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# English Premier League and English Football League academy managers' experiences of how psychosocial skills and characteristics are identified and developed in youth academy soccer players

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## ABSTRACT

Psychological skills and characteristics (PSCs) are vital for player development, yet there is a lack of agreement on which are important and how they should be identified and developed in academy players, creating barriers to implementation into curricula. The key stakeholder with considerable insight into PSC development is the academy manager (AM). The aims of this study were (a) explore AMs' experiences of PSC identification and development, (b) identify challenges AMs feel affect development of PSCs. Nine AMs (i.e. Category 1;  $n = 3$ , Category 2;  $n = 3$  and Category 3;  $n = 3$ ) comprising an average coaching experience of  $20.4 \pm 7.4$  years and time in the role of  $5.2$  years  $\pm 3.2$  years participated in semi-structured interviews. Reflexive thematic analysis generated themes identified ideal PSC outcomes that AMs felt were important. AMs identified current practices within academies alongside challenges: transitions, need to upskill coaches, access to additional support from external partners and National Governing Bodies. There was consensus that PSCs are key drivers of progression and that embedding them into the pathway was critical to facilitating development. Academies should think carefully about design, implementation and evaluation of programmes to support player PSC development for success during and after soccer careers.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## KEYWORDS

Psychological factors; transitions; organisational constraints; coaches; external partners

## Introduction

In 2012, the English Premier League (EPL) introduced the Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP) with the aim of "producing more and better homegrown players" (Premier League, 2011). As part of the EPPP, each academy is awarded a category status from 1 (highest) to 4 (lowest), with category 1 receiving more funding, contact time with players and full-time coaching and specialist staff (e.g., sport psychologists). The EPPP review conducted in 2022 encouraged soccer academies to engage with a more multi-disciplinary and holistic approach to player development (Premier League, 2022) that incorporates all areas of the English Football Association's four-corner model (i.e., technical/tactical, physical, psychological and social) (Simmons, 2004). Traditionally, much of the emphasis has been focused on technical/tactical and physical attributes when assessing and developing players (Koopman et al., 2020), which is in contrast with a growing body of research that highlights the importance of psychological factors in the processes of player talent development (Green et al., 2020; Hardy et al., 2017; Moodie et al., 2023; Till & Baker, 2020).

Within soccer talent development environments, Gledhill et al. (2017) identified 22 internal psychological factors (e.g., self-awareness, self-regulation, task/mastery orientation, fear of failure) and 21 external social factors (e.g., autonomy supportive coaching, parent climate) that are interrelated (i.e., psycho-

social). These were in turn associated with five player-level behavioural indicators (i.e., adaptive lifestyle choices, volitional behaviours, appropriate use of coping strategies, amount of football behavioural engagement, quality of football-specific practice and play and consistently high levels of football technical and tactical performance) that led to higher levels of soccer performance and subsequently higher chances of successful transition from the academy to senior team. As such, this highlights the importance of youth academy soccer players developing their psychosocial skills (i.e., learning how and when to deploy methods such as self-talk and imagery) that can regulate their psychological characteristics (i.e., traits that a player possesses innately or that can be developed through psychosocial skills training, such as resilience or motivation) (Dohme et al. (2017). Importantly, it also highlights the importance of key stakeholders in soccer academies carefully considering the processes they use to identify and develop player psychosocial skills and characteristics (PSCs). For youth academy soccer players this may be particularly important as highlighted in the EPPP 10-year review that only a "small minority of boys will have professional playing careers" (Premier League, 2022, p. 27). Therefore, PSCs can also be seen as important for developing players as people (e.g., facilitating essential life skills and managing emotional wellbeing) and for players being able

to thrive in a career outside of soccer (Larsen et al., 2020; Ryom et al., 2020; Stambulova et al., 2021).

Despite this, there is widescale disagreement about which ones are important and how they should be developed (Dohme et al., 2019). A range of approaches have been suggested by numerous authors, possibly due to variability in the contexts of study (e.g., age and sport), leading to inconsistencies in definitions and deployment (Dohme et al., 2017). Single construct approaches such as grit (Duckworth et al., 2007), growth mindset (Dweck, 2006) and resilience (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2016) have been popular previously, but more recently have been seen as being too simplistic and part of a much larger picture (Moodie et al., 2023). A more comprehensive approach suggested by Collins et al. (2019) is the systematic teaching, testing and tweaking of a set of skills thought to be essential for developing psycho-behavioural factors (e.g., commitment, motivation and goal setting) in athletes, known as psychological characteristics of developing excellence (PCDEs). However, there does seem to be a lack of distinction between which of these falls into the skills and characteristics brackets and how these skills are delivered beyond classroom sessions (Dohme et al., 2017). To that end, Dohme et al. (2019) conducted a systematic review exploring PSCs thought to facilitate development in youth athletes. From 92 PSCs identified, they filtered these down into eight skills (including social support seeking, realistic self-evaluation and maintaining a sense of balance) and 11 characteristics (including hard-work ethic, interpersonal competencies and resilience).

Notably, the work of Harwood and Anderson (2015) and Mitchell et al. (2022) has focused more on PSC development programmes “on the grass”, implemented through coaching staff who have the most contact time with players. Harwood and Anderson’s (2015) “5Cs approach” prescribed a number of practices that could be delivered by coaches around the five constructs of commitment, communication, concentration, (emotional) control and confidence. Mitchell et al. (2022) developed this further, including the 5Cs in their work, but adding resilience, presence and self-awareness to their “8 pillar” approach, delivered in collaboration between sport psychology consultants, academy coaching staff and players. Mitchell et al. (2022) also identified a number of behaviours that could be observed in players by coaches during practical sessions to signify their level of psychosocial progress. For example, commitment included behaviours such as staying involved in the game, creating opportunities in training and games and showing for teammates. However, Mitchell and colleagues did acknowledge potential barriers to this approach, namely an overemphasis on technical and physical preparation, difficulty for coaches to understand and verbalise how to appropriately foster PSCs, and a prevailing attitude of some coaches to be autocratic. Support from appropriate agents (e.g., sport psychology consultants) may be useful in mitigating these limitations (Mitchell et al., 2022). Indeed, Côté and Gilbert (2009) suggest that expert coaches are well positioned to enhance athletes’ psychological growth by creating optimal learning environments, drawing on the premises of self-

determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) to facilitate autonomy, relatedness and ultimately competence.

