

***'THE TALENT IS OUT THERE.'* TALENT DEVELOPMENT IN IRISH  
FOOTBALL: AN EXAMINATION OF ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE  
AND PRACTICE.**

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## List of Abbreviations

AIS:	Australian Institute of Sport
ATDE:	Athletic Talent Development Environment
DDSL:	Dublin District Schoolboy League
DMSP:	Developmental Model of Sport Participation (Côté, 1999)
ETP:	Emerging Talent Programme
FA:	Football Association
FAI:	Football Association of Ireland
FAIFS:	Football Association of the Irish Free State
FIFA:	Federation Internationale de Football Association
FTEM:	Foundations, Talent, Elite, Mastery (Gulblin et al., 2013)
GAA:	Gaelic Athletic Association
HDI:	Human Development Index
IFA:	Irish Football Association
LFA:	Leinster Football Association
LOI:	League of Ireland
LTAD:	Long Term Athlete Development (Bayli & Hamilton, 1996)
NGB:	National Governing Body
PPCT:	Process, Person, Context, Time (Bronfenbrenner, 2005)
RAE:	Relative Age Effect
RDO:	Regional Development Officer
SDT:	Self-Determination Theory of Motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985)
SFAI:	Schoolboy Football Association of Ireland
TD:	Talent Development
TDE:	Talent Development Environment
UEFA:	Union of European Football Associations
UK:	United Kingdom



## **Abstract**

Football is one of the most complex and competitive sports in which to reach elite levels (Haugaasen, Toering, & Jordet, 2014). Differences in sport systems, societal norms, cultural traditions, sociological and organisational issues may influence an athlete's complex career development journey (Stambulova, 2009; Henriksen et al., 2010; Richardson, Relvas, & Littlewood, 2013). An ecological approach to development views child development within the context of a system of relationships that form his or her environment; therefore, to foster future positive behaviours and change developmental trajectories one must identify and understand direct and indirect influences on development (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Gabbard & Krebs, 2012). The aim of this thesis was to examine the football governance landscape in the Republic of Ireland in relation to its ability to develop youth footballers, whilst exploring the contextual and lived experiences of these youth players as they developed within their respective talent development environments.

This study employed a mixed method approach which involved quantitative and qualitative research data in a collection of studies. Study One, analysed and presented the demographics of those involved in the Football Association of Ireland's primary talent development mechanism (n=1936), the Emerging Talent Programme (ETP). This study found a significant Relative Age Effect (RAE) and inequity of access to the ETP in relation to place of birth within the cohort. It also identified clear patterns of internal migration, with footballers moving towards the 'core' footballing development centre of Ireland (Dublin District Schoolboy League, DDSL).

Study Two assessed the talent development practices of all authoritative bodies within Irish youth football with respect to organisational, governance, athletic, psycho-social, cultural and environmental issues. This study identified tensions and incongruence between strategic apex organisations resulting from Governing Body leadership, board composition, political dominance and perceptions of a lack of organisational justice. Structural and resource inequalities were identified in relation to finance, scouting networks, quality of coaching, facilities and player volume. Such incongruence combined with inequalities, led to concerns regarding youth development.

Study Three provided a lived experience insight into the talent development pathway encountered by Irish footballers. This study followed five footballers who were on the Republic of Ireland under 15 international team, for a period of four years. This journey provided an insight into the impact that macro factors (identified in Study One and Study Two) had on the experiences of a developing footballer.

Overall the thesis has provided an original contribution to the study of talent development in Irish football, providing a holistic analysis of the development pathway, its governance structures and the resulting lived experience of the pathway, utilising a bio-ecological approach.

## **Declaration**

No portion of the work referenced in this thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or institute of learning.

This research was supervised by members of the academic staff but is essentially the work of the author. Views expressed are those of the author and are not necessarily those of any other member of the Research Institute of Sport and Exercise Sciences.

Copyright in the text of this thesis rests with the author. The ownership of any intellectual property rights that may be described in the thesis is vested in Liverpool John Moores University and may not be available for use by any third parties without the written permission of the University.

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To my girls, to whom I can finally answer your questions of 'Are you finished your work yet?' with a 'Yes'. I'm proud to be able to stand as an example of what's possible for you to achieve, but for now I owe you a debt of mammy time.

