDSNF is an example of these pedagogical concepts synthesised into a practical delivery model that couples the AM's empirical experiences with key events and actions, and the often-hidden influences of the AM's real world. The importance of deliberately planning activities to encourage active learning is clearly supported by the current findings and the positive

feedback from the AM in this case study. The selection and implementation of the activities and key tasks were very important for us. Driven to make informed choices on what would work from both this thesis and the participant's perspective. These activities were based on experiences of living and existing in the AM's world and upon earlier literature reviews and empirical studies into the TD domain. This combination of physical and cognitive activities, supported by mutual questioning, discussion and theoretical exploration aided the AM in constructing his personal learning and will hopefully help optimise the delivery of his professional duties.

The use of the TDSNF, and the AM's outputs enabled the demonstration of a positive shift in the way I can gather, analyse, and produce data about coach development or in this case AM development. These findings support the recent calls for the design of learning programmes to move from the traditional top-down approach largely apparent in national coaching awards towards more naturalistic, bespoke, and ecologically valid alternatives (McCarthy *et al*, 2020). As this TDSNF employed an EP approach to solving tasks directly related to the AM's specific environment, that reflected the thinking skills regularly utilised within the academy setting and produced meaningful outcomes that had value regarding the AM's specific challenges, this case study has demonstrated how this change is indeed possible in the HP and TD domains. This transfer of focus is not surprising however, especially considering that this method is closely linked with more contemporary teacher education programs (in both structure and pedagogy). This shift may also signal further support for reconsidering the provision and examination of national coaching awards as a contextual, situational, and personal endeavour. If, as Cushion, *et al*, (2003: 83) contends that working in this area is a "complex, interrelated and interdependent process that is firmly embedded within the specific social and cultural contexts", then to support the individual development of those that exist here requires a totally different set of approaches and resources of which this TDSNF would seem to be of merit.

Finally, related to the potential for any such formal and specific AM's **Individual Learning Plan** (ILPs') to interface with myself (and vice versa) it would be prudent for research to determine the effectiveness of the current ILPs on offer and the outcomes achieved by the AM graduates. The ability to study the "products" of an ILP would provide "real world" insights and data invaluable to broadening one's knowledge base and that of the clubs and NGB assuming all would be willing to cooperate in such an investigation.

The findings from this case study can help those who design, implement, and administer a club's CPD portfolio in ensuring that the products and resources being promoted and delivered are finally truly fit for purpose and fulfill the participants' foundational wants and needs. With

reference to the club's AM, this will only be possible if time is taken to learn more about the AM's background, instructional practices, thought processes, and motivation for leading and managing their TD programmes. The findings of this study suggest that the biographies, viewpoints, and beliefs of participants are vital to the design of quality academy workforce education programs. Furthermore, in consulting the related literature in the design of personal and workforce education programmes, embodied pedagogical practices could offer academy managers some aid in structuring their own **Academy Ecological Development Programme** underpinned by research and applicable to their team's visible and hidden realities.

Finally reflecting on my experiences as a facilitator as well as that of the participant it is clear there are several lessons to be learned from this case study that will help shape and guide future interventions by oneself or others keen to utilise this framework. Firstly, several different mediums could be utilised to better disseminate the framework's philosophy, content, process, and activities so that others can develop their expert knowledge in their own lived worlds. Perhaps in the future, a tutor resource book or website with a variety of activity guides and extension tasks could be provided. This resource could also be targeted at AMs across other sporting domains to equip them with the appropriate tools, rationale, and confidence to address their sport or organisation's own learning needs in the TD space.

Crucially, such a resource, coupled with the TDSNF itself could supply a bespoke personal development programme that confirms their views on their own identified TD gaps. However, it should be noted that the key to this framework's success, according to these findings, is in collaboration with a skilled and experienced coach developer who has the skills and knowledge to help draw out and articulate the AM's 'foundational wants' for that specific environment. It is an incredibly complicated yet fascinating act, to explore the performance of an AM and their workforce, to uncover hidden truths, challenges, barriers, and enablers, all with the purpose of adding value to their own and their players' experience and future progression. With the addition of such a book or collection of online resources, AMs could also self-administer such an intervention and become much better prepared to harness their own knowledge to suit their unique contexts to produce a robust, bespoke development programme for their teams. Ultimately, all such actions would enhance the dynamics of TD within environments such as a professional rugby league academy and well beyond.

## 6.8. Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter was to assess the practicality and efficacy of the TDSNF and its activities that had been created with an embodied pedagogy approach and critical realist view of the TD environment. A single case study method was utilised through the purposeful sampling of an elite AM with which to trial the *5 Phases* of the framework's application. Feedback from the AM and this thesis' current reflections were very positive over the ease, relevance, enjoyment, value, and ultimately the learning that took place through each *Phase* of the framework's implementation. The most impactful aspect of the framework however was the final outputs (ILP and AEDP) and the perceived value to the AM. This value was associated in terms of not only the tangible development plans that were created but also with the learning and knowledge that had been shared and developed to reach such a worthwhile endpoint. Key to this was the nature of the activities themselves and the EP that underpinned them which activated thoughts, feelings and recollections that helped uncover the previously hidden 'truths' that existed in the AM's world.

Of course, this case study is just the starting point for future process refinement and framework amendments BUT what is clear is that such a process of 'uncovering' the lived reality through the AM's embodiment supplied an incredible impetus for learning. If the TDSNF can be enhanced through future experience and revision, it is hoped that it will be able to supply a viable alternative to the continued professional development currently offered to AMs by many sports' National Governing Bodies. Coincidentally, the main goal of the current study was to determine RO3. The key to this being achievable however, is the willingness and openness of future participants to fully embrace the ethos that underpins this framework. A limiting factor may well be the ability to secure and train experienced facilitators who can utilise the framework tasks and resources to enable such expertise-based training to occur. With that in mind, RO4 aims now become clear and the development of bespoke training for the coach developers and the publication of high-quality supporting resources must become the next natural stage of our framework's evolution.

## 6.9. Chapter 6 reflexivity commentary

Looking back on this case study, here I had to relate to sensitivity in the ways in which both the process and I as the researcher shaped the data collected, including the role of prior assumptions and experience that the AM had already shared with me in the earlier research studies. To help manage this conflict, the EP tasks' helped form a separation by acknowledging my role in the research. EP naturally guided the discussion around the task and its scenarios to enhance my perspective and retrospective thoughts, feelings, and actions. The most pleasing was the engagement with emerging themes and my cultivation of prompts and probes that had really improved throughout the rigours of self-reflection shared in the earlier studies. Attia and Edge (2017), helped me recognise how to help manage this familiarity through a bidirectional relationship between researcher and research as it is an important developmental concept in qualitative methods, to acknowledge that I must appreciate how I am both affecting the field and being affected simultaneously. This can only be achieved by applying a reflexive process such as that which is integrated within this study.

Knowing the environments that the AMs work in and how they react positively to demonstration and collaborative tasks throughout their development, including those found within the earlier studies within this thesis, the EP activities incorporated both whilst also linking perfectly to the data collections aims. Engaging AMs to both learn and reflect through their thoughts and bodies, confront their own biases to cognitive ways of knowing their original views and earlier findings, enabled them to begin to consider the use of embodied instructional strategies with their peers (Dancis *et al*, 2023). While this is a by-product of the thesis aims, it is an encouraging finding with the potential to interest further research.

The earlier research findings, along with the AMs thoughts and their duties became my questions, I designed the activities to help the participants interrogate these questions further, and the data collected became either a personal development plan or foundational want for the academy program. I analysed the data so I could show themes related to the AM's embodied learning and reflections and describe potential implications for NGBs that educate and develop both AMs and their academy workforce.

Although I knew at times this was going to get uncomfortable, I felt confident the AMs would have no barriers while using their bodies as a tool for reflection whether through experiencing or accessing emotions during the tasks. My carefully designed questions, prompts and probes uncovered new meanings and deep insights about themselves, their values, and beliefs.

Lawrence (2012: 76) argues that "promoting and practising embodied pedagogies often means breaking through boundaries and challenging dominant ideologies and epistemologies". In this section of the thesis, I was now determined to explore those boundaries and consider how they manifest in our own practice as coach developers and whether we can break through them.

At this point I became immersed in the data collection, but with careful planning the AMs remained at centre-stage, while I ensured the AMs responses avoided any separations of theory and practice. By using an interdisciplinary approach with the significant goal of problem-setting helped eased the construction of tasks and supporting questions. For example I started with the interpretative scenarios, this enabled the development of more complex interpretative categories from the AMs which then drew out the interactions with me (Madouas *et al*, 2023). In this situation, I helped by leading formal data collection, and the one-on-one sessions with the AM. Together, these methods provided a reflexive position from which to interpret and construct understandings of how the coach developers help candidates learn (Jones *et al*, 2023).

An implication of this finding is the possibility that EP along with contextual tasks and supplementary questions support the idea that collaborative physical tasks and co-creative strategies increase engagement and improve results. Despite these promising results, questions remain if I would use EP in such an in-depth way again? Probably not because of the time it takes but I would definitely make sure the bodies are used when developing rugby academy staff in the future, yet I am happy I broke new ground in data collection practices and found new ways to engage a professional academy workforce in formal CPD.

## Chapter 7: Summary of findings, recommendations, reflections, and conclusions

### 7.1. General Summary

It was proposed at the outset that this project would involve ***exploring the dynamics of the talent development environment in professional rugby academies***. Throughout this process, the holistic nature of TD in a fully professional academy was consistently a foundation and a knowledge base that the thesis was built upon the transition from junior to senior professional levels (Collins *et al*, 2016b; Finn and McKenna, 2010; Stambulova *et al*, 2012; Webb *et al*, 2016). The breadth and depth of this thesis required several research objectives, and these consisted of the following:

1. Identifying the nature of the challenge for academy managers (AM), involved in the development of young talent in a professional academy.
2. Explore the ingredients for a successful AM within a professional academy.
3. Critically investigate the interplay of the biopsychosocial pressures to empower and equip the individual with effective resources to navigate and negotiate these TD challenges for a professional AM.
4. Formulate a critical review of recommendations for future use of the TDSNF, future implications for NGBs, Coach Development professional organisations, and further studies.

Upon reaching RO1, I uncovered how the AM is omnipresent and influential across many domains of professional development for the academy, and this was evident throughout the five main independent studies. In preparing to reach RO2, collaborative talent development (TD) initiatives and co-creation become important outputs. This co-action, which is important if the findings from coaching interventions are to effectively address the transition phases of young academy players, was best represented by the multidimensional model that was developed from initial field research while developing RO3 (e.g., the TDSNF) which is explored further within chapters five and six.

The descriptions and explanations from the qualitative data presented while achieving RO2

and RO4 uncovered how AMs were sceptical of the potentially negative influences of the traditional national coaching courses when learning, whether that be formal or informal (e.g., level 2 or CPD), but all are engaged in more self-directed learning. During the analysis of the focus group within the exploration of RO3, areas of TD needs were synthesised for the rugby academy staff and found that a communal forum for a closed group of individuals to share their opinions and learning experiences, might better support the development of a sufficiently focused and critical approach to the co-construction of professional coaching knowledge (Abraham and Collins, 2011; Boulton and Hramiak, 2012; Hall and Graham, 2004).