Although there are an increasing number of studies that have explored how PSCs are developed in youth academy environments (Barraclough et al., 2022; Crawley, 2021; Kelly et al., 2022, 2023; Mitchell et al., 2022, 2024; Moodie et al., 2023; Taylor & Collins, 2021; Thomas & Grecic, 2020; Wilkinson & Grecic, 2021), to the authors’ knowledge only a few of these have been undertaken within a EPPP soccer academy setting (Barraclough et al., 2022; Crawley, 2021; Green et al., 2020; Kelly et al., 2022, 2023; Mitchell et al., 2022, 2024). The emphasis of these studies has generally been around measuring PSCs using a variety of methods including questionnaires (e.g., Barraclough et al., 2022; Kelly et al., 2022, 2023) and via interviews with coaches for their views (Mitchell et al., 2022). There has been a call for some time to move the development of PSCs out of the classroom and onto the pitch to enhance their ecological validity (Diment, 2014) and to improve the receptivity to sport psychology in soccer generally (Pain & Harwood, 2004).

From the existing academic literature, there continues to be notable challenges that EPPP soccer academies face in successfully implementing PSCs into their programmes. Although EPPP was designed to develop players holistically (S. Jones, 2018), psychological profiling and support were only made mandatory at Category 1 (English Football League, 2018). This means that psychological support (i.e., assessment and development) at lower categories with less resources (i.e., time, staff and finances in particular) is down to the discretion of individual academy managers (AMs). Even at Category 1, McCormick et al. (2018, p. 10) report that some clubs just “pay lip-service to the potential of sport psychology services in order to meet the requirements of the EPPP”, with sessions often being basic classroom-based workshops. The success of these sessions often depends on buy-in from coaches who can have a major impact on how players perceive them. This could be problematic as research by Champ et al. (2020) and Crawley (2021) suggests that coaches are not always receptive to new ideas and may maintain the hyper-masculine premise that psychology is for the weak. An understanding of current experiences of how PSCs are identified and delivered across all categories of soccer academies would be useful in determining where improvements can be made and what good practice is already being conducted.

AMs have the ultimate responsibility for the management of the academy. Their role includes developing, implementing and monitoring the clubs coaching curricula to develop individual players and through guiding coaches they play an integral role in ensuring a successful foundation is built within the academy (PFSA, 2024). This underlines their position as a key stakeholder and one that has a significant influence on the assessment and development of PSCs. No study has previously explored the experiences of these key stakeholders, who ultimately make the decisions based on personal philosophy, time and financial constraints, around what will, or will not be included within their programmes (Dean et al., 2022; Layton et al., 2023). This can be seen as vital in bridging a gap in knowledge by giving a voice to a previously under-publicised source, who

have had a wealth of experience “in the field”. Such information could provide insights into what AMs see as being the most important PSCs for development both on and off the field, including perhaps some PSCs that have not previously been noted. Furthermore, it could also help to identify what good practices currently exist around the identification and development of PSCs in academies and what could be improved, which could elucidate a field that is currently subject to a lack of clarity (Dohme et al., 2019). This information could help guide academies into the successful development of psychosocial programmes and educate *all* key stakeholders (i.e., players, staff and parents) into their importance. Exploring the commonalities and differences between Category 1, 2 and 3 academies would also be useful in attempting to level the playing field for academies with less resources by demonstrating where good practice exists and how lower Category academies could overcome a lack of resources. Therefore, the aims of this study were to (a) explore AMs’ experiences of how psychosocial factors are identified and developed in youth academy soccer players across different category levels and (b) identify what challenges AMs feel affect the development of youth academy soccer players’ PSCs across different soccer academy category levels.

## Methods

### Research philosophy

In line with recommendations from McGannon et al. (2021), it is important to outline philosophical stance when conducting qualitative research. The current study adopts an interpretivist approach which allows researchers to collect rich, context-specific data to explore phenomena from the perspective of the participants (in this case, AMs who rarely have such a voice). I. Jones et al. (2012) describe this as an attempt to explore what the participants think and feel about a topic through the lens of their own experiences. A relativist ontological approach is adopted (Poucher et al., 2019) whereby the concept of reality depends on the experiences and knowledge of those interpreting it (i.e., the researcher acts as the research instrument). Furthermore, a subjectivist epistemological approach was employed whereby knowledge is “co-constructed” (Poucher

et al., 2019, p. 3) through the researcher and participant both bringing their existing insights into the process in order to learn more about the phenomena and research questions being explored.

### Participants

A purposive homogenous sample of nine AMs (age:  $44.3 \pm 8.7$  years) from two Premier League and seven English Football League club soccer academies volunteered to participate. Two of the Category 1 academies were in the Premier League and one in the Championship. Category 2 academies were in the Championship, League 1 and League 2. Category 3 academies were in League 1, League 2 and the National League. It should be noted that Category 1 academies have more coaches (six compared to five, four and two at Categories 2, 3 and 4, respectively) and more coaching hours with players (between 8–14 compared to 3–12 at Category 3). AMs were recruited through personal contacts and use of social media including LinkedIn and Twitter (now X). The sample size of nine follows guidelines from I. Jones et al. (2012) who suggested that for a homogenous group, six to eight participants would be appropriate. Therefore, three AMs from each category level (i.e., category 1, 2 and 3) were recruited (Table 1). The mean coaching experience was  $20.4 \pm 7.6$  years (range 10–32 years), with time in the role of  $5.2 \pm 3.2$  years (range 1–9 years). All participants had a minimum of UEFA “A” licence, with academic qualifications ranging from level 2 (GCSE) to level 7 (master’s degree). Ethical approval was granted by the first author’s institutional ethics committee (reference number BAHSS2 0305), and voluntary informed consent was obtained from all participants.

### Interview guide

Interview questions were developed using recommendations from Castillo-Montoya (2016) on the interview protocol refinement framework. This involved a four-phase process with the initial phase involving the construction of questions that first established rapport and then progressed to the questions most pertinent to the study aim. The second phase involved writing questions in the everyday language of the interviewee, free from academic jargon. The interviewer wrote a script to keep the questions in mind, including prompts in case participants

Table 1. Participant characteristics.

Participant (Category level)	Age (years)	Playing experience (level)	Coaching experience (years)	Time in role (years)	Highest vocational qualifications	Highest academic qualifications
Cat 1	46	Semi-pro	18	9	ECAS, A, AYA	A level
Cat 1	39	Pro	10	3	A, AYA	BA
Cat 1	50	Pro	32	9	Pro	A level
Cat 2	44	None	15	2	A, EYL	GCSE
Cat 2	45	Semi-pro	21	6	A, AYA	HND
Cat 2	46	Pro	27	9	Pro, AYA	MSc
Cat 3	37	None	15	3	A, AYA	GCSE
Cat 3	62	None	30	5	A, AYA	MBA
Cat 3	31	Semi-pro	16	1	A	BA

ECAS = Elite Coach Apprentice Scheme; A = UEFA A licence; AYA = FA Advanced Youth Award; EYL = UEFA Elite Youth Licence; BA = Bachelor of Arts; HND = Higher National Diploma, Pro = UEFA pro licence; MSc/MBA = master’s degree; GCSE = General Certificate in Secondary Education.