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# **List of Academic and Professional Disseminations**

## **Arising from This Thesis**

### **Peer-reviewed journal articles**

Finnegan, L., Richardson, D., Littlewood, M., & McArdle, J. (2016). The influence of date and place of birth on youth player selection to a National Football Association elite development programme. *Science and Medicine in Football*, 1, 30-39. doi: 10.1080/02640414.2016.1254807

Finnegan, L., McArdle, J., Littlewood, M., & Richardson, D. (2018). Somewhat united: primary stakeholder perspectives of the governance of schoolboy football in Ireland, *Managing Sport and Leisure*, 23, 1-2, 48-69. doi: 10.1080/23750472.2018.1513342

Finnegan, L. (2019). Stepping stones? An exploration of internal football player movement in the Republic of Ireland. *Regional Studies, Regional Science*, 6, 596-606. doi: 10.1080/21681376.2019.1685905

Finnegan L., McArdle, J., Littlewood, M., & Richardson, D. (in press). The impact of place of birth on a youth footballers' journey through a National Associations' development pathway; a longitudinal study. Article collection on 'Birth Advantages and the Relative Age Effect: Exploring Organisational Structures in Youth Sport', *Frontiers in Sports and Active Living*.

## Conference proceedings

Finnegan, L., Richardson, D., Littlewood, M. & McArdle, J. (2013). Talent Identification within the Emerging Talent Programme. Presented at the 2014 All Ireland Postgraduate Conference in Sport Sciences and Physical Education, 24 January 2014, Limerick, Ireland.

Finnegan, L., Richardson, D., Littlewood, M. & McArdle, J. (2014). Talent Identification within the Emerging Talent Programme. Presented at the 2014 PEPAYS Conference in Waterford Institute of Technology, 6/06/2014. Waterford, Ireland.

Finnegan, L. (2018). “You Cannot Tell Every League in the Country How to Organise Their Leagues” – The Implementation of a National Football Development Plan for the Republic of Ireland”. European Association Sport Management (EASM), 07/09/2018. Malmo, Sweden.

Finnegan, L. (2018). The implications of Relative Age Effect for grassroots football and talent development. International Sports Convention (ISC), 05/12/2018. Geneva, Switzerland.

Finnegan, L. (2019). Relative Age Effecting youth football/ Effetto dell’ eta relativa. Italian FA Seria A/B club conference, 04/02/2019. Rome, Italy.

Finnegan, L. (2019). Relative Age Effect in youth football. Croatian FA UEFA Pro/A licence conference, 11/06/2019. Varaždin, Croatia.

## **Impact analysis**

The author met with Football Association of Ireland Head of Coach Education to identify where Relative Age Effect research could be located within the FAIs coach education structures. Included a presentation to senior coach educators 08/01/2019.

Croatian FA UEFA Pro/A licence courses presentation on RAE in youth football, following the assessment of Irish policies and practices. 11/06/2019 & 12/2009.

WordPress site established ([www.talentdevelopmentinirishfootball.com](http://www.talentdevelopmentinirishfootball.com)) to aid the dissemination of PhD research material to all interested stakeholders (e.g., administrators, coaches and parents). This generated 19,947 views of the PhD research posts by 14,448 unique visitors.



# Chapter One. Introduction and Literature Review

*No single component of the system is solely sufficient or responsible for development in any domain...instead development arises from the way in which multiple components organize themselves.*

*(Mekos & Clubb, 1997, p.140)*

## 1.1. Introduction

Unearthing future professional level athletes through a process of talent identification and development is the “holy grail” of any sporting nation (Weissenteiner, 2017, p.102) and it follows that talent development is a focus of significant attention within sport administrations (cf. FAI, 2013a; Sport England, 2016; Australian Institute of Sport, 2018a; Sport Ireland Institute, 2018). Differences in sport systems, societal norms, cultural traditions, sociological and organisational issues may influence the athlete’s complex career development journey (Stambulova & Alfermann, 2009; Henriksen, 2010; Richardson, Relvas, & Littlewood, 2013). Development processes require significant human and financial input from various stakeholders (Sotiriadou, Shilbury, & Quick, 2008) and organisations that develop cooperative relationships between these stakeholders are more likely to be successful in achieving desired outcomes (Jones, 1995). Football is one of the most complex and competitive sports in which to reach elite levels (Haugaasen, Toering, & Jordet, 2014).