These findings certainly clarified that RO2 had been accomplished. The later findings from chapters three and four helped nuance the design of the graphic now known as the *Academy Manager's professional duties* which in turn met with RO4 criteria. The AM's professional duties helix informed the framework analysis content, which has become the cornerstone of the *Talent Development Self-Navigation Framework* (TDSNF). Furthermore, all of which are underpinned with literature reviews, lived experiences, sociocultural factors and activity probes into the skills and resources used by the academy staff emphasised that RO3 has now evolved into a foundation of any future research projects (refer to chapters three, four and six). The trustworthiness of the RO3 methodological tools and analysis processes were met within RO2 and RO4, and their outcomes were addressed throughout each independent research project. Reporting and reflecting consistently, the trustworthiness issues associated with the tools of the main data collection and analysis methods used in the thesis were addressed and allowed RO3 to be met (these included semi-structured interviews, framework analysis, an independent pilot study, stimulated recall, case study research, inductive content analysis, deductive content analysis and thematic analysis).

The graphics' (e.g., AM professional duties helix, and TDSNF) deeper exploration helped reach RO2 and RO4. Consequently, the investigation of the interplay of the co-acting pressures to empower and equip the individual participants was discussed in chapters three and four. In turn, these highlighted that effective resources can uncover that navigation and negotiations of these TD challenges for an AM helped prioritise learning pathways and foundational needs for the academy. To acquire RO4, the TDSNF operationalised the data collection, the AM was able to visualise the shifting demands across a range of development areas and target priority areas of development for themselves, their staff and the academy environment which is summarised in chapter six. Furthermore, this supplied action based on RO4, where an emerging suggestion was that bespoke workshops are to be used to facilitate and nurture the AM and academy workforce (e.g., coach development). This is consistent with UK Sport and EIS' (2020) Position Statement, which described that more explicit instructional



strategies and support structures are needed to guide coaches toward higher levels of engagement.

The *Embedded Pedagogical* (EP) tasks and subsequent interviews designed and executed to meet with RO2, and RO4, are evidence that graphic tools designed to reach RO3 have been used as a framework to entice AMs, coaches and academy staff to self-navigate through the complexity of personal development in this highly competitive environment and proof that this could revolutionise the national education of academy staff and their on-going development as an agent of change. Together these results provide important insights that TDSNF and the RO4 outcomes have accomplished important work in guiding future academy staff development and future research and will continue in this manner when utilised correctly by any wider sporting academy pathways. RO4 demonstrated how academy coaches can identify with this tool, and thus increase feelings of ownership and control in their professional learning. This will be of great interest to NGBs and coach developers. This working graphic (TDSNF) can be considered integral to the development of AMs, as RO4 was for the AM to identify, in collaboration with myself (as the facilitator and coach developer) and seek some advantageous pathway improvements, issues and training needs through personal and workforce development (e.g., academy coach development), which remains a major output of this thesis.

One of the main undertakings to reach RO4 was the use of an embodied pedagogical approach to cognition and help spell out effectively the intuition that one's body shapes what the mind can do (Varela *et al*, 1991). The participant's engagement certainly helped formulate a critical review of recommendations for future use of the TDSNF, course design implications for NGBs, coach development organisations and any future professional academy studies. Upon meeting RO4, the findings will doubtless be scrutinised, but there are some immediately dependable conclusions for the role played by those responsible for setting and managing the development agenda during this crucial phase of an AM and the academy workforce's daily function. With a focus on professional sports, to meet this overall purpose, five empirical studies were conducted with chapter two being the first of these.

## 7.2. Chapters and findings revisited

### 7.2.1. Chapter 2: Talent Development for a professional academy: observations and analysis from a career in rugby's high-performance environment

The evidence presented in this chapter suggests that while investigating RO1, it uncovered the relevance of the current rugby TD model, transitions initiatives, and other specialised support (e.g., sports psychology, physical development, nutrition) faced by academy managers, academy coaches and players (Wylleman and Lavallee, 2003). Demonstrating the importance of considering that the AMs, ACs, Senior Coaches and Volunteers in the context not only of sport but also of their sports craft expertise (technical and tactical), psycho-social, academic, and vocational development all needed bespoke support and guidance. The AMs' experiences and general academy foundational needs are gradually becoming central to national professional development and the NGB roles becoming diminished, which is typical for professional pathway coaches (UK Sport and EIS, 2020). This was presented consistently with literature associated with the key features of the TDE and the experiences of my time in these positions.

These personal reflections uncovered deeper layers of professional practice and presented a very different picture of what one might presume is happening in the rugby talent pathway, specifically at the professional academy stage. What is evident within the *Focus on Player Attributes, Academy Managers' Knowledge Base, Talent Coaches Role Frames, The Talent Pathway's Organisation, The Environment, and the Promotion of Positive Relationships and Social Interactions*, is that there appears to be a huge *theory to practice gap* by all concerned parties. Consequently, the role of the AM and their relationships with the academy coaching workforce became the key construct to be investigated throughout this thesis. Additionally, how other stakeholders (e.g., senior coaches, directors, parents, and players) worked together with the AM and the nature, quality, and how coherent their relationships affected the academy environment were mentioned throughout chapter two. The conversations uncovered the notion that TD and transitional development are linked in such a manner that the purpose of TD is to build up the athlete's resources to cope with the demands of moving onto senior professional and international career transitions.

To conclude, *the gap between theory and practice* is described how the transition from junior to senior often involves high-level stress and the risk of identity foreclosure (Lavallee *et al*, 1997; Lavallee and Robinson, 2007; Pummell *et al*, 2008). Young academy players making

this transition face challenges that impinge on all aspects of their lives, such as the sports they are involved with, their studies, work, and personal relationships (Stambulova, 2007a; 2007b). The support for these important aspects of a player's development was either missing or ad-hoc. With such extremes evident between AM's experiences and the best practice guidelines from generic sports literature, there is a need to bridge or at least reduce the knowledge-practice gap. It appears that the common agent of change across all factors is the AM's need to provide leadership, management, and direction of travel for their staff and players.

Reflecting on these concerns, the nature of the environment is extremely bespoke to the specific country and indeed the club or local area in which it exists. Furthermore, in response to both changes in funding and a rapidly growing evidence base for the TDE, a professional rugby academy has been given far greater responsibility for the development of its workforce. Findings from these explorative discussions also indicated that there is a need to help shape and guide AMs in the decisions they make concerning each of the TD factors mentioned in this chapter. These findings are put to good use in chapters three and four where it was my intention to provide a useful road map to guide the AM's discussions, data collection and future actions. It appears the nature of current national support is too generic for any clear application, therefore a bespoke TiD and TDE tool kit should be developed and shaped by the AMs' themselves with the flexibility for it to be adapted to each club or person's specific needs. The role of AM, and how their workforce interacts with the other stakeholders whilst developing the academy environment has attracted little research attention, despite this connectivity and coherence being obvious and important (Bloom, 1985; Côté, 1999; Baker *et al*, 2018) as a contributor to the efficacy of the total TD process.

### **7.2.2. Chapter 3:** An investigation into the talent development knowledge and practice of a High-Performance Coaching team.

To acquire RO2, the aim was to critically analyse a group of professional academy staff and synthesise areas of wider TD factors into the chapter by establishing a series of focus groups to explore TDE more fully. My objective is to dig deeper into the knowledge and behaviours of those working in rugby TD. A comparison of the findings in this chapter with those of other studies identified a clear mismatch in TD theory to practice within the academy environments being explored. Therefore, I sought to explore the ideas, opinions, beliefs, and reflections of these professionals with a clear responsibility for player development. This was to verify, disprove or identify additional areas of interest from the previous findings in chapter two.

The focus group took on a workshop approach with collaborative activities provided, designed, and executed, which stimulated discussions, raised concerns, and prompted a debate that was all consistent with the main themes identified in the previous findings in chapter two. The four sequential workshops were scheduled in agreement with the participants. What could interest NGBs, and academy staff developers is the participant's perception of these workshops, and they saw this as a collaborative starting point for their time together rather than being finite events that they would move on from. The emergent themes generated by the participant's engagement in the workshop tasks formed an agenda for future debates and possible interventions that would improve both their personal development on the intended outcomes of the academy pathway and are now new agents of change.

Findings supported the initial work with the participants identifying gaps in their professional practice relating to *Organisational Connectivity, Philosophical Alignment, Psychosocial Nurturing, Workforce Development, and Legacy Building*. These findings support this thesis RO4 and a wide body of research that promotes the effective implementation, management and communication of numerous operational and humanistic concepts that underpin these major themes. The agent of change here for the NGBs and rugby staff developers is that if a course can consciously hold a sophisticated epistemological stance as in this research, it will promote creativity in learning and the generation of new ideas to nurture the constant evolution of the participant's environment.

The validation that *Workforce Development* was a deeply concerning gap, one that made RO3 even more interesting. Consequently, this needed to be developed with an immediate intervention for further education not just for players, coaches, and senior management, but at all levels of the club. More importantly, for AMs themselves to maximise their impact in this area of their professional duties. The most obvious finding to emerge from this chapter is that the agent of change for NGBs and staff who operate within the academy pathway is the use of the periodic coaching workforce gatherings as a *community of safety* (Super *et al*, 2016) for the academy coaching workforce so they can offset everyday feelings of workplace roles, pressure or anxiety which in turn will enhance participant engagement in future courses or education strategies. It is worth explaining why I chose to frame the academy workforce gatherings as a community of safety. While I cannot find a lot of research, having experience in arranging these meetings I can support this because staff feel safer sharing stories, narratives, artefacts, and experiences while working in the academy. Super *et al*, (2016) explains that it relates to the quality of life and being able to pursue and obtain the fullest benefits from their working life and social lives together without fear or hindrance from senior staff.

### 7.2.3. Chapter 4: A Realist Framework Analysis of a High-Performance Academy Managers' Duties and Roles: The ABC's and D's of Talent Development (Attitudes, Behaviours, Challenges...and Development needs)

The purpose of this chapter was to investigate the professional duties of Academy Managers (AMs) in a fully professional academy. With RO4 in mind, I aimed to explore the knowledge and application of best practice concepts as well as identify potential gaps in provision and related development needs. The TD Helix created to help meet RO3 provided a real context to explore AM's attitudes, behaviours and challenges when operating in the professional academy domain. Upon reaching RO3, another data analysis tool was created, Framework Analysis (FA) which helped me dig deeper into professional duties allocated to the AMs within the TD landscape which I grouped into the following four areas:

1. Developing and maintaining a positive culture
2. Implementing a holistic TD environment
3. Supporting staff development and learning
4. Managing up and down the pathway

This chapter addressed RO2. Whilst still maintaining a predominantly qualitative approach, in contrast to the smaller samples utilised in chapter three, with both broader and larger exploration of the seven AMs'. This chapter adopted a critical realist (CR) position in its appreciation that an objective reality exists beyond that which is observable (Bhaskar, 1998a). Here, within professional rugby league's domain of TD to provide some element of conclusion from the collected data. In line with existing research (Archer, 1995; Bhaskar, 1998a; North, 2017; Sayer, 2000) from within the domain of empirical experience (e.g., what happens, day to day and hour to hour within the organisation/club). This research revealed new findings about how the AM functions in practice.

Not surprisingly, the key agents to enable an AM's success in performing these duties are their academy and senior coaches which are certainly ignored by NGBs and their national programmes for pathway coaches. This reality also uncovered the natural, psychological, and social worlds which were also hidden. Whilst reaching RO2 the exploration revealed that the *actual* events and actions undertaken, and the *empirical* events experienced became the agents of change for an AM to structure and influence their future *actions* (e.g., their duties, roles, responsibilities).