Table 2. Semi-structured interview questions.

Open Question to achieve this purpose	Probes if participants do not provide enough detail in their answer	CONTEXTUAL FACTORS – If they still do not give me the information what can I ask them to directly comment upon ?	What is the purpose of this line of enquiry?
What approaches do you use to assess players' psychosocial skills?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How confident are you in the measures you select? What do you base this feeling/opinion, etc., on?</li> <li>Do you have an evidence-based approach or is it more "we've always done it this way"/gut feeling?</li> <li>What are the strengths/limitations of your current methods?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Do you look at current research or trust your own instincts and those around you?</li> <li>What do you do well?</li> <li>What do you think you can do better?</li> <li>Is one specific corner more important than the other?</li> <li>If so, which? Why?</li> </ul>	<p><b>Do AMs account for psychosocial factors? If so, how do they assess these?</b></p> <p><b>Are they looking at current performance or long-term potential?</b></p>
What approaches are you using to develop a player's psychosocial skills?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Which factors do you think are important when developing players?</li> <li>Do you use a version of the four-corner model?</li> <li>Could you give some insight into what you use from each corner?</li> <li>What psychosocial support is offered during their time at the academy?</li> <li>Any activities used to support the development of players' psychosocial skills?</li> <li>How do you know if players have developed their psychosocial skills?</li> <li>What about the players' social context/background (e.g., family situation) and how does that affect your practice?</li> <li>How would you involve other stakeholders in this process (e.g., parents)?</li> </ul>	<p>Do you have specific staff for this? Is it undertaken by coaching staff? Is it not considered at all?</p> <p>Do you or your staff use an evidence-based approach? e.g., PCDEs, 5Cs, Diment model</p> <p>How would these be re-assessed (e.g., observation, questionnaire, interview, performance profiling)?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Experiences (trauma/challenge?)</li> <li>Family (parents/siblings)?</li> <li>Socio-economic status/home postcode</li> <li>Education/ethnic background</li> <li>Religion?</li> <li>Birth quarter</li> <li>Birth order (number of siblings)</li> <li>Other activities away from football</li> </ul>	<p><b>Do they take attempt to develop psychosocial factors? If so, how?</b></p> <p><b>Are they looking at current performance or long-term potential?</b></p>
Is there anything that limits you in how you identify and develop players' psychosocial skills? What are your strengths in this area?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Which constraints limit you from being more effective (e.g., time, finance, knowledge)?</li> <li>How do you think your current approaches to developing players psychosocial skills could be improved?</li> <li>Do you offer training to your staff around psychosocial factors as much as physical/technical/tactical?</li> <li>How can you improve relationships between all key stakeholders including parents when exploring psychosocial factors?</li> <li>Is there anything that you currently do really well that you could recommend to other AMs?</li> <li>How can this be rolled out across all COP if Cat 2 and 3 have lower budgets and contact time with players and staff?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Budget/time constraints for lower cats</li> <li>Mental health</li> <li>Dual-career information for players</li> <li>Staff CPD into identification and development of psychosocial factors</li> <li>Better communication lines between all key stakeholders (especially keeping parents involved)</li> <li>Current good practice that can be shared with others</li> <li>e.g., partnerships with other not-for-profit organisations/volunteers?</li> </ul>	<p><b>Any factors that could be improved upon, especially from a psychosocial perspective?</b></p> <p><b>Any advice for others to improve best practice?</b></p>

needed further probing to answer questions. Phase three of the framework involved the sample questions being reviewed by research team members for "structure, length, writing style, and comprehension" (Castillo-Montoya, 2016, p. 826). Finally, phase four was the piloting of the interview conducted with two participants (AMs) to enhance reliability by practising technique and assessing the appropriateness of questions (I. Jones, 2015). This was followed by the participants providing critical feedback, which was used to make minor changes and to add further clarity to some of the questions. For example, a more specific probe was added to the final question "do you think the EPL, EFL and FA could do more? If so, what & how?" to give

AMs some concrete examples of who might be responsible for assistance. Table 2 illustrates a sample of questions from the interview guide.

### Data collection

Interviews were semi-structured whereby a standard set of questions were prepared giving the researcher a degree of flexibility in the order of the questions and when to probe the interviewee further (I. Jones et al., 2012). All interviews were conducted by the first author either remotely using Microsoft Team's video conferencing software or face-to-face, dependent

on interviewees' preferences. Remote interviews were recorded on Microsoft Teams. For face-to-face interviews, the Memo application function on the iPhone was used, alongside the Evistr digital voice recorder (in case either failed). Interviews were transcribed verbatim (yielding 131 pages of transcript in total using the Word for web transcription function), and participants anonymised. Interviews lasted between 43 and 92 min (mean:  $68 \pm 16.6$  min) and were concluded once the participants felt they had fully told their story.

### Data analysis

Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis according to guidance from Braun et al. (2019) to enable construction and evolution of codes throughout the analysis process. The researchers themselves are part of this process whereby they are narrators of a story, interpreted through their own reflexive lenses informed by their respective applied experiences. The first author had approximately 20 years' experience in coaching with UEFA level 3 and English FA's level 4 Advanced Youth Award, around 10 years were spent in academy football at Category 3. The two co-authors had 60 years' combined experience in sport as coaches, coach educators, teachers and researchers including various professional roles within soccer talent development environments. Reflective thematic analysis involved six phases as recommended by Braun et al. (2019). Phase one was familiarisation with data, which began with noting any commonalities and anomalies whilst transcribing, proofreading and editing the data. The second phase involved generating codes using NVivo qualitative analysis software (QSR, version 12). Phase three was constructing themes, whereby codes that showed patterns of similarity were clustered into data themes, again based on the first author's judgement. For phase four, the data themes were then collated into a thematic table to be reviewed by the second and third authors who acted as "critical friends" to provide feedback on their appropriateness and validity in relation to the data set. Phase five involved refining themes deductively into two storybook themes: 1) identification and development of player PSCs and 2) challenges that affect the implementation and development of player PSCs. The final phase was to write the report.