Talent development is a biopsychosocial process (Collins et al., 2011), therefore optimal development will only be realised based on the interaction of mechanical and

physical attributes, sociocultural environment and psycho-behavioural characteristics (Bailey et al., 2010). Baker and colleagues (2017) emphasise that an issue with talent development is that little is actually known about the process of initial talent identification; and what is presented by academics tends to focus on physiological attributes. Secondly, the ability to accurately identify talent and future success appears to be quite low when one considers the resources employed to conduct such evaluations (cf. Koz, Fraser-Thomas, & Baker, 2012).

Côté, Baker and Abernethy (2007) acknowledged that the development pathway which an athlete selects depends not only on the sport but also the social and cultural context to which the athlete is exposed to, and ultimately influenced by. A common criticism of talent development models in sport, is the focus on one part or sub-set of development rather than the whole landscape of development (Bullock et al., 2009; Ford et al., 2011). The domain in which an individual displays talent will not be determined by any highly specialized component but rather by “the specific weighted multiplicative integration of the contributing innate components” (Simonton, 1999, p.438). To fully understand development within specific contexts, a multi-layered analysis from macro to micro influences is recommended (Houlihan, 2000; Girginou, 2001). Salmon and Timperio (2007) suggested that there is a “need for multilevel study designs that incorporate individual-level influences, proximal social influences and influences within the broader environment in order to better understand physical activists' behaviour” (p. 196). In addition to the need for multi-level analysis of talent development contexts, Domingues and Goncalves (2014) stress the need for conducting mixed method research to link effective proximal processes to characteristics of the youth athletes under development, with Cooke and colleagues (2010) strongly emphasising that “as a field of enquiry talent identification and

development demands a multidisciplinary approach” (i66). Researchers within the field of talent development have called specifically for more longitudinal studies to be conducted to enhance the ecological and contextual insights into talent development (Vaeyens et al., 2008; Haugaasen & Jordet, 2012; Weissenteiner, 2017).

### **1.1.1. Relevance and Importance of the Thesis**

From a former position of sixth in the FIFA world ranking, a quarter final place at the 1990 World Cup and a host of Irish players representing British clubs at the elite stages of European club competition, the current landscape of Irish football is less impressive with an apparent dearth of indigenous talent making an impact at club and international level. In 2013, the Republic of Ireland fell to an all-time low of number 67 in the FIFA world rankings (FIFA, 2018). In a study of Republic of Ireland senior internationals over a 28-year period from 1986-2014, only 57% were developed in Ireland, with 43% being developed abroad, predominantly in the UK (Reilly, 2014). For those that did develop in Ireland, 68% of those made their senior footballing debut outside of Ireland. In a recent examination of representation on the senior Republic of Ireland squad, six Dublin schoolboy clubs provided 50 out of the 146 players that have represented Ireland at senior level in the past 20 years (Maher, 2015). This raises questions regarding place of development advantages and development system equity. The Republic of Ireland’s last appearance at a World Cup was in Japan and South Korea in 2002. This tournament ended in controversy for Ireland with the then captain Roy Keane leaving the pre-tournament training camp after raising issues with management about the conditions of the training field, travel arrangements, strategy and management competency. Following the negative publicity and heightened need for

accountability (expressed by the Irish government and demonstrated by a freeze on their FAI funding) after this tournament, the FAI commissioned an independent report from an external consultant agency 'Genesis'. This report criticised the administration and management structure and governance of the FAI. The report stated that there was 'no culture of discipline' in FAI management and that basic management techniques were non-existent in the organisation (Genesis Strategic Management Consultants, 2002). The Genesis report also cited that the FAI had poor and ineffective communication with stakeholders and that they failed to recognise good organisational practice employed elsewhere in sport management. The FAI assert in their strategic plan for 2016-2020 that "governance is at a high level and will be maintained as such" (p.34) and they fully endorse best practice in governance (FAI, 2016). Yet the FAI still face criticism in relation to gender representation, lack of independent directors, age and term limits of board members and fiduciary transparency (Sweeney, 2017). In light of such governance and developmental issues, there is a need to examine Irish football with respect to the responsibility of the FAI and the 'fit for purpose' nature of its talent identification and development processes and relationship with stakeholders in the development of youth footballers.