By investigating the AM's lived experiences and their perceptions of the reality in which they exist, the TD environment, qualitative methods were deemed most suitable, notably through semi-structured interviews. To both meet RO2 and plan for RO4, this uncovered a series of higher and lower-order themes that both categorise and bear influence on the AM's actions. What became evident from the findings is that AMs engage in a plethora of duties that act upon various agents in a wide range of contexts often with conflicting aims and objectives. From the framework analysis (FA) method, typologies were created to describe these diverse roles and unearthed interesting themes for NGBs and coach developers that within the domain of empirical experiences (day-to-day and hour-to-hour actions) new agents emerged.

1. Cultural architect
2. Succession planner
3. Life coach mentor
4. Sports craft teacher
5. Character builder

By highlighting these agents of change for the AMs' developmental needs, it becomes clear that bespoke support is essential if they are to successfully overcome the multiple challenges they face whilst performing their professional duties. Indeed, in line with FA practices, the findings uncovered a range of typologies of the AMs' work, most of which focus on their interactions with both their academy and voluntary coaching teams.

These findings suggested that, before learning activities such as formal professional development, mentoring and bespoke CPD are placed at the centre of formalised provision. NGBs and coach developers need to help AMs to better recognise and deal with the potentially mixed and unregulated influences of the social milieu on learning to ensure their informal development is sufficiently open-minded, reflective, and critical. What can be an agent of change for these educators is the application of a community of safety (Super *et al*, 2016) for tasks needed to explore how formal learning might better support the development of these skills, while still meeting an AM's perceived learning needs and their preferences for informal, socially mediated learning activities can be established.

It was discovered that the findings are much broader and richer than this study's initial remit. For example, all the participants, despite their vast experience in the sport, identified their own needs for support and professional development with each AM characterised by very different training needs, not only for their teams but for their professional development. A serious agent of change is that nothing that they had encountered or been provided for previously, or were

aware of thus far, had sufficient content, processes, or value to help them accomplish their required duties and roles within their academy. It is clear from this chapter that more bespoke support is required to improve an AM's performance and improve their own coaches' effectiveness to attain more positive player outcomes which will be explored in preparation to meet RO4.

#### **7.2.4. Chapter 5 (Parts 1 and 2):** The primary concern of the Academy Manager in the rugby academy and Designing a method for applying the Talent Development Self-Navigation Framework (TDSNF)

Uncovering possible new agents from the professional duties of the AMs' highlighted the need to investigate the characterisation of the themes described in chapter four as important contributions towards increasing understanding of TD within a professional rugby league academy (see, Wilkinson and Grecic, 2019; 2020; 2021a; 2021b). Chapter four found the main professional duties of an academy manager sit outside traditional conceptions within national systems and coach education provisions expanded upon during the RO4 summary. The construction of a bespoke club or organisation-specific model (AEDP, see chapter six) that encompasses how an AM orchestrates environmental relationships, coordinates these interactions, and develops their interdependencies will be of great interest within TD research but more specifically for the NGBs' and coach developers. Designing a tool that will offer analysis and identify various roles the AM have, such as player psychosocial nurturing and cultural, cross-cultural, and contextual aspects within a club, became the focus of RO3.

The scarcity of literature in this area challenges whether shared mental models (SMM) are consistent with an organisation's overall sociological factors and if they can correlate with the professional duties of the AM (Filho *et al*, 2016). The first part of this chapter review sought to determine and justify the need for such a model and how it can be utilised or adapted within the CR paradigm, with the EP method nested subtly inside the *domain of empirical experiences* to enhance data collection. The second part of this chapter review will offer insight into the construction of the tool known as the *Talent Development Self-Navigation Framework* (TDSNF).

#### **7.2.5. Model Design Part 1:**

Literature suggests (Dupré, 2003; Noble, 2008) that effective player development systems have a clear view of what constitutes successful outputs, outcomes and more importantly

inputs. This is particularly true when observing trends around the identification of a clear philosophy and culture which includes ideas about effective playing styles and player characteristics, all of which have been consistent within the preceding chapters two, three and four. The national systems do not provide space for a culture of cooperation or sharing of ideas, which would encourage the different academies to form a tight, highly integrated community of practice (McCarthy *et al*, 2020). Within chapter four's findings, the AMs' discovered that coach development is seen as consistent with McCarthy *et al* (2020) when stating they all had the desire to provide their coaches with opportunities to merge, discuss documentation (e.g., codes of conduct and expectations), coach education and a chance to regularly meet and talk to share best practice.

As explained in chapters two, three and four, national support system principles fail to recognise that this rugby TDE is spatially and socially embedded within the *domain of empirical experiences* which are well-managed and effective environments. They are all planned, resourced, and fully understood and adhered to by all relevant individuals and organisations (such as local leagues, clubs, academy directors, coaches, players, and parents). Finally, effective player development is underpinned and indeed brought to life by a skilled and committed workforce, most notably, the AMs' and the club's senior coaches (see chapter three). The findings from chapter four suggest that an AM and the academy workforce development will unnecessarily be subjected to a range of influences and forces. This means stakeholders must accept that their interventions will only be successful under certain conditions. Consequently, the player development systems they design must be flexible, adaptable and above all patient (Martindale and Mortimer, 2011).

The holistic nature of development in a professional academy is explained throughout the preceding chapters, all co-acting across many different domains of professional development. This co-action is important if the findings and coaching intervention are to effectively address the transition phases of young academy players. To meet RO3, I presented the multidimensional model developed from initial field research, The *Talent Development Self-Navigation Framework* (TDSNF). The value of this graphic that was operationalised during data collection formed the next phase by creating a visual representation (see the series of graphics in chapter five) of the shifting demands across a range of development areas. Follow-up workshops and interviews will be used so that the AM can self-navigate through the complexity of personal development and AC development in this highly competitive environment. The tool now has an important role in guiding the thesis research aims but it will continue in this manner when in the hands of the AMs' who, once it has been shown, can relate to it more readily. The agent of change here is the fostering of a sense of ownership



and control as they prioritise their professional development, but it also correlates with the foundational needs of their academy and the club's player pathway (or succession plan).

Chapters three and four found that the participants' current knowledge was situated in the mental models and distributed cognitions of the coaching workforce in their contexts. Throughout the early chapters, the AMs identified some missing components or specific operations such as small, elite project meetings between national coaching leads and national-level coach educators in the NGBs. To supplement these missing components all developed initiatives and coalitions between football directors and senior coaches in their clubs, coach development strategies through wider group meetings and discussions and coaching communities of practice. To a lesser degree, the AMs mentioned drawing on coaching expertise and ideas from other sports, with an example being that rugby league might consult rugby union and vice-versa. They concluded throughout chapters two, three and four, that their coaching workforce needs a bespoke delivery programme to enhance their knowledge through a range of formal, non-formal and informal learning contexts. This included sharing the club's performance values in coaching clinics, seminars, conferences, workplace learning, and practical experience, alongside their previous playing experiences, reading and researching and constant observation and mentoring.

Consequently, the performance measures of an AM and their staff typically involve the use of observers who must capture the moment-to-moment aspects of academy workforce behaviours that can be reached during EP tasks. For some domains, such as AM and AC continued professional development (CPD), there is emerging agreement on the appropriate nature of measurement instruments such as the TDSNF per-se, which has now evolved to the point of being a standardised instrument that has become an agent of change of seven AMs' who engaged in this research. It was interesting to find in chapter four that an organisational model for *player transition, coach development, philosophical alignment and sociocultural connectivity* which tracks the AM around multiple factors could address these issues of TD, including, cultural, cross-cultural, and contextual aspects within a professional academy. In response to this, the next stage of this reflection is to explain the function of the tool and framework by which to support an AM in a professional academy in their exploration, comprehension and identification of personal needs relating to the professional skills required to perform their jobs effectively. This is the primary objective of RO3 and is the focus of part two.

## **7.2.6. Model Construction Part 2**

The previous section highlighted a need for more long-term, systematic, and sustained efforts to mine the rich data available within an AM's practical expertise, which can be used to help the development of academy coaches and players in the future. The development of AM's expertise within this elite sport environment is understandably proven to be a complex matter involving mediated, unmediated, and internal learning situations. However, it is less clear to what extent and in which ways these learning situations are woven together in the academy coaches' (ACs) learning paths. In other words, what is the 'gluey' link between these learning situations and the AM's idea of what constitutes expertise in academy leadership.

Here I focus on the existence of real life and current mechanisms which shape events, and past experiences in this environment and my experiences as a coach educator provide the extensive knowledge and understanding, grounded in theory and practice, of the proposed TD tool (TDSNF). In addition, RO4 is met because the NGBs' national programme staff have an authentic appreciation of the situational demands of the AM's role and environment. The TDSNF's physical features of engaging the participant do apply, as this is seen as an intensely embodied form of pedagogical practice (see the graphics within chapter six). I planned to engage the AM with EP tasks so that their body emerged with new behaviours and gestures towards the activity, tasks, and scenarios. Thus, generating a repertoire of gestures and responses that convey practical and technical issues of task solutions, correlating with an embodied dialogue of words and gestures between the participant and myself as the facilitator. This in turn affected the shared, mutual attention on TD in a rugby academy. This is essential to create the most conducive context for the professional development episode to occur, built upon mutual respect, trust, and rapport with the participants (Molan, *et al*, 2021).

## **7.2.7. Cornerstones of the design of the tool**

To achieve RO3, the process of delivery requires five distinct phases which are to be completed as the participant and myself (research lead) work our way through the TDSNF Matrix. The different layers and elements of the matrix are arranged in groups to represent the following concepts:

- Phase 1: The inner/central layer around the participant which are the six professional duties identified in the study in chapter three that drive the direction and scope of the AM's work.
- Phase 2: Relate sub-themes that emerged from the study in chapter four (framework analysis).
- Phase 3: Connects to the outer layers 3-6, multiple sections representing groups of related or interdependent concepts explored in the case study in chapter six.
- Phase 4 and 5: These are emergent and from the indicative content explained in the findings from chapters two, three, and four. All these layers are topics that align with the sub-themes above that are both grounded in TD research and indicative of each AM.

Responding to the emerging themes whilst exploring the tools, problems, and outputs such as learning paths and learning situations of the AM from a biographical learning perspective, revealed micro-sociocultural issues with a cross-case analysis of qualitative interviews with the participants about their pathways to leadership expertise helped lay the foundation for these insights. Firstly, self-creative and self-organising a resource intentionally and deliberately pervades the thoughts and actions of the AM as they reinterpret what they learned in any given situation (the EP tasks were consistent throughout the phases), including the *off tasks conversations* spaces described in chapter four where the participants parade their sense of expertise and personal style. Secondly, important face-to-face interactions and dialogues with myself (the facilitator) seem to portray an AM learning path and experience of leadership expertise. Thirdly, more nuanced descriptions of an AM's learning situations by interweaving mediated, unmediated, and internal learning situations may be fruitful for future studies of AMs' learning paths. The agent of change is that future professional academy coaches or management educators might incorporate a similar approach that favours the participants' biographical learning and development of expertise as personal journeys in authentic learning situations. This will encourage the creation of ILPs (Individual Learning Plans) and AEDP (Academy Ecological Development Plan) spaces in the AM's professional life and assist in learning from them.

The link between the academy's foundational needs certainly influences the AMs' foundational

wants. It becomes clear that an AM's internal learning situations occur in between the flux of daily activities and are expressed in these statements as an attitude signaling reflection and mindful action influenced by the organisation's demands and an AM's professional duties. Against the background of the results from this tool, it might be suggested that future AMs' and their coach education and development might incorporate this approach as it is likely that a biographically oriented educational strategy of this kind would optimise the AM's learning processes in a mixture of learning situations.