### Trustworthiness

To improve trustworthiness within the current study researcher reflexivity was deemed important (I. Jones et al., 2012), whereby the interviewer was aware of their own potential biases at both the data collection (e.g., affecting the responses of interviewees with leading questions or verbal/non-verbal reactions) and analysis (i.e., subjective interpretation of data) stages with various measures taken to recognise, accept and reflect. These measures included feedback from critical friends, pilot interviews and self-reflection from the first author during phases of thematic analysis. In this instance, the second (DG) and third researchers (DH) prompted the principal researcher (JB) to amend interview guide questions as well as to reflect, explain and explore alternative interpretations from the data.

This resulted in altering themes and their contents after consultation with the second and third researchers. For example, a subtheme of "player assessment methods" was discarded, and relevant data was subsumed into the psychosocial testing theme, under the psychosocial factors' subtheme. Member reflection was considered as an additional method, but it was decided not to pursue this due to the time constraints placed on AMs especially during the season and the transient nature of the job (four AMs had moved clubs/positions shortly after data collection).

### Results

Two hundred and eleven raw data codes were generated from the nine interviews with EPPP soccer AMs. Raw data codes were organised into 21 lower-order themes, then built into six higher-order themes and finally two storybook themes that were aligned with the aims of the study: 1) how PSCs are identified and developed in youth academy soccer players (Table 3) and 2) challenges that affect the development of youth academy soccer players' PSCs (Table 4). Examples of raw data quotes from AMs are presented in each table with AMs classified according to participant number (i.e., AM1 to AM9) with their respective category number subscripted (i.e.,  $C_1$  to  $C_3$ ).

#### Storybook theme 1: How psychosocial skills and characteristics are identified and developed in youth academy soccer players

##### Ideal outcomes

All AMs commented on the importance of player PSCs on the pathway, with most acknowledging that they were the key drivers of a player's development: "That's the heartbeat of making a player tick, and if you don't get that, you don't get the other bits" (AM1 $C_1$ ). "It's very much the corner which, in my opinion, makes or breaks professional footballers" (AM1 $C_2$ ). Accordingly, AMs identified a number of ideal PSC outcomes that they felt would be important to identify and develop in players. These included realistic self-evaluation, resilience, hard-work ethic, interpersonal competencies, independence and seeking and using social support. Independence seemed to be particularly important across all Category levels:

They have what they need, what they've got to practice on, what they need to work on. They're in control of their own destiny. We can only do so much, but we try and give them the tools away from here that they'll also need so not just being there for four hours a week, training on the Astro, it's much more than that (AM2 $C_2$ )

##### Current practices

AMs highlighted a number of current practices used in academies to identify and develop player PSCs. These included psychosocial testing, psychosocial training, psychological support, sharing knowledge, staff experiences on the pathway and player centred approaches. Regarding psychosocial testing, AM1 $C_2$  mentioned the lack of knowledge in

**Table 3.** Academy managers' experiences of how PSCs are identified and developed in youth academy soccer players.

Higher-order theme	Lower-order theme	Raw data exemplars
Ideal outcomes	Realistic self-evaluation	We expect all players to clip their own performance and to highlight what they were seeing . . . each player has his own reflection book so he can reflect on the actual week training, how he felt his emotions were around that, how he felt during the game, before the game, after the game and over the course of his week. (AM2 <sub>C1</sub> ) The ones who were really keen with their clips and their reflection and likewise with those that basically aren't bothered I think that tells its own story a little bit about the individual. (AM2 <sub>C1</sub> )
	Resilience	We talk about players coming through with that display of resilience . . . Some of the players that we spoke about, their real quality that they had was resilience. (AM3 <sub>C2</sub> )
	Hard work ethic	I don't think it's a normal thing to push your body and to perhaps have an obsessive nature around improvement, or a desire to win or push your body beyond its normal thresholds. There's a reason why they're high performers. The will to win or a competitive edge can drive people to do things which aren't quite normal and that obsession to become perfect, that obsession to master skill, I think is something which, whilst on one hand is the thing that makes them great, of course it's something as well which can cause problems if it's not channelled the right way after sports. (AM3 <sub>C1</sub> ) I think that's prevalent in those players that don't make it because if I think about the top players that are playing top level right now playing the Premier League, internationals at the top of their game . . . they are comfortable with dealing with setbacks and they're comfortable in striving . . . it's a paradox in striving for perfection. They accept imperfection and I think you see them accepting it by the way they handle those moments. So, you're never going to see them have a meltdown . . . those that seek perfection aren't the ones that make it in my experience. (AM1 <sub>C1</sub> )
	Interpersonal competencies	The other pillar that's a psychosocial one is lifelong learner, committed to personal development, so you're talking about schools and talking about you've got to be adaptable to any circumstance. So in the moment in the game can you adapt and can you if the situation changes or you learn enough to see it quickly and then show learning and then the last one is commit to personal development. (AM1 <sub>C1</sub> ) They've got to be a learner . . . receptive to information . . . one thing we do ask is that they can pick things up . . . to keep developing them mentally that they don't suffer from any inadequacies in terms of their physicality. (AM2 <sub>C2</sub> )
	Independence	I use that a heck of a lot in the academy just to manipulate situations or get boys to learn autonomously. (AM1 <sub>C1</sub> ) We give them ownership of their own development in terms of the individual learning programs we give them away . . . what they've got to practice on. They're in control of their own destiny . . . we can only do so much, but we try and give them the tools away from here that they'll also need so not just being there for four hours a week, training on the Astro, it's much more than that. (AM2 <sub>C2</sub> )
	Social support seeking	I would say all those boys I mentioned all balanced, all very well supported underneath from families. (AM1 <sub>C1</sub> ) We just try and incorporate them [parents] and educate them as much as possible into the whole program and not keep them at arm's length. (AM2 <sub>C1</sub> )
Current practices	Psychosocial testing	Psychosocial is the least looked at corner. You've got technical and tactical, which can be measured, so can physical, whereas psychosocial can't be. (AM1 <sub>C2</sub> ) A lot of the conversations are psychological around how we can change our players, thinking about how we can get a player to see things a little bit differently . . . but I wouldn't say it's part of a curriculum . . . as I'm hearing myself say this it sounds quite loose. (AM3 <sub>C1</sub> )
	Psychosocial training	It's more around dealing with adversity and setbacks and self-perception and how your teammates can help you through that. AM1 <sub>C1</sub> There's bumps in the road that we'll put in place to help . . . We give them exposure of uncomfortable situations . . . We encourage them to focus on weaknesses as well as strengths. All our players here have a strength, but the majority have a lot of weaknesses as well, which is, if I'm being truthful, why they're here. (AM2 <sub>C2</sub> )
	Psychological support	We have one full time psych, but we've rebranded that department to the wellbeing team, but we also have what was originally player liaison is now under the heading wellbeing. (AM1 <sub>C1</sub> ) The club has moved into a partnership with a company who supply everything with regards to psychosocial health and wellbeing for players, staff or employees of the club. They'll have all the resources that they need. With regards to psych, we will appoint a full-time clinical psychologist, and we've got a sports psychologist coming in. (AM1 <sub>C2</sub> )
	Sharing knowledge	Everyone is constantly sharing information . . . everyone's aware of all the players . . . we're outstanding at creating an environment that allows players to be people and the amount of detail we go into helping players. (AM1 <sub>C1</sub> )
	Staff experiences on the pathway	We have people that have lived the journey and understand the demands of the game, so I think there's enough gladiators that have been in the arena (AM3 <sub>C1</sub> )
	Player-centred approach	Knowing the individual, what makes him tick . . . That that gives us an advantage over a lot of teams because we do put the players at the centre of everything. (AM1 <sub>C2</sub> ) We try and put the player at the centre of everything. We understand that losing and mistakes is part of development. (AM1 <sub>C3</sub> )