### **7.2.8. Chapter 6:** A case study exploration into the professional duties of a High-Performance Academy Manager: Creating an individualized learning plan using the Talent Development Self Navigation Framework (TDSNF)

In reaching RO3 and RO4, the aim is to investigate the professional duties of an AM but this time with the explicit aim of identifying bespoke development needs through the operation of the Talent Development Self Navigation Framework (TDSNF). This is the first substantive grounded theoretical framework of AMs' learning processes and made explanatory links to other literature in coaching, learning and professional development. Although 'tidy maps of knowledge and learning are usually deceptive' (Eraut 2000: 133). The TDSNF represents an original and useful heuristic representation of the way this AM actively constructed and adapted knowledge for use in socially situated EP practice. In essence, through tasks that matched their daily professional duties and reflective conversations.

Using the original EP approach grounded in a CR view of the participant's TD domain, chapter six presents a full description of the framework's application as a case study example of the TDSNF in practice. The data collection tasks also link the micro factors of individual coach learning with the macro factors of context and contextual issues that enable or inhibit the learning process, certainly now an agent of change for NGBs' course tutors and coach developers. While many of the ideas around the process of high-performance leadership learning have been recognised for some time, the process remains something of an empty space.

The key elements of the TDSNF tasks illustrate important processes of how concepts from learning experiences are rejected, adopted, or fitted into AMs' evolving philosophy with consideration to important contextual and moderating factors such as the academy's foundational needs as well as practical implementation and its barriers. The findings in chapters three and four provided detailed evidence that an AM cannot cherry-pick certain

elements of learning experiences. For the first time research related to the personal development of AM explained why and how this occurs, as well as the subsequent impact on their practice.

Findings acknowledge how the facilitated TDSNF helped the AM reflect more fully on his *real world* and foundational wants and needs to co-create both an individual learning plan for himself and a TD development plan for his academy environment. Another significant theme throughout, often a key driver in adult learning, is the expressed pragmatic desire for relevant, practical knowledge that *works* and *leads* to enhanced coaching ability (Nelson *et al*, 2013). An interesting agent of change for NGBs and coach developers is that the TDSNF can measure AM's performance, but it is necessary to go beyond this quantifiable measure. Using the EP methods affected each AMs' decision-behaviour on the tasks, situation, and conversation. Therefore, the application of the expert performance approach to measuring AM's behaviour requires the TDSNF supporting tasks that are contextual to measure the decision made, its effect on the environment, and its underlying mechanisms which ultimately leads to ILP and bespoke AEDP.

Feedback on the TDSNF content, structure, process, and outputs was extremely positive, with significant implications in adopting this approach more widely for coach education and learning being subsequently presented. Embodied Pedagogy (EP) is identified as a filter from which reflective conversation emerged, albeit based on the tacit understanding of how to implement concepts in context and implicit judgments of *what works*. The AM found this part the most enjoyable and offered continued and sustained engagement in the follow-up interviews. At this point, it is worth noting for the future that by placing interviews after the interventions the AM could then have gained greater rapport with me and be able to see what I am trying to achieve. Ideally, to be more diligent, interviews pre-and post-intervention might have shed different viewpoints on this embodied approach. NGBs and academy coach developers could target these processes to enhance the impact of learning situations (Abraham and Collins, 1998).

Using the expert-performance approach with the TDSNF proved that the EP approach nested inside the CR paradigm can be used to understand and enhance an AM's performance, expertise, and learning. The complexity of the professional academy environment and its context-rich nature may at first glance make it difficult to apply the whole TDSNF. However, it is possible to create controlled EP tasks representative of the essence of high-performance leadership and have an expert or novice AM engage in those tasks while measuring the mechanisms that underpin their performance. Additionally, this traced their development back to both the academy's foundational wants and the AM's foundational needs. The battery of

such tasks designed and described in chapters two to four would be required to examine expert performance in high-performance leadership. The expert performance approach of the facilitator that can also be applied *in situ* within the academy pathway environment is a clear strength. The approach can enable the performance of an AM by measuring their strengths and identifying weaknesses and help design training activities to rectify weaknesses and to help promote effective learning in all academy personnel.

### **7.3. Reflections**

Reflecting on the aims of the PhD programme, this thesis allowed me an opportunity to research and solve specific challenges and redefine best practices by combining practical knowledge with scientific awareness and insight. Valid reflections on the applicability of ecological approaches to TD (Araujo and Davids, 2011; Beek, 2009; Krebs, 2009) have voiced a need for theory-driven research that is ecological in nature and adapted to the world of sports. There has been a suggestion that, due to the relatively unexplored nature of the field, this research should have an exploratory rather than a confirmatory design, or in the words of TD founder theorist Bronfenbrenner (2005), be in the *discovery mode* rather than in the *verification mode*. Undertaking this PhD, level of study has equipped me with further knowledge and understanding of complex issues affecting TD nationally and how these can be utilised in the development of the academy's workforce such as with these AMs, but also led to agents of change in the learning experiences that are planned, programmed, and delivered by NGBs and coach developers.

Within my newly acquired knowledge of research paradigms such as CR and the power of EP activities on delivery, I find myself indebted to previous researchers in both 'embedded pedagogy' (Estola and Elbaz-Luwisch, 2010; Fletcher and Bullock, 2014) and 'critical realism' (North, 2017; Oliver, 2012; Redman-MacLaren and Mills, 2015; Yeung, 1997), theorists that have investigated the body's complex relationships with subjectivity. Over the entire PhD, projecting my efforts to theorise and conclude are also grounded in the collaborative heutagogical project, which has led me to explore the conceptual links between embedded ways of knowing, performances of lived experiences and body intelligence that intertwine to help the AMs engage, learn, and develop. Indeed, this presented thesis has been exploratory and has aimed to develop and test a concrete version of a theory-driven framework for the holistic emerging ecological study of CR and EP in TDE's.

Discovering that an adequate methodological approach to the study of a TD professional

(AMs), the use of qualitative methods, looking at the real-time functioning of the environment and the use of multiple sources of evidence, all made a positive impact on the design of these studies, and the creation of tools, models, and activities. These all added significantly to the ease and enjoyment experienced by the participants, including myself in researching the objectives. I use the terms 'embedded pedagogy' and 'critical realism' interchangeably throughout these empirical studies to signal an epistemological and pedagogical shift that draws attention to the bodies as agents of knowledge production. Forgasz (2015), offers many intellectual traditions, in particular explicit enlightenment of how the mind over the body can suppress bodily knowledge. Since the 1980s, thinkers from many disciplines have engaged with the idea of embodiment as part of the post-modern critique of universal knowledge (Alcoff and Potter, 1993).

Reflecting on the future of professional academy environments, it is clear it could be studied in several different ways. However, following the findings from chapter four, it is worth making some observations as to the strengths and weaknesses of the method used before pursuing any investigations. The agent of change within chapter six highlights the need to ensure ecological validity and there was an emphasis on investigating TDSNF as a real-life TD model within a real-life context. The research set out by selecting a multiple-study approach and chose to look at the real-time functioning of the environments via collaborative small community tasks, such as the EP activities, rather than relying on retrospective accounts. This approach has appeared suitable for providing an insight into the actual existence of the AM and their academy workforce within the TDE. Follow-up interviews, prompts, probes and observations of the participants and analysis of documents complemented each other in mapping not only the status of the environment but also its history and perceived future challenges. During the formation of the TDSNF, the findings from all the previous chapters were finally strengthened via a reflexive process that allowed me, as the researcher, to adapt accordingly.

Each of the different chapters fostered an environment that enabled participants to mutually engage in the practice of shared inquiry and reflection on a professional activity (Hara *et al*, 2009). More specifically, the content of each RO represented a significant body of collectively developed and maintained practical knowledge, which functioned as a shared resource that participants could draw upon when reflecting on their everyday field experiences, ongoing professional development, and when planning for future coaching practice (Gray, 2005). The thesis findings will have significant implications for the understanding of how AM's interactions with the club's workforce can epitomise their reputation as a cultural architect.

The future success of an AM all depends to a large extent on their knowledge of their sport, potentially their previous background as a player, their level of education, or professional rugby know-how as well as their individual performers' (players and academy coaches) appreciation of the skills necessary for elite performance. Throughout this thesis, issues have been addressed around a professional academy's TD and the evidence here suggests that a bespoke personal development programme is among the most important factors for academy staff. On reflection, the data collection episodes also provided insights into the AM's interpersonal skills which enables them to effectively engage with players, coaches, teams, and the ever-increasing numbers of support staff. Ultimately, the agent of change for any national programme is the successful implementation of this model, as evidenced by these findings. It is an *Academy Ecological Development Programme (AEDP)* that is delivered in collaboration with a skilled and experienced coach developer who possesses readymade resources and activities. This process should facilitate fundamental needs in an academy environment.

The new and rich information aligned with how an AM will react in their current practice and is connected to the themes within the phases. This dynamic strategy also revealed information about how the participant implemented such knowledge into their ongoing management practice and provided an opportunity for participants to add any further information they felt was important regarding the themes, activities, and scenarios. This embodied system perpetuated equality and social stratification for the participant while challenging them to revalue, sustain, and create their learning while feeling in charge of the connected intentional spaces. This posed the question; *'Are we now fully present and attending to the dynamics in learning spaces that are connected to everyday micro-practices to macro structures of the academy manager?'* Finally, by critically exploring what a TDE might look like through EP tasks, even if it does not take hold, it is at the very least identifying the gaps and attempting to drive change.

The case study approach was sensitive to narratives and descriptions of the categories in phase one and individual preferences. The participant must be able and open to adapting their learning processes and possible needs for the academy workforce (the academy's fundamental needs). This initiative could involve the development of NGBs' CD workshops, websites, workbooks, and resources aimed at providing those working at the coalface in a professional academy and coach development, both within specific sports such as rugby and other generic organisations (UK Coaching), with practical ways to examine and exploit the social milieu to encourage AMs to develop themselves professionally in the direction of an effective high-performance leader.



Reflecting on this process, by sharing phase one of the TDSNF to start a conversation around the high-order themes (professional duties, chapters three and four) for developing talent in a professional academy, this was an ideal space to reacquaint the AM with these previous findings in an open manner. This enables the tracking of the AM views on several factors and addresses issues of TD, 'player psychosocial nurturing, cultural, cross-cultural and contextual aspects within a club.' The later phases provided more concrete examples of what the analysis will demonstrate, with explicit room for the participants to contribute their interpretations and experience. Sequentially, these conversations led to phases 1, 3 and 4 of the TDSNF design. As an agent of change the TDSNF will enhance the relationship with the participants while discussing the model's themes and increases engagement with all who found the entire process enjoyable, thus evoking examples of adaptable, accessible practices that model EP, and conjure activities acting as a metaphor for where the participants work, think, play, build capacities, fail, and transform.

#### **7.4. Limitations**

The limitations of the study are worth mentioning. First, it is difficult to prove the uniqueness of each environment mentioned. During this thesis, it was explored in many different environments, one of which was investigated during the case study approach, which was strengthened with a pilot study. Additionally, these environments relate to different sociocultural factors (e.g., their community reputation) and are situated in different parts of the country. It is not possible to know for sure if the unique features of each environment are a function of the environment or a cultural setting determined by the club's space in the sport or their region, without a standalone longitudinal research project. On the other hand, the design and adaption of Raduescu and Vessey's Critical Realism (2008) model's trustworthiness enabled the coding and analysis against each domain to become more straightforward, which in turn highlighted the fact that TDE functions are different. Thus, it allowed any viewing of the club's TDE footprint to become even more convincing and considered that there are similarities. These are common features of successful TDE and must not just be ascribed to one club or its competition rivals.