obtaining assessments of player PSCs. Similarly, AM3<sub>C2</sub> stated that: "we don't use questionnaires . . . it comes down to a lot of opinions and the head of recruitment role and the experience that they have over a period of time". This may even suggest that more formal assessments of PSCs may be dismissed altogether and not universally embedded into some academy curricula. One exception was where AM1<sub>C2</sub> revealed that they were taking a more holistic approach to assessment, including emphasis on the psychosocial corner:

In the past it's just been done off eye and it's a subjective opinion, whereas now the work that we're doing with \*\*\*\*\* [external company] will give us that objective opinion where they'll sit down and

they will be able to tell us from footage, from interviews, from all the data they collect, if that person has improved and the way that we improve that.

There also appears to be some resistance (e.g., AM2<sub>C1</sub>, AM1<sub>C3</sub>) to using psychometric testing methods, such as questionnaires, as they may lack ecological validity and seem to be too dissociated from performance on the pitch:

There's questionnaires and all sorts of things that you could try to test these things. When you're looking at players, the difficulty is applying that when you're watching under 12 sessions or under 12 games, what does that look like on the grass? (AM2<sub>C1</sub>)



**Table 4.** Challenges that affect the development of player psychosocial skills and characteristics.

Higher-order theme	Lower-order theme	Raw data exemplars
Transitions	Athletic transitions	So one thing we do ask is that they can pick things up because we've got players here who are even up to the first team they're physically not at the level of some other players. But they've got to try and find a way that works. So go back to the learning. It's no use telling a player who's physically not developed to keep running, keep running at a more physically developed individual, you see the difference of age and stature. If a player keeps doing that and fails, that shows us he's not learning. He's not picking it up, so they gotta find a way. And that's something that we're big on. With the younger ones to keep developing them mentally that they don't suffer from any inadequacies in terms of their physicality, so I think that's big certainly here. (AM2 <sub>C2</sub> )
	Non-athletic transitions	As they go through puberty and through the stages of turning from a boy into a man sometimes their characters can evolve, change to certain aspects. Temperaments can change ... it's about trying to be patient ... we do expect certain behavioural standards. (AM3 <sub>C2</sub> ) They might have a bit of a tough family background where they support themselves and they have to make their own way to training and back and a hard day at school. School work. They might be a bit troublesome at school or be in trouble, which then they take it into a game or into a training session. Again making it clear to players that it's a short career, not everyone's going to make it, but we can give you the right tools, the best opportunities. And that's from all aspects. And you leave this place as a better player, a better person. And then we've had a good influence on you ... (AM3 <sub>C3</sub> )
	Dual career transitions	We have to do more because that percentage of players that go on to become professional footballers are this ... it's important that you have education. You have a background that is a primary focus, and this can be the secondary focus. I think we have to educate them more when they come in. (AM3 <sub>C2</sub> )
Staffing issues	Staff recruitment	We're actually limited to the type of coaches that we have ... a lot of coaches that have come in recently probably have not had any sort of backgrounds in academy football, let alone working with children on a consistent basis. So, we're having to teach them to get them to understand just as well as the players. (AM3 <sub>C3</sub> )
	Staff CPD	Probably upskilling our staff who are the ones that spend the most time with the players ... then they would have more chance to contribute with those aspects ... we haven't done a huge amount on incorporating psych or social stuff into sessions. (AM2 <sub>C3</sub> )
Organisational constraints	Finances	Probably the only thing really that stops us is the finances ... If something is going to be cut, nine times out of 10 it's going to be something to do with the academy. (AM1 <sub>C2</sub> )
	Time	Sometimes staff do three different jobs ... to guard against that burnout we may need a couple of extra staff who are specialists in certain areas ... The psych being an area because I only see that developing and getting bigger. (AM2 <sub>C1</sub> )
Additional support	External partners	The days of keeping things within these four walls, I think those days have gone. It's about collaboration now and speaking to football clubs, being open to working with any organisation who can help the individual ... giving them the best opportunity to be a footballer. I think it's just being open minded and inviting people in as opposed to keeping them out (AM2 <sub>C2</sub> ) We've got into a project at the moment with a company called ***** who are now looking at measuring psychosocial elements of the game ... We have a daily wellbeing health questionnaire ... we'll have a real good understanding of each player before they even walk in through the door ... we get reports sent to us on a monthly basis on how to deal with each individual. (AM1 <sub>C2</sub> )
	National Governing Bodies	The Premier League should send out a mental health/psych social ambassador one per club. (AM1 <sub>C1</sub> ) What I would love is the Premier League and EFL to ringfence funding like they are doing for the player care ... for psychology ... that would force clubs to do it. Because the problem is as well with Cat 2s and Cat 3s if there's an extra 10, 15, 20, 30 grand funding, it goes. (AM3 <sub>C2</sub> )

Other AMs referred to questionnaires but required specialist staff to manage this and were perhaps unaware of how this was operationalised (e.g., AM2<sub>C1</sub>). Three AMs (AM2<sub>C2</sub>, AM2<sub>C3</sub>, AM3<sub>C3</sub>) acknowledged that more could and should be done in assessing and developing PSCs in a more objective fashion. For example, AM2<sub>C2</sub> stated:

In terms of the actual measurement that's something that the sports psychology will be looking into, but we don't really measure that other than it's just hard, looking visibly at the player and how they're operating in their environment, I think if someone gave me a piece of paper ... I'm a little bit old school.

For psychosocial training, there was consensus across all AMs that embedding challenge into the pathway was essential for successful development of player PSCs. One AM (AM1<sub>C3</sub>) offered some explanation to why they thought challenge to be important: "We call it strategic stress. You've got to place hurdles and stress, challenges in development ... if someone is comfortable and not being stretched then they can't be learning".

At one of the Category 3 academies, AM1<sub>C3</sub> described a slightly different approach to embedding psychosocial challenge:

We have player led games. We send teams to games with no coaches ... because we want the boys to lead, with the boys to articulate the points, to face challenges and come up with solutions cos ultimately that's what's going to stand them in good stead.

Levels of psychological support and staff varied across categories as might be expected in accordance with resources and funding. At Category 1, AMs commented about availability of full-time staff to support player psychosocial development. At Category 2, AMs also highlighted the use of part-time psychology staff and external organisations. At Category 3, AMs described differing levels of support: "We have psychology support throughout the whole academy ... as the boys get older the level of support increases" (AM1<sub>C3</sub>). "We have retained psychologists both for full time boys and for the nines to 16s program" (AM2<sub>C3</sub>). More worryingly, AM3<sub>C3</sub> stated that: "we've actually got a lad who's studying psychology and he's going to do some profiling with the players. He's working intensely with the youth team first and he will then be introduced to working with the younger age groups".

Sharing knowledge between departments about individual players was identified as a particular strength at Category 1. Another Category 1 AM described staff's experience as ex-players as being important. Experienced staff was also mentioned as a strength by another Category 1 AM:

Specialist staff who've been here a long time, they understand the players and parents and form relationships better so they can pass on that information better and then there's a trust element from the player and parent back to us. (AM2<sub>C1</sub>)

At both Category 2 and 3, player-centred approaches seemed to be a particular method used to identify and develop player PSCs. For example, AM1<sub>C3</sub> stated: "We try and put the player at the centre of everything ... we're very patient and we try and take a holistic approach with players ... we're very personable ... we try to interact".

### **Storybook theme 2: Challenges that affect the development of player psychosocial skills and characteristics**

#### **Transitions**

Transitions in academy soccer can include athletic transitions, i.e., moving from phase to phase such as youth development to professional development phases, non-athletic transitions (i.e., education/family-related) and dual-career transitions (i.e., managing education or other work interests alongside sport) (Stambulova et al., 2021). In the current study, AMs identified all these transitions to be challenges that could affect the development of player PSCs. With regard to dual-careers, there was a general perspective from AMs that the vast majority of academy players would not become professional footballers and that recognising other career options was also important. This was summed up by AM1<sub>C3</sub>: "we want to produce players ... but if he doesn't play professional football then we want to try and give him the life skills and development that are ultimately going to allow him to progress and develop in other walks of life".

#### **Staffing issues**

Within this higher-order theme, AMs discussed challenges around staff recruitment and continuing professional development (CPD) that could affect the development of player PSCs. Staff recruitment was seen as a potential issue by some but also seen as vital for the development of player PSCs:

Recruit the people inside your building. They're going to be miles more important than the building itself ... staff that have a bounce and energy ... that care for the kids more than they care for themselves and their own careers ... if their focus is on the boys then you've got the right type of person in and then that will give the greatest edge and the greatest platform to develop young people along the way (AM3<sub>C2</sub>)

With regard to staff CPD, AMs expressed a desire to improve staff knowledge around the importance of PSCs for player development, but that this was possibly constrained by resources:

When we had had the full-time psychologist here it was done probably once a month ... the work wasn't done with players or squads it was done through the coach ... if we were looking at leadership, for example, the psychologist would - if we were going to use a six week block - sit with the coaching staff and give us ways on how we could give players tasks to work on leadership ... the psychologist was going through the coach to affect more people than he could if he was doing stuff on his own. (AM1<sub>C2</sub>)

#### **Organisational constraints**

Financial and time constraints were two organisational constraints that AMs expressed as challenges to developing player PSCs. Finance was mentioned by Category 2 and 3 AMs in particular. Time constraints, however, were pretty uniform across academies even at Category 1. At Category 2, AM2<sub>C2</sub> stated:

There's always a problem here of people wanting a piece of the pie ... the majority of time needs to be spent with the coaches ... but I'm conscious of sports science and to get in that education, player care, psychology, nutrition, lots of staff members who quite rightly want a piece of that action.

A Category 3 AM also mentioned insufficient contact with players as being problematic:

Time, the more time you can give your players and parents and your staff, the better, the more information you can have. The more connections and conversations you can have the better ... those are the things you can't control. (AM1<sub>C3</sub>)

Clearly, differences in academy category grading (based on up to 10 different factors such as training facilities, coaching, education and welfare provisions) have a huge effect on funding and other resources, creating an uneven playing field with potential implications on how player PSCs can be developed. AM2<sub>C3</sub> summed up the situation within a Category 3 academy:

We're on 15% of what some of the Cat 1 budgets are and having to do probably 90% of the stuff ... and being a small club and a Cat 3 academy the number of people to do that work is limited. I did 65, 70 hours every week and I could do more. I'm probably speaking for pretty much every Cat 3 manager that I know.

However, not all AMs saw these as barriers necessarily:

It's about the smaller clubs just working a little bit smarter. Always finding a way to do something ... we don't look at the categorization as a number. We just want to provide excellence whether we are Category 1 or Category 4. (AM1<sub>C2</sub>)

Similarly, AM3<sub>C1</sub> (who had previously worked in a Category 3 academy) stated:

I think sometimes at cat 3, a small but talented staff where you can align messages, you can really have meaningful discussions and CPDs ... I don't see the problem in football being solved by money and volume of staff.

#### **Additional support**

Obtaining additional support from external partners and national governing bodies (NGBs) were mentioned as challenges that could affect development of player PSCs. It was apparent that additional support was perhaps particularly pertinent and

important for Category 2 and 3 academies with smaller budgets and less contact time as expressed by AMs. External partners included developing partnerships outside of the academy setting to help with the development of player PSCs. Collaborating with other clubs was also mentioned by a number of AMs, as was additional support from non-footballing organisations:

We've got partnerships and relations with companies and external companies and charities that provide support in areas that we feel we can't offer support . . . one of the things that COVID forced us to do is jump online to have meetings and workshops, so you know the new world has shown us that there's other ways to do things. AM1<sub>C3</sub>

Support from other footballing organisations was also discussed by a number of AMs, namely the Football Association (FA), Professional Footballers' Association (PFA), the Premier League (EPL) and the Football League (EFL). This concurs with recommendations from Mitchell et al. (2022) that academies should use external organisations wherever possible to help overcome the challenges of developing PSCs, although some vetting of these would be necessary to ensure alignment in values.