The methodology used in this study did establish a rigorous causal relationship concerning the factors influencing the data collection methods' success (e.g., collaborative tasks, group interviews and embodied pedagogical tasks). Creating the emerging empirical models with the use of TDSNF and contextual tasks, these centred mainly on the relationships emphasised by the AM as well as on interpretations of observational data and documents analysed. This should not be considered simply a weakness in design, however, but a natural consequence

of the complexity of TDSNF tasks and the NEW TD theoretical framework.

#### **7.4.1. Trustworthiness revisited**

Critical Realism's (CR) domain of empirical experiences (Raduescu and Vessey, 2008) opts for explorative designs whilst systems theory promotes a reduction of attention given to causality and researchers in the field of organisational cultures. Schein (1985: 203) stresses that: "gathering valid data from a complex system is intrinsically difficult, involves a variety of choices and options, and is always an intervention into the life of the organisation if the research involves any contact with the organisation". Because of this, one cannot know whether the rugby academies were good TDE at the time of the study, nor the AM equally successful or not until their prospective players have made it to the senior teams, or that they can move onto a fully-fledged career in rugby elsewhere. However, the academies and AMs selected have a successful history of producing professional players and were central components (academy coach and senior coaches amongst others) having been part of the environment for a long period. This fact makes it highly likely that the environment at the time of the study will be similar in structure and culture to earlier when it is known to have been successful, and that it will still be successful at the time of the study.

Concerning the ethical aspects of these studies, it is worth mentioning that the CR and in particular the EP task approach are subject to potential problems. Therefore, it was highly recommended from an ethical perspective, that all participants in the study were informed that they had a right to drop out at any time. No participants elected to do so. If any participants had decided against participating in the study, however, I did face dilemmas, since the study involved observations of EP tasks that are consistent with the AM's daily routines in which all participants took part. Any participants no longer wishing to continue would not be interviewed, but it would be difficult not to include them in the observations, at least if they were volunteers (which they were not). For future research, a more specific contract regarding participation in different parts of the study would be beneficial.

#### **7.5. Recommendations**

NGBs and national elite sports leadership or academy coach developers are aware there remains a scarcity of research into how these concepts can influence high-performance leadership, learning and behaviour (Rotherham and Collins, 2020). UK Sport and EIS (2020) Pathway Statement highlighted a need to know more about how coach developers might

exploit social learning as a legitimate tool in coach development provision. As such, the aims addressed in this thesis can now inform the significant gap between current sports coaching research, knowledge and practice relating to informal coach learning and development throughout the pathway coaching.

The questions regarding the design and delivery of formal high-performance leadership for an AM and coach education programmers, and the implications for practice that emerge, are positively substantial. For example, there are two distinct topics NGBs' and coach developers' (CDs) (McCarthy, *et al*, 2020) need to consider. Firstly, identifying fundamental wants, which are influenced by the academy's foundational needs and then exploring how best to proceed to develop these needs by prioritising a learning pathway that is co-created with the facilitator (ILP and AEDP, chapter six). This was guided by the pilot study, which provided a recommendation to group the sub-themes in chapter five, concluding that the activity was best separated up into a 3-tier framework so participants could gain a deeper insight into their own emotions, behaviours, and environmental needs, which also correlated with CR domains. Moreover, the training of CDs around their understanding of the three levels is also an area of further important research.

This is possible by breaking up the three levels. Firstly, the behavioural, which is comprised of words and actions around, *philosophical alignment and legacy building*. Secondly, the cognitive and emotional, which is comprised of thoughts and feelings around, *organisational connectivity and player transitions*. Finally, the conative is comprised of *workforce development and psych-social nurturing* (adapted from Giges, 2014). These sociocultural factors play a large part in the behaviours of the AM and those around them (academy and pathway coaching workforce). Most AMs in the studies appear to be copying practice from significant others (e.g., national programmers, senior coaches, peers) without any practice variation to meet the various needs of players in transition (e.g., u18 moving to senior fully professional). This implies that the CD needs to evidence ways to meet the needs of this pathway workforce and facilitate learning in a similar emerging, progressive and engaging way.

Therefore, it is essential in developing AMs that they receive consistent positive messages as to their evolution, behaviour, and actions. NGBs and sports organisation's CDs need to look more broadly at how this can be done within their own sporting culture by unpacking an AM's professional space, the synthesised connections between their performance, the EP tasks and critical communication between the themes. This co-learning certainly becomes the agent of change within the academy environment that generates knowledge through processes of

experimentation, repetition, and preparation. The AMs value an ideology that is complex and reliant on multi-dimensional actions within an identified and agreed space. Within this study, this needed to be *broken down* for the academy workforce to learn about TD factors such as the AM's professional duties, emotions, behaviours, and fundamental wants, all exactly what is needed to help build a personal development programme. This propensity for *developing the coaching workforce* was exemplified by the participant in the case study who constantly described the importance of being a *more skillful academy coach* so they can compete with senior coaches in discussions and knowledge exchange.

While reflecting on the workshops and tasks in the case study phases (see chapter six) I started to outline learning from other coaches, learning from a bespoke education course, learning from participating in collaborative tasks and learning from the process of reflecting on experiences which proved to be conclusive. For example, recognising the apparent prevalence of coaches' negative attitudes towards coach education (Cushion *et al*, 2003; Gilbert and Trudel, 2004), resources such as EP activities can be utilised or adapted to raise awareness of the relevance of conceptual changes in the way formal coach education is delivered, and ensure that attitudes and beliefs are supportive of such change and innovation. This should help NGBs to recognise where and why the value in socially mediated learning endeavors such as *AEDP* encourages engagement in the complimentary EP tasks.

If professional sports bodies and NGBs are committed to establishing an engaging professional academy pathway course, TDSNF will be a useful tool to ensure this is indeed on an ongoing basis. The extended conversations confirmed the success of the activities and tasks all aligned to the model's themes, which stimulated the type of conversations for an AM that have now become essential. The AM's performance in the workshops will embody any inquiry that is integral to research, whilst emerging themes inform what to bring to the learning spaces, identify what the participants struggle with, and how EP can create more ideal learning environments for this type of TD demographic. Structured performance-based workshops in all practices help develop the articulation of embodied, experimental explorations in qualitative research. The TDSNF workshops will allow the participants to develop a critical awareness of differences and shared experiences, connect everyday practices to larger power structures, and generate enactments of social transactions with academy colleagues.

Continued efforts are needed to make a NEW alternative paradigm more accessible and where AMs' must experience leading groups by reflecting on those experiences and constructing their understanding and knowledge of both the TD and coach education and development. Developing AMs through the TDSNF will encourage participants to ask

questions, explore, and evaluate what they know (e.g., during the embodied pedagogical tasks). Within all sports, national programme coach educators would require a radical change in approach and delivery methods, entailing the use of EP tasks (see, chapter six activity techniques). For example, authentic problem-solving and experimentation are about creating further knowledge and then reflecting on what they are doing and how their understanding is changing. This would require the national educators to provide inquiry-based learning activities, utilise questioning techniques and perhaps most importantly encourage the AM and academy pathway coaches to become active learners rather than passive recipients of information (North, 2017; Oliver, 2012; Redman-Malaren and Mills, 2015; Yeung, 1997).

## 7.6. Conclusions

Investigating the academy managers' (AM) professional duties identified social systems which all need to be developed along with the AM's fundamental wants. For example, *connectivity* was mainly found to be an issue in transferring talent to an agreed model (sociocultural factors) and involved efforts to improve and implement a cooperative colleague system. The development of the coaching workforce (including themselves) was mainly found to be a by-product of the academy's needs. *Philosophical alignment* revolved around issues of senior coaches' lack of involvement with the academy pathway population.

The *psychosocial nurturing* of the players is largely missing, arguably because none of the AMs are professionals qualified nor grounded in the nuances and programming of such a subject, they had little experience. Interestingly, an additional system was also evident in the environments, which are now referred to as the learning system (e.g., EP tasks and activities). This learning system is built on basic cultural assumptions about openness and sharing knowledge and is characterised by a focus on the performance process rather than results and by a dialogue that is unequal where these senior coaches and AMs are expected to pass on their knowledge. This finding highlights the fact that the learning system for an AM is a key aspect of the TD process established by the environments which ultimately the AMs are expected to develop within their roles.

Furthermore, the thesis highlighted the fact that the learning system, such as the EP tasks, the *TDSNF*, the *ILP* and the outcome of an *AEDP* are NOW all key aspects of the TD process established by AM's skills in developing the environment, (included the stakeholders, senior coaches, directors, academy coaches, parents, and volunteers) and their ability to connect these with the club's sociocultural factors (the club's community reputation). On the balance

of probabilities, most rugby league qualifications and coaching pathways hinder participation and performance levels rather than fostering them. 'The professional academy TD population' has proved this in the preceding chapters - it is foolhardy to suggest otherwise.

Most AMs have a positive experience on courses, yet when you ask them a few years down the line how courses helped them, few of them remain complementary. This is not to say that all national programmes or short courses and all content is negative, irrelevant or that no learning occurs. To reiterate, there are many committed NGB, national talent leads and coach educators delivering worthwhile content, meaningful experiences, and valuable learning. Arguably, this is usually down to the tutor's capability rather than what they are asked to deliver. It certainly begs the question; What would happen if there was an alternative route to certification such as this suggested agent of change – the NEW alternative paradigm becomes verified? What would happen if a participant saw that they were not fully liable because their national qualification was deemed not fit for purpose? I will end this point by asking if the TDSNF, ILP and AEDP relate to sustainability, or does the current national structure reflect a sustainable model or one that risks the AM and their workforce becoming further disenfranchised with what is on offer?

### **7.6.1. Methodological Conclusion**

Many scientific articles, relevant literature and previous research on the thesis question have been systematically read and analysed to gain an understanding of the research phenomenon. The various theories selected are related to previous successful explorations into sport, coaching, or leadership. In this case, it is AMs' and the research that can contribute to a deeper analysis and understanding of TD within a professional academy. Throughout this PhD, I gained a greater understanding by using different theoretical frameworks when conducting research. Reflecting on the different experiences of compiling this thesis, there is a realisation that I am looking back on a journey, my journey into the world of high-performance leadership. Like any journey, some of the most memorable experiences come from the parts that take us out of one's comfort zones, changing us forever. Certainly, ones that are embodied and that have helped connect through sensory or lived experiences. Combining these with this examination of a bespoke, *reality-grounded* learning initiative whilst targeting the professional judgments and decision-making of experienced AMs in talent development, new ground in literature is broken. This rigorous, theoretically informed CR approach with EP activities will allow the generation of rich, causal, explanations of 'what has worked within this learning initiative, for whom, why and under what circumstance' (Pawson and Tilley, 1997: 214).

It has been pleasing to realise that the thesis has been exploratory and has both developed and tested a concrete version of a new theory-driven framework for the holistic study of the TDSNF in a professional academy. I have suggested that an adequate methodological approach to the study of TDSNF should have the design of a case study, use qualitative methods, look at the real-time functioning of the environment and use multiple sources of evidence gained from the five earlier empirical studies. Looking back, it is worth pointing out that the AMs could be studied in many ways, and it is worth making some observations as to the strengths and weaknesses of the method used. Navigating the domains of Critical Realism (CR) helped my focus, learning more about how social science can refine and improve my new knowledge about the real world I was exploring, and guide me to make claims about reality that are relatively justified, while still being historical, contingent, and changing.