## Discussion

The aims of this study were to (a) investigate AMs' experiences of how psychosocial factors are identified and developed in youth academy soccer players across different category levels and (b) identify what challenges AMs feel affect the implementation and development of player PSCs across different category levels. Our findings highlight several ideal outcomes related to PSCs that AMs felt were important for identifying and developing in youth academy soccer players. Whilst AMs highlighted a range of current practices being used by academies to develop player PSCs (including embedding appropriate levels of challenge and encouraging independence) there was acknowledgement of a need for improvement in staff knowledge, formal assessment approaches, operationalisation of collected data and use of psychological support staff that could differ across category levels. Furthermore, AMs identified a range of challenges that could further hinder the development of player PSCs including transitions, staffing issues, organisational constraints and additional support, some of which seemed particularly pertinent to category 2 and 3 academies who have less staff and greater financial constraints.

### *How psychosocial skills are identified and developed in players*

An important finding from the current study was that AMs highlighted a range of ideal PSC outcomes that they believed to be important for identifying and developing in players. These included social support seeking, realistic self-evaluation, resilience, hard-work ethic, interpersonal competencies, and independence. Social support seeking has been described by Dohme et al. (2019, p. 32) as an "athletes' ability and willingness to ask for and receive help and advice from others such as coaches, parents, teammates, or teachers". This can be from emotional, informational, or tangible perspectives and is thought to aid youth athletes' development of resilience.

Realistic self-evaluation (Dohme et al., 2019) describes a vital part of development whereby youth athletes evaluate their progress through identifying strengths and weaknesses, which in turn allows them to set appropriate goals and expedites learning. This aligns with the concept of "strategic stress" discussed by one AM (AM1<sub>C3</sub>) in the current study whereby challenge is used within the programme to enable players to develop and deploy PSCs. Strategic stress can be likened to placing bumps in the "Rocky Road" of talent development environments (Collins et al., 2016), such as players playing up or down a year group, in different positions, or even being used as a substitute. It is also important to note, however, that the challenges that these bumps present are highly varied based on players' interpretations and experiences of the different challenges and types of challenges they face (Papastaikoudis et al., 2024).

Independence (also referred to as autonomous learning) has been documented by different researchers (e.g., Dohme et al., 2019; Gledhill et al., 2017; A. Hill et al., 2019; Toering & Jordet, 2015) as being important on the development pathway. This includes part of a wider set of skills known as self-regulation which incorporates metacognition (being aware of one's own strengths and weaknesses) and delayed gratification (short-term sacrifice for long-term gains). Autonomy supportive coaching has been noted by Gledhill et al. (2017) as being linked to better engagement levels from players, as well as improved enjoyment and decreased drop-out. Conversely, coaching behaviours that deny opportunities for player autonomy have been linked with a lack of progression by players. This can clearly be related to the autonomy part of self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) whereby players who have at least partial ownership over their own destiny are likely to be more intrinsically motivated. Furthermore, Côté and Gilbert (2009, p. 313) claim that expert coaches are skilled in creating "optimal learning environments" where group members mutually support each other.

Regarding current practices being used to identify and develop player PSCs, AMs identified a number of considerations and approaches around assessment methods. Although some AMs acknowledged that more could and should be done in assessing and developing PSCs objectively, there was a reluctance to use questionnaires unless specialist staff were around to manage this, and AMs were perhaps unaware of how this was operationalised. Others were reticent of using psychometric testing at all through a lack of ecological validity for phenomena that occur "on the grass" and were less "tangible" than other measures in the physical, technical, and tactical corners. This may be reflected in a general decline in the use of questionnaires since the turn of the century (Vealey et al., 2019). Although they offer a potentially efficient and structured method of assessment, many sport psychology consultants now deem them as lacking relevance (and ecological validity), undermining the relationship between athlete and consultant and being at risk from various biases such as demand characteristics and social desirability (Wixey et al., 2023). Additionally, their use as formative and summative assessment tools may be countered by a lack of providing data during games and training, when it really counts.

Some AMs referred to using a more traditional and subjective coaches' eye approach that relied on intuition and

experience. Advantages of this approach include the ability to see the player in their most natural setting (i.e., the pitch) providing high levels of ecological validity (Sieghartsleitner et al., 2019) with several studies confirming that ratings from coaches were valid and reliable indicators of potential future progression (Fenner et al., 2016; Güllich et al., 2017; Jokuschies et al., 2017; Zuber & Conzelmann, 2014). However, there have also been a number of studies (Cumming et al., 2018; M. Hill et al., 2023; Sieghartsleitner et al., 2019) that urge caution in using this as a sole method of assessment due to factors such as cognitive biases and maturation effects. Overdependence on this method may also cause problems if it is used by inexperienced coaches who may be less versed in what to look for. To this end, Mitchell et al. (2024) provided a list of age- and stage-appropriate behaviours that coaches can observe in players in order to gauge their current PSC status and develop this accordingly through co-creation of sessions with sport psychology staff.

Based on these findings, future approaches to identifying a player's current PSCs should look to use a multi-dimensional approach (Sieghartsleitner et al., 2019) by combining objective and validated tools with ecologically valid approaches such as observations and synergistic input from coaches, AMs and psychologists in training and games (Daley et al., 2020). Indeed, the involvement of coaches (with guidance from specialist staff) has already been advocated by researchers investigating how best to identify and foster PSCs in academy environments (Dean et al., 2022; Mitchell et al., 2022; M. A. Williams et al., 2020). Once player strengths and weaknesses have been assessed, a collaborative approach (Mitchell et al., 2022) could again be used to embed psychosocial challenge within the curricula (Collins et al., 2016). Mitchell et al. (2022) advocated an "8 pillar" approach, evolved from the 5Cs developed by Harwood and Anderson (2015), whereby they suggested the development of individualised performance profiling for every academy player to provide baseline scores that could be reassessed at regular points during the season, thereby adopting a player-centred approach, which may also promote multi-disciplinary working within academies (Moodie et al., 2023). Forming partnerships with appropriate external agencies (e.g., charities and universities) may be useful in recruiting suitably qualified individuals to assist in this process, which in turn would provide them with valuable industry experience.