Firstly, developing and more recently defining critical realism was not an easy task, the pool of scholars that critical realists often draw upon (Archer 1995; Bhaskar 1978; 1998c; North, 2013a; 2013b; 2017) are a set of beliefs, methodology, or dogma that unites critical realists, yet there is not one unitary framework. I utilised Critical Realism much more like a series of an AM's behavioural characteristics in which various commonalities exist between these members, but these commonalities overlap and crisscross in different ways. Multiple methods applications prove to be fruitful in capturing the important parts of this chaos. This new knowledge around a reflective philosophical stance helped provide me with a philosophically informed account of science and a social science which did, in turn, inform the thesis' empirical investigations. Looking back, I have realised that this experience has helped me as a student, academic researcher, mentor, high-performance coach, and leadership developer. More importantly, replenishing my drive for continuous learning as a high-performance coach I now feel much more confident in my writing abilities and research skills.

## **7.7. Future Research Opportunities**

The largely exploratory nature of the studies reported in chapters two, three, four and six constituted only the initial stages in testing and refining AM's fundamental wants and the academy's foundational needs and the potential use of the TDSNF. At the time of writing this thesis, the first four studies were published describing that the use of such data collection methods validated AM's bespoke approach to education. As such, it is important to note that the findings of this research *by no means* provide all the answers. In fact, in keeping with the rationale of many of such inputs, I generated more questions than answers, and future studies can build on and look to improve the protocols and procedures utilised to design ILP and the

AEDP. Furthermore, I recognise the limits of what can be achieved by, and claimed for, the pedagogical frameworks employed in large-scale and short-duration studies in this thesis. Despite these limitations, and in addition to the practical recommendations outlined in chapters six and seven, the findings in this thesis highlight how further research is warranted in this area, as provided within the empirically based recommendations for such research.

At this point, it is worth reflecting that the empirical studies for focus groups, the framework analysis and finally the case study in this thesis were grounded in a higher-performance sports context. As such, the relatively small groups were fully engaged professional AMs' and ACs' so are not fully reflective of a wider academy staff cohort. These findings are therefore an extension into more typical real-world academy settings which helped uncover new findings and can be treated as tentative signposts (Cushion *et al*, 2010; Jones *et al*, 2004) to new agents for HP leaders. In addition, more studies of social learning activities, using tools like TDSNF, are needed across different cultures, sports, and at different levels of development.

Additionally, ways in which AM's activities are evaluated are better considered than simply obtaining their opinions and perceptions of their experiences (Cushion *et al*, 2010). For example, better insight is needed into different modes of socially mediated learning and their coalition with like-minded peers as well as their ability to understand and apply theory in the complex and adaptive activity of coaching (Ollis and Sproule, 2007; Threlfall, 2014). Likewise, a detailed investigation of the TDSNF and the impact of the EP activities on the experiences is vitally important to provide evidence in support of what works, why and for whom (Wayne *et al*, 2008). Learning is non-linear and difficult to quantify, which means measuring these factors in experimental or causal studies is inherently difficult (Cushion *et al*, 2010).

In summary, future findings need to be presented in digestible and pragmatic ways, *'that is what we have found and so we can recommend the following action'* (Giacobbi *et al*, 2005b) so that organisations (such as NGBs') are provided with clear guidelines on how and why evidence could and should be put into practice. Where possible, this material should also include examples of applied, research-evidenced practice by other sports, organisations and nations to identify and promote agreed gold standards for coach development (North, 2010). If successful, the results from the future research will go help determine how an AM can best learn to perform their difficult and demanding work and help to inform and direct how HP leadership professionals and coach educators can best optimise both individual and organisational outcomes in this regard (Rynne, *et al*, 2006; 2010).



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# Appendices

## Appendix A: Ethics clearance

14 May 2018

Clive Palmer /Stuart G Wilkinson  
School of Sport and Wellbeing (AHRC, SENS & CASES) University of  
Central Lancashire

Dear Clive / Stuart

**Re: BAHSS Ethics Committee Application Unique Reference Number: BAHSS  
557 FR**

The BAHSS ethics committee has granted approval of your proposal application 'Talent Development in Professional Rugby League Academies: Exploring the professional duties of the Academy Manager'. Approval is granted up to the end of project date.

It is your responsibility to ensure that

- the project is carried out in line with the information provided in the forms you have submitted
- you regularly re-consider the ethical issues that may be raised in generating and analysing your data
- any proposed amendments/changes to the project are raised with, and approved, by Committee
- you notify [EthicsInfo@uclan.ac.uk](mailto:EthicsInfo@uclan.ac.uk) if the end date changes or the project does not start
- serious adverse events that occur from the project are reported to Committee
- a closure report is submitted to complete the ethics governance procedures (Existing paperwork can be used for this purposes e.g. funder's end of grant report; abstract for student award or NRES final report. If none of these are available use [e-Ethics Closure Report Proforma](#)).

Yours sincerely



Duncan Sayer Vice Chair

**BAHSS Ethics Committee**

\* for research degree students this will be the final lapse date

*NB - Ethical approval is contingent on any health and safety checklists having been completed and necessary approvals gained as a result.*

## **Appendix B: Participant Information and Consent Form**

### **B1. Focus Group information sheet**

**Project** An investigation into the talent development knowledge and practice of a rugby high-performance coaching team

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study is to investigate Talent Development environments (TDE) within the transition stage of professional rugby. The aim is to explore the knowledge and application of best practice concepts by the coaching teams that work specifically with Academy players to facilitate transition to the first team playing squads. focus groups are to be established in order to explore TDEs more fully.

As part of this TDE exploration around those currently working in professional rugby's talent development transition stage have a series of 'gaps' in their theory to practice which are limiting the successful creation and operation of the most conducive TDE for their players we would genuinely appreciate it if you would take part in this external research being carried out by myself, Stuart Wilkinson through the University of Central Lancashire. Your own club officials have approved this research project which will be included in Doctor of Philosophy.

Before you decide whether to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information by emailing [sgwilkinson@uclan.ac.uk](mailto:sgwilkinson@uclan.ac.uk). Thank you for reading this information sheet, which you should keep if you decide to take part in the study.

#### **Purpose of this Study**

The aim of this project is to explore the pattern of behaviours expected of individuals in each academy environment situation and define a structure which is a crucial component for the effective function for performance in coaching teams such as a rugby academy.

#### **Why have I been chosen?**

You have been chosen to participate in this study because you are currently a member or key stakeholder of fully professional rugby academy.

#### **Do I have to take part?**

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and also be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part, you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason.

#### **What will happen to me if I take part?**

The study will involve taking part in a single interview or focus group which will focus on your perceptions of the current TDF in both your own environment and nationally. This interview should last approximately one hour and will take place at a time and location convenient to you.

#### **Confidentiality**

Please rest assured that all information gathered in this study will remain anonymous and strictly confidential. Interviewees will be assigned will remain anonymous. When we write the final report for either publication or my Ph.D., or professional outputs (e.g., presentations) we will not use your name or any other information which could make you publicly identifiable, although you may have a higher probability of identifying other participants and vice versa. All collected data will be held on a password protected computer and in a secure locked cupboard. Data will be stored for five years from the end of the project and then destroyed.

#### **Withdrawing from the study**

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You do not have to answer any question, you can

stop answering a question at any point, and you have the right to fully withdraw from the study with-out penalty.

If you decide to withdraw from the study, all data relating to you will be destroyed. If you decide to withdraw after outputs arising from the study have been communicated (e.g., report publications, presentations), please be assured that none of your responses will have been explicitly linked to you in these works.

### **Risks and Benefits**

Your participation and the information you provide will help us understand more about the current National TDF for club academies compared to your own TDE for your club professional pathway in serving both its stakeholders and its young players. Through this study, we will report and publish on the current strengths of the National TDF and your own rugby academy environment and recommendations the need for a change or modification to better suit stakeholders needs.

### **Research Ethics**

The University of Central Lancashire's research ethics committee has reviewed and approved this study. If you have any complaints or issues about the study please contact Adrian Ibbetson, who is our Head of School at the School of Sport and Wellbeing, UCLan. If you would like to take part in this study or if you require further information, please contact:

Stuart Wilkinson

### ***SGWilkinson***

[sgwilkinson@uclan.ac.uk](mailto:sgwilkinson@uclan.ac.uk)

Clive Palmer (Director of Studies)

.....

[CAPalmer@uclan.ac.uk](mailto:CAPalmer@uclan.ac.uk)

David Grecic (Supervisor)

.....

[DGrecic1@uclan.ac.uk](mailto:DGrecic1@uclan.ac.uk)

Thank you for your help in this study.

## B2. Academy Staff consent form

**Title of Research Project:** *An investigation into the talent development knowledge and practice of a rugby high-performance coaching team*

**Participant name:** \_\_

**Lead Researcher:** Stuart Wilkinson

I have read and understand the participant information sheet.	
I understand what the project is about and for what the results will be used.	
I am fully aware of all procedures involving myself and of any risks and benefits associated with the study.	
I know that my participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the project without giving any reason. I understand that if I decide to withdraw from this study all data relating to me will be destroyed. I also understand, however, that it will not be possible to retrospectively remove my data from any publications or presentations that arise from this work.	
I agree to notes being made during the interview	
I agree to the audio recording and transcription of my interview	
I understand that anonymized quotes may be taken from me and used to illustrate general themes and points within any publications or presentations resulting from this work.	
I understand that the data collected on me will be destroyed at the conclusion of the project but any raw data on which the results of the project depend will be retained in secure storage for five years, after which it will be destroyed.	
I understand that, although the other participants who work with the investigator may have a higher probability of identifying me (and vice versa), the results will be anonymous, and any quotations used will not be attributed to me.	

Academy Manager Access Arrangement: I certify that the research team conducting this study have been permitted to invite the prospective participants to consent to participate within this investigation.

I certify that the signature below has also been witnessed.

Authorized Personnel signature: XXXXXXXX

Signature of Investigator: **SGWilkinson**



### B3. Focus Groups tasks and Interview Strategy

#### Academy Coaching Training Workshops

<b>TABLE 1</b> Workshops, Activities, and in-tasks Probes		
<b>Workshop Title</b>	<b>Activities</b>	<b>In Task Discussion Probes</b>
Develop the Environment	The Transition Timeline  Extension: The four-quadrant based meta-analysis	Discuss unique and important role of a professional player.  Extension Task: Can you Co-create your own TD Model: Suggest a series of concentric circles  Foster collaboration and Relatedness to the organisation
Developing the Character	Footage of role model and player footage  Developing Self-awareness within the pathway	Suggest: Where in the academy programme are you increasing awareness of relationship between behaviours, thoughts, wants, and emotions?  Consider congruence between your own personal behaviours and fundamental wants?
Developing the Culture	Defining your role as cultural architect	Discuss AMs role in the coach/athlete/parent/colleague relationship
Developing Sports Craft	Games V Drills	Are there benefits of both?  What are your Performance measures
Identifying fundamental wants and academy foundational needs	Identity in action	Describe Senior Staff and Academy Connectivity  Prioritising and alignment to personal development
Embedding Nature of the challenge	Public Image	Start by Reflect on experiences in this workshop then and as a sport player, then coach and finally an expert.

#### B4. Focus Groups tasks audit trail sample

What follows below are two tables that demonstrate how the data has been analysed to build and construct the final storybook themes. The first table below overviews the initial coding phases (i.e., step 2 of 6; Braun & Clarke, 2013). Example transcript passages are presented, along with the initial code assigned. The lower-order theme is also presented to give readers some context. Next, the second table below provides readers with the full reflexive thematic analysis.

##### Examples of transcript coding and generation of raw data codes

Example Transcript Extract	Codes Assigned	Lower Order Themes
<p>My assistant was an ex-international. He fully understands what you can and cannot do as a player. He doesn't pretend a certain move or play is possible when there is no way of predicting what will happen. He needs to know that we build our players into our system while accounting for strengths and the halfbacks he has worked with always rank amongst the most efficient players around England. His international athletic background has been absolutely critical for sticking to our aim of aligning our players with our DNA (AM6)</p>	<p>Creating a vision, Reflecting the club traditions, and/or Connecting staff to the purpose</p>	<p>Psychosocial Development Community identity Brand, DNA, or Playing Style Shared Mental Model</p>
<p>It is very important to have some past coaching experience. We find the best kids and design a system around their talent... emm, perhaps this national influence is wrong, and we should be doing it the other way around?... While my coaches have a wealth of knowledge and a coaching background where he has been exposed to a whole bunch of systems and strategies...they just don't get this, emm...maybe we should be looking for what comes close to our DNA as opposed to just the best kids? I really would like the coaches here to change and adapt his approach year in and year out (AM4)</p>	<p>Creating self-sufficient players, and/or Character-building strategies</p>	<p>Adaptability Self-regulation Valued based coaching Occupational positioning</p>

**A full example of the reflexive thematic analysis**

Example Raw Data Codes	Lower Order Theme	Emerging themes
<p>His international athletic background has been absolutely critical for sticking to our aim of aligning our players with our DNA (AM6)</p> <p>The experience of looking after the younger lads, some are behaving you know, we have had a discussion this week about our Curries brothers are still EAP's do we still look after them as an academy because actually, the first team players play for their country at the top level (S&amp;C 1).</p> <p>Loyalty is the biggest thing when developing an academy coach because a lot of stuff we do is confidential. I mean it is not war, but you keep your secrets for yourself (AM4).</p> <p>like our S&amp;C, Medical Rugby Management, all worked independently and not through fault, just though there is a hell of a lot of work to do, the pressure is on to get it done so you just plough on and get it done, do you know what I mean? (AM1).</p>	<p>Creating a vision</p> <p>Reflecting the club traditions</p> <p>Connecting staff to the purpose</p> <p>Managing conflict</p>	<p>Developing and maintaining a positive culture.</p>

## **Appendix C: Participant Information and Consent Form**

### **C1. Semi Structured Interviews for FA**

**Project** *An investigation and analysis of Rugby Academy Managers' Duties and Roles within a Fully Professional Talent Development Environment.*

#### **Introduction**

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 the potential gaps in provision and the related development needs. By exploring the Academy Managers landscape we hope to uncover how they contextualize their daily professional interactions with other stakeholders. By highlighting the Academy Managers developmental needs, we can then design and bespoke support, which is essential if they are to successfully overcome the multiple challenges they are faced with whilst performing their professional duties.

As part of this TDE exploration around those currently working in professional rugby's talent development transition stage have a series of 'gaps' in their theory to practice which are limiting the successful creation and operation of the most conducive TDE for their players we would genuinely appreciate it if you would take part in this external research being carried out by myself, Stuart Wilkinson through the University of Central Lancashire. Your own club officials have approved this research project which will be included in Doctor of Philosophy.

Before you decide whether to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information by emailing [sgwilkinson@uclan.ac.uk](mailto:sgwilkinson@uclan.ac.uk) Thank you for reading this information sheet, which you should keep if you decide to take part in the study.

#### **Purpose of this Study**

Explore how the Academy Manager navigates their responsibilities that are accountable for establishing and maintaining the TDE for these players. They are in a pivotal position within the club as they are required to integrate both down wards and upwards into the First Team professional environment.

**Why have I been chosen?**

You have been chosen to participate in this study because you are currently a fully professional Academy Manager of a fully professional rugby academy.

**Do I have to take part?**

It is up to you to decide whether to take part. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part, you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason.

**What will happen to me if I take part?**

The study will involve taking part in a semi-structured interview, conducted by the lead author with those currently operating in this TD domain. Interviews range from 45-80 minutes and will take place at a time and location convenient to you.

**Confidentiality**

Please rest assured that all information gathered in this study will remain anonymous and strictly confidential. Interviewees will be assigned and will remain anonymous. When we write the final report for either publication or my Ph.D., or professional outputs (e.g., presentations) we will not use your name or any other information which could make you publicly identifiable, although you may have a higher probability of identifying other participants and vice versa. All collected data will be held on a password protected computer and in a secure locked cupboard. Data will be stored for five years from the end of the project and then destroyed.

**Withdrawing from the study**

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You do not have to answer any question, you can stop answering a question at any point, and you have the right to fully withdraw from the study without penalty. If you decide to withdraw from the study, all data relating to you will be destroyed. If you decide to withdraw after outputs arising from the study have been communicated (e.g., reports, publications, presentations), please be assured that none of your responses will have been explicitly linked to you in these works.

## **Risks and Benefits**

Your participation and the information you provide will help us understand more about the current National TDF for club academies compared to your own TDE for your club professional pathway in serving both its stakeholders and its young players. Through this study, we will report and publish on the current strengths of the National TDF and your own rugby academy environment and recommendations on the need for a change or modification to better suit stakeholders' needs.

## **Research Ethics**

The University of Central Lancashire's research ethics committee has reviewed and approved this study. If you have any complaints or issues about the study please contact Bryan Jones, who is our Head of School at the School of Sport and Wellbeing, UCLan. If you would like to take part in this study or if you require further information, please contact:

Stuart Wilkinson

*SGWilkinson*

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Clive Palmer (Director of Studies)

.....

[CAPalmer@uclan.ac.uk](mailto:CAPalmer@uclan.ac.uk)

David Grecic (Supervisor)

.....

[DGrecic1@uclan.ac.uk](mailto:DGrecic1@uclan.ac.uk)

Thank you for your help in this study.

## C2. Academy Managers' consent form

**Title of Research Project:** *An investigation and analysis of Rugby Academy Managers' Duties and Roles within a Fully Professional Talent Development Environment.*

**Lead Researcher:** Stuart Wilkinson

I have read and understand the participant information sheet.	
I understand what the project is about and for what the results will be used.	
I am fully aware of all procedures involving myself and of any risks and benefits associated with the study.	
I know that my participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the project without giving any reason. I understand that if I decide to withdraw from this study all data relating to me will be destroyed. I also understand, however, that it will not be possible to retrospectively remove my data from any publications or presentations that arise from this work.	
I agree to notes being made during the interview	
I agree to the audio recording and transcription of my interview	
I understand that anonymized quotes may be taken from me and used to illustrate general themes and points within any publications or presentations resulting from this work.	
I understand that the data collected on me will be destroyed at the conclusion of the project but any raw data on which the results of the project depend will be retained in secure storage for five years, after which it will be destroyed.	
I understand that, although the other participants who work with the investigator may have a higher probability of identifying me (and vice versa), the results will be anonymous, and any quotations used will not be attributed to me.	

Academy Manager Access Arrangement: I certify that the research team conducting this study have been permitted to invite the prospective participants to consent to participate in this investigation. I certify that the signature below has also been witnessed.

Authorized Personnel signature:

Signature of Investigator: **SGWilkinson**

### C3. Interview Guide

#### Developing and Maintaining a positive culture

Question	Potential Probes	Indicative emergent Prompts
Can you explain what you do at the club on a day-to-day basis?	<p>Is your academy a reflection of the club's values, attitudes, norms, assumptions, and beliefs?</p> <p>Is this describing the importance of establishing clear values?</p> <p>Describe the benefit of having a clear communication system throughout the club?</p>	<p>Are you in agreement with respect to this clubs' historical and cultural practices?</p> <p>Can we see how you enable consistency throughout the whole club pathway?</p>

#### Implementing a holistic TD environment

Question	Potential Probes	Indicative emergent Prompts
How successful have you been in achieving your objectives?	<p>Does your academy believe it is delivering the 'whole-person development approach'?</p> <p>Can you describe what 'being athlete-centered' means?</p> <p>Can you describe a challenge you set yourself? And your coaches?</p>	<p>Is your response encouraging independence, sacrifice and empathy, an understanding of individual differences and an encouragement of adaptability?</p> <p>Are you saying this is autonomy?</p> <p>Are you saying the coaches are aware of the players personal challenges?</p>



### Supporting staff development and learning

Question	Potential Probes	Indicative emergent Prompts
How do you manage the other members of your team? And are there any issues that arise working with such a varied workforce?	<p>Where in your academy development plan does it express a constant need for self-improvement among all the academy workforces?</p> <p>Can you define where the pathway for coaches to reach the high-performance level sits in your academy plan?</p>	<p>Are you describing that you know exactly what tells you that you can better?</p> <p>Do your academy coaches know they can improve upon or are they doing this themselves?</p>

### Managing up and down the pathway

Question	Potential Probes	Indicative emergent Prompts
Where in your academy programme do the top end pathway coaches connect with the bottom end pathway coaches?	<p>Connectivity and consistency are cornerstones in any successful organizations, can you find an example that explains this?</p> <p>What point in the day do you interact with the senior staff and management?</p>	<p>Are you describing a multi-disciplinary team of experts collaborating on TiD?</p> <p>What tells you that different parts of the club need to develop links...and it this your job?</p>

#### C4. Semi Structured Interviews Audit Trail for FA Sample

What follows below are two tables that demonstrate how the data has been analysed to build and construct the final storybook themes. The first table below overviews the initial coding phases (i.e., step 2 of 6; Braun & Clarke, 2013). Example transcript passages are presented, along with the initial code assigned. The lower-order theme is also presented to give readers some context. Secondly, the next table provides readers with the full reflexive thematic analysis.

##### Examples of transcript coding and generation of raw data codes

Example Transcript Extract	Codes Assigned	Emerging Themes
<p>“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.”</p>	<p>Implementing a holistic TD environment</p>	<p>Psychosocial Development Micro Cultures Cooperative Learning</p>
<p>“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?”</p>	<p>Implementing a holistic TD environment</p>	<p>Brand, DNA or Playing Style Shared Mental Model Cooperative Learning Motivational climate Meta Perceptions</p>

**A full example of the reflexive thematic analysis**

Example Raw Data Codes	Lower Order Theme	Emerging themes
<p>“We put the student-athlete ahead of our personal goals and aspirations. You cannot have a coach here who only cares about winning a championship.”</p>	<p>Developing and Maintaining a positive culture</p>	<p>Reflecting the club traditions, connecting staff to the purpose, Managing Conflict</p>
<p>“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... world-class”.</p>	<p>Supporting staff development and learning</p>	<p>Developing collective self-efficacy, Establishing a culture of continuous learning</p>
<p>“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)”.</p>	<p>Managing up and down the pathway</p>	<p>Identifying resources and planning</p>
<p>“In the world of Super League, there are a lot of choices on what players best suit our succession...it is just being clear with the head coach or CEO why they take on this particular choice... So, I am noticeably 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”.</p>		<p>Managing player transition, Sharing information with stakeholders</p>

## **Appendix D: Participant Information and Consent Form**

### **D1. Case Study into TDSNF**

*Project A coach education style workshop to explore the professional duties of a High-Performance Academy Manager and use of the Talent Development Self Navigation Framework (TDSNF).*

#### **Introduction**

This study investigated the professional duties of a professional rugby league Academy Manager (AM) with the explicit aim of identifying bespoke development needs through the operation of the Talent Development Self Navigation Framework (TDSNF). The purpose of this study is to investigate Talent Development environments (TDE) within the transition stage of professional rugby. The aim is to explore the knowledge and application of best practice concepts by the coaching teams that work specifically with Academy players to facilitate transition to the first team playing squads. focus groups are to be established in order to explore TDEs more fully.