In the current study, embedding challenge ("strategic stresses") was seen as an important aspect for successful psychosocial training of players. This may occur in what Fletcher and Sarkar (2016) described as environments facilitative of building resilience, i.e., being high challenge and high support, whereas, in contrast, Moodie et al. (2023) suggested that athletes should be exposed to a variety of highs and lows manipulated through deliberate planning, allowing them to experience a variety of different emotions, provided that reflection and supportive debriefing were also present. Challenge for challenge's sake may be detrimental, as chronically high challenge with no purpose and little athlete support can derail development (Taylor & Collins, 2020). Collins and MacNamara (2017, p. 4) describe a "teach-test-tweak cycle", where age- and stage-appropriate challenges are periodised into programmes from

an early age when players are more receptive and would benefit more greatly from positive habits formed from the PSCs being developed. This challenge element can be introduced incrementally and also involves checking that players are competent in dealing with this added pressure by deploying appropriate PSCs at each stage (Bell et al., 2013). Differentiation is also vital to ensure that the challenge is set at the correct level for every individual and that appropriate support is also provided (Papastaikoudis et al., 2024; G. G. Williams & MacNamara, 2022) so that this strategic stress does not become distress.

### ***Challenges that affect the development of player psychosocial skills and characteristics***

With regard to the challenges that affect the implementation and development of player PSCs, AMs across all categories described the importance of developing players as people capable of functioning outside of the soccer bubble, due to the vast majority not achieving a professional career. This echoes suggestions from Stambulova et al. (2021) and similarly from Larsen et al. (2020) and Ryom et al. (2020) in their case studies with mainland European academies Ajax Amsterdam and KRC Genk, respectively. These perspectives also seem to contradict the prioritisation of assessment and development of technical/tactical and physical attributes (Koopman et al., 2020). They would also agree with an increasing volume of research suggesting that player PSCs are important facilitators of future progression and developing their ability to cope with the transitions (i.e., athletic, non-athletic and dual-career) they will experience throughout the pathway (Hardy et al., 2017; Moodie et al., 2023; Morris et al., 2015; Till & Baker, 2020).

Recruitment and training of staff were seen by AMs as further challenges that could affect the identification and development of player PSCs. Crawley (2021) and Dean et al. (2022, p. 2) identified a lack of education and "psychological literacy" for coaches and perhaps an unwillingness to embrace the psychosocial elements of performance. Notably, Dean et al. (2022) discussed a low level of guidance in the EPPP performance plan to inhibit the successful integration of PSCs into academy curricula. Additional support for academies from external sources was discussed by some AMs. Partnerships already existed between some academies and independent organisations, which could be an important step forward in mitigating financial and temporal constraints. Some AMs believed that the Premier League and the Players' Football Association in particular could do more. The Premier League's (2022) report on 10 years of the EPPP highlights a lot of success that the plan has enabled with contributions from the FA, EPL and EFL (but not the PFA). The report also identified 10 opportunities for progress, including providing more varied experiences on the pathway to facilitate easier transitions out of football, allowing more of a player voice and improving multi-disciplinary working. These opportunities could guide future research in this field, along with investigating the impact of player care officers, now made compulsory at all Category 1 to 3 academies (Premier League, 2022).



Additionally, a lack of acceptance of current PSC methods from key decision-makers as well as a lack of buy-in from coaches are problematic (Nesti & Sulley, 2015). Aside from organisational challenges, the assessment and development of PSCs still lacks in ecological validity with an overemphasis on psychometric testing by sport psychologists, especially of an inductive nature (Wixey et al., 2023). Graduates and postgraduates may initially lack the required soft skills to work effectively with players and staff at academies, alongside a lack of micropolitical literacy (Gibson & Groom, 2019). Involving coaches in the assessment (Mitchell et al., 2022, 2024) and delivery (Diment, 2014; Harwood & Anderson, 2015; Mitchell et al., 2022, 2024; Wixey et al., 2023) processes has only been a recent development suggesting a lack of inter-disciplinary collaboration.

Recommendations from Wixey et al. (2023) include the provision of a central database of resources for coaches, online workshops, changes at an organisational level such as better use of player reviews to assess PSC development and a golf caddy approach from sport psychology staff whereby they work indirectly through coaches. Clearly, a more evidence-based approach to integrate PSCs into their curricula holistically with a player-centred focus would be beneficial (Wixey et al., 2023). Starting at younger ages to desensitise players towards the PSC programmes could be an important improvement (Laureys et al., 2021; Ong et al., 2018). Clearly, although some excellent practice already exists, much more work is required to improve the process (Mitchell et al., 2022; Nesti & Sulley, 2015).

Further recommendations from AMs to improve current practice include lower category academies (with greater budgetary/time constraints), developing innovative procedures and partnerships with external agencies (e.g., charities/universities), creation of a "British Legion" of soccer by the PFA to better cater for released players and upskilling coaching staff to enhance PSCs through session design. There has also been an underlying theme in evaluating and developing the whole person and not just the soccer player (through an inter-disciplinary approach) to prepare them for life outside of soccer and the inevitable transitions that will be experienced in all domains.

## Limitations

Although this is the first study to investigate AM perceptions of how PCS are identified and developed in EPPP soccer academies, the sample only represents around 10% of the overall population of AMs across Tier 1 to Tier 3 EPPP academies. Therefore, the findings of the current study may not be a universal theme across every academy. It is also important to acknowledge that use of semi-structured interviews may have some inherent weaknesses that could have influenced the findings of the current study, such as self-report bias (giving inaccurate answers), recall bias (inability to recall events accurately), social desirability (presenting oneself in a socially favourable manner) and demand characteristics (giving answers that the participant believes the researcher wants) (Horne, 2022). However, the study has given the opportunity for a traditionally hard-to-reach

sample to have a voice, shedding light on existing good practice and identifying areas for the further evolution of assessment and development of PSCs in players.

## Conclusion

There was a consensus from AMs that PSCs are the key drivers for development of future soccer players and for succeeding in careers outside of soccer for the vast majority of players that do not go on to play professional soccer. Use of multiple, ecologically valid methods (i.e., both objective and subjective) were proposed as a potential way forward, including player self-assessments and coach observations. In terms of developing PSCs, there was some agreement that embedding challenge ("strategic stress") within academy curricula was an effective way of developing players' PSCs. Upskilling coaches by appropriately trained support staff and using support from external organisations was deemed important to help overcome some of the organisational challenges (i.e., time constraints and staffing issues), especially those operating at lower category levels.

## Article highlights

- Academies should think carefully about the psychosocial skills and characteristics that they wish to develop in their players for success within and after their soccer careers. Self-evaluation, resilience, independence and social support seeking were identified as being particularly pertinent.
- Academies should use both subjective (e.g., coaches' intuition) and objective (e.g., questionnaires) assessment methods to identify and develop player PSCs.
- Careful thought should also be given to the design, implementation and evaluation of programmes to include the embedding of challenge and upskilling coaches' psychological literacy.
- All academies may struggle with budgetary and time constraints (especially lower down) but should seek to develop innovative internal procedures and/or develop partnerships with external agencies (e.g., charities and universities) to help develop player psychosocial skills.

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