As part of this TDE exploration those currently working in professional rugby's talent development transition stage has a series of 'gaps' in their theory to practice which are limiting the successful creation and operation of the most conducive TDE for their players we would genuinely appreciate it if you would take part in this external research being carried out by myself, Stuart Wilkinson through the University of Central Lancashire. Your own club officials have approved this research project which will be included in the Doctor of Philosophy.

Before you decide whether to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information by emailing [sgwilkinson@uclan.ac.uk](mailto:sgwilkinson@uclan.ac.uk) Thank you for reading this information sheet, which you should keep if you decide to take part in the study.

#### **Purpose of this Study**

This project aims to explore the pattern of behaviours expected of individuals in each academy environment situation and define a structure which is a crucial component for the effective function for performance in coaching teams such as a rugby academy.

**Why have I been chosen?**

You have been chosen to participate in this study because you are currently a member or key stakeholder of fully professional rugby academy.

**Do I have to take part?**

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and also be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part, you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason.

**What will happen to me if I take part?**

This study involves taking part in 1 to 1 interview with mental and physical tasks which will focus on your own solutions to very dynamic scenarios. The tasks have embodied pedagogy approach grounded in a critical realist view of your own Talent Development domain. Additionally, the findings from these tasks will help the participants reflect fully on your 'real world' and 'foundational wants and needs'. This interview should last approximately two hour and will take place at a time and location convenient to you.

**Confidentiality**

Please rest assured that all information gathered in this study will remain anonymous and strictly confidential. Interviewees will be assigned will remain anonymous. When we write the final report for either publication or my PhD, or professional outputs (e.g., presentations) we will not use your name or any other information which could make you publicly identifiable, although you may have a higher probability of identifying other participants and vice versa. All collected data will be held on a password-protected computer and in a secure locked cupboard. Data will be stored for five years from the end of the project and then destroyed.

**Withdrawing from the study**

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You do not have to answer any question, you can stop answering a question at any point, and you have the right to fully withdraw from the study with-out penalty. If you decide to withdraw from the study, all data relating to you will be destroyed. If you decide to withdraw after outputs arising from the study have been communicated (e.g., reports, publications, presentations), please be assured that none of your responses will have been explicitly linked to you in these works.

## **Risks and Benefits**

Your participation and the information you provide will help us understand more about the current National TDF for club academies compared to your own TDE for your club professional pathway in serving both its stakeholders and its young players. Through this study, we will report and publish on the current strengths of the National TDF and your own rugby academy environment and recommendations the need for a change or modification to better suit stakeholders needs.

## **Research Ethics**

The University of Central Lancashire's research ethics committee has reviewed and approved this study. If you have any complaints or issues about the study please contact Adrian Ibbetson, who is our Head of School at the School of Sport and Wellbeing, UCLan. If you would like to take part in this study or if you require further information, please contact:

Stuart Wilkinson

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Clive Palmer (Director of Studies)

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David Grecic (Supervisor)

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[DGrecic1@uclan.ac.uk](mailto:DGrecic1@uclan.ac.uk)

Thank you for your help in this study.

## D2. Case Study into TDSNF consent form

**Title of Research Project:** *A coach education style workshop to explore the professional duties of a High-Performance Academy Manager and use of the Talent Development Self Navigation Framework (TDSNF).*

**Lead Researcher:** Stuart Wilkinson

I have read and understand the participant information sheet.	
I understand what the project is about and what the results will be used for.	
I am fully aware of all procedures involving myself and of any risks and benefits associated with the study.	
I know that my participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the project without giving any reason. I understand that if I decide to withdraw from this study all data relating to me will be destroyed. I also understand, however, that it will not be possible to retrospectively remove my data from any publications or presentations that arise from this work.	
I agree to the notes being made during the interview	
I agree to the audio recording and transcription of my interview	
I understand that anonymized quotes may be taken from me and used to illustrate general themes and points within any publications or presentations resulting from this work.	
I understand that the data collected on me will be destroyed at the conclusion of the project but any raw data on which the results of the project depend will be retained in secure storage for five years, after which it will be destroyed.	
I understand that, although the other participants who work with the investigator may have a higher probability of identifying me (and vice versa), the results will be anonymous, and any quotations used will not be attributed to me.	

Academy Manager Access Arrangement: I certify that the research team conducting this study have been permitted to invite the prospective participants to consent to participate in this investigation. I certify that the signature below has also been witnessed.

Authorized Personnel signature: XXXXXX

Signature of Investigator: **SGWilkinson**

### D3. Workshop Guide – Case Study

#### TDSNF – Workshops Itinerary

<b>TABLE 1</b> Workshops, Activities, and in-tasks Probes		
<b>Phases</b>	<b>Activities</b>	<b>Indicative ‘In Task’ Discussion Probes</b>
Phase1: describe and assess yourself and how you interact with your staff against the six professional duties of an AM?	1. The Socratic discussion	Do you have a sweet spot where they all align? Have you reacquainted yourself with your duties in the chart?
Phase 2: make your own connections between the layers whilst referencing back to your own needs and that of his Academy or club?	1. Build Your Ideal Player	Check your post-it notes and linkages? Remind me how his Head, Trunk, Arms, or Legs link back to the professional duties? Go back to a time when you were a player? What was the biggest impression any teammate made on you?
Phase 3: Can you identify areas that need to be addressed in order to make positive impact to be made upon your own and / or their workforce’s professional practice?	1. Twister	The hypothetical scenario what are your immediate words and actions? What potentially influence these actions? could you prevent something like this from happening? list the different words and actions you noticed within yourself.
Phase 4: learning pathway - construct yours using the different helix blocks selected in the previous phases. Prioritise these on your own previous learning experiences, preferences, resource availability and motivations?	1. Blockbuster	Can you organise the cards you mentioned in Twister into categories so that link to each other? You were in complete control of your selection? Do you need them all? If not, why? If these are your or the academy’s needs, is it important to know how to improve them at this stage?



		Can you identify any gaps in skills or knowledge?
Phase 5: Design a bespoke development plan for themselves and the workforce that they manage.	1. Role Sort	<p>What is the priority needs of the academy? And you?          Are these the same or do they influence each other?          Start by building a mission statement for the academy?          Based on this statement think of another name for your role other than an AM. Cook or chef??          Does this align you're your respective leadership beliefs and behaviours?</p>
Phase 6: Aligning the fundamental wants of the academy and the AM foundational needs	1. Academy Ecological Development Programme	<p>Try linking back to the role sort task?          What is your current academy staff method of CPD?          What people are experts in these areas within your club?          Do you have a relationship with these people?</p>

## D4. Supplementary Interview Guide

### Phase 1

Question	Potential Probes	Indicative emergent Prompts
How did the various elements of the professional duties connect to your real-world within an Elite Academy?	Check the helix chart again? Check your post-it notes?	Question their reaction during the tasks from data or notes during tasks conversations.

### Phase 2

Question	Potential Probes	Indicative emergent Prompts
During the building of <i>Your Ideal Player</i> task, you managed to make vivid connections back and forth from the framework to your own professional practice, but also that of his team...do you know them that well or is there something lese informing this?	Check the photo collections for the constructed ideal player?	You explained your selections regarding the legs linked to <i>Philosophical Alignment and Psychosocial Nurturing</i> because? And other body parts...Head?

### Phase 3

Question	Potential Probes	Indicative emergent Prompts
Now that can reflect on the response to the scenario, what are you doing to support the coach-athlete-succession triangle with players moving between the different environments in the club's talent pathway?	Check on the cards/sections you selected and where they link or connect. Or show me again? Do they have to depend on each other?	Now that you cannot avoid these gaps, how are you feeling about your wants? And...have they now made stronger connections to the academy's foundational needs?

**Phase 4**

Question	Potential Probes	Indicative emergent Prompts
During the activity selected the professional duty of <b>philosophical alignment</b> to explore with the facilitator.... why? Would you change your mind now?	This is your view, or do you know your staff that well it has become a summary of the academy's foundational wants?	What staff members would agree with you and why who wouldn't and would this is because of ignorance and lack of experience?

**Phase 5**

Question	Potential Probes	Indicative emergent Prompts
Are your cards consistent with your previous outcomes from the tasks?	Can you offer me an example of where they connect? Do you have experts inside your organisation to support these needs?	In your example what are your quick wins and what are your barriers? Which is your number one issue? Which could be met formally and informally?

## D5. Case Study Audit Trail Sample

What follows below are two tables that demonstrate how the data has been analysed to build and construct the final storybook themes. The first table below overviews the initial coding phases (i.e., step 2 of 6; Braun & Clarke, 2013). Example transcript passages are presented, along with the initial code assigned. The lower-order theme is also presented to give readers some context. Secondly, the next table provides readers with the full reflexive thematic analysis.

### Examples of transcript coding and generation of raw data codes

Example Transcript Extract	Codes Assigned	Low Order Themes
<p>“The advantages for the academy in taking this approach (focusing on the professional duties) in terms of its engagement with the players’ entire community...erm, it’s part of that virtual cycle of engaging their (academy player) community, supplying the first team and then getting more people involved. the challenge now is for the wider club to understand the importance of getting that development model right”.</p>	<p>Build Your Ideal Player</p>	<p>Philosophical Alignment</p> <p>Psychosocial Nurturing</p>
<p>‘The Ideal Player’ is carrying the character and integrity of the academy, providing power in the same way his legs might when he’s playing, ... (this) would be ideal for these more experienced academy players to pass on to the new players”.</p>	<p>Build Your Ideal Player</p>	<p>Workforce Development</p> <p>Organisation Connectivity</p>

### A full example of the reflexive thematic analysis

Example Raw Data Codes	Lower Order Theme	Emerging themes
<p>“So, the challenge from here is... well, erm...what does being an ‘Established Elite Player’ look like? We’ll (the academy workforce) have a look at our programme and now we have broken that down into three aspects that we are going to really focus on getting right as well as the continuous unfolding and rolling out the whole player development bits that will run underneath that, erm...</p> <p>“Without discussing it with other people (senior and volunteer coaches) erm...I just believe in not bothering them, erm...just getting on with my job, whatever it is and just getting that understanding that actually no! it is all you know about rugby coaching, erm...if we don’t discuss it and we don’t agree on a way forward in each of us (academy, senior and volunteer coaches) then it’s not linked together, then we are always going to be pulling against each other”.</p> <p>“I openly rubbish this type of coach, and his views both during and after the game, erm...in actual fact if I knew more about a number of things (psych-social, welfare, mental toughness) I could have helped prevent this”</p> <p>“this is a really important process, erm...this has helped me, erm...to see different sides of the club’s staff, erm... so, in the past I might have only seen like one side of the senior coach or CEO whereas this taught me to look a little bit different and maybe use them (clubs workforce) in a different kind of way, so that is opened my eye up to that and making sure that my coaches are not all going to have all of the attributes that you might want but just fill in the gaps in what they need and what they’ve not got but...erm, I like it... we have to create the environment where you can see that, erm... definitely.”</p>	<p>Creating a vision</p> <p>Connecting staff to the purpose</p> <p>Managing conflict</p> <p>Reflecting the club traditions</p>	<p>Managing up and down the pathway. Building relationships with senior staff, and designated staff to manage.</p>