Current research on the area of talent has advocated a move away from talent being viewed as static and instead on the dynamic processes that influence the development of this talent (Bailey et al., 2010; Martindale et al., 2010). Analysing governing structures is useful for macro insights on development but individual journeys within a pyramid can be obscured by such a macro perspective (Shilbury et al., 2008) with Sotiriadou and colleagues (2008) emphasising the need for a more detailed examination of the interrelationships within these development frameworks. Bailey et al., (2010) acknowledge that development cannot be fully understood without the

consideration of the wider sociological perspective, thus contextual factors (e.g., place of birth) are being explored in relation to their influence on access to resources vital for attaining elite level of performance (Baker & Logan, 2007). A youth players' potential must be prioritised over selection methods that may be influenced by physical size or geographic location in relation to access to resources. The equity of resources can be influenced by the governance processes experienced by an organisation with relations between stakeholders often influencing the distribution of resources (Winand et al., 2010). There are several contextual issues that impact the development of young players. Sotiriadou and colleagues (2008) suggest that while governance lessons can be learned from international comparative insights, it would be naïve to suggest that frameworks can be generalised to other sport systems or countries. Thus, advocating that a country-specific analysis be conducted to fully advance development knowledge.

Phillips and colleagues (2010a) suggested that to advance understanding of talent development, researchers must move towards a “multidisciplinary and integrative science focus” (p.271). This thesis integrates biological, psychological and sociological perspectives of the talent development context (Storm, 2015) providing a multidimensional analysis of the talent development practices in Irish football, with a particular focus on organisational structure and practice and how this impacts on the microsystem of players developing within this context.

### **1.1.2. Thesis Objectives**

The aim of this thesis is to examine the football governance landscape in the Republic of Ireland in relation to the ability to develop elite footballers, whilst exploring the contextual and lived experiences of elite youth players as they develop within their respective talent development environments. The overarching research objectives are as follows:

1. To quantify the demographics of those involved in the FAIs elite development pathway (ETP).
2. To assess talent development practices of all authoritative bodies within Irish youth football with respect to organisational, governance, athletic, psycho-social, cultural and environmental issues.
3. To examine the dominant challenges faced by young Irish footballers following their entry on, and subsequent progress through, the talent development pathways in Ireland.

Study-specific objectives will be introduced within each relevant chapter which extends and probes these overarching objectives.

### **1.1.3. Structure of the Thesis**

Chapter One critically examines the existing research relevant to the general positioning of the dissertation. This chapter reflects on the current state of research in the talent development sphere, with a specific focus on talent development in football. Characteristics of successful talent development environments are then explored.

Following on from the importance of development environments, an insight is provided into bio-ecological models of development. As this thesis is grounded in the Republic of Ireland context, it is important to provide an insight into the culture, historical underpinnings, governance structures and practices of football within the country.

Chapter Two (Study One) is an empirical chapter based on quantifying the demographics of those involved in the FAIs elite development pathway. This study assesses issues relating to place of birth, date of birth and internal migration of talented footballers in the Republic of Ireland.

Chapter Three (Study Two) investigates the talent development practices of all authoritative bodies within Irish football with respect to organisational, athletic, cultural, psychosocial and environmental issues.

Chapter Four (Study Three) provides a lived insight into these demographics and practices. Utilising a longitudinal methodology, consideration is given to the impact of numerous micro and macro influences on talent development.

Chapter Five will combine and synthesise the findings of the preceding chapters and advance the discussion around talent development in Irish football. Overall conclusions will be provided, along with future recommendations for the design and governance of talent development pathways. Future potential areas for further research stemming from these investigations will also be presented.

## **1.2. Literature Review**

The literature section aims to provide the reader with a theoretical and contextual understanding of appropriate material in relation to the dissertation objectives as outlined above. Talent development in sport (and specifically football) and appropriate ecological developmental characteristics are discussed before a thorough background of the football development structures, practices and governance within the Republic of Ireland is provided.

### **1.2.1. What is talent?**

Talent is complex, hard to define and lacks a clear theoretical framework (Vaeyens, Lenoir, Williams, & Philippaerts, 2008). Baker, Cobley and Schorer (2012) view talent as being an individual's "potential for success in a domain" (p.3). Gagné (1995) described talent as being systematically developed abilities which lie at the opposite end of the spectrum to "untrained and spontaneously expressed natural abilities" or gifts (p.106). Talent is dynamic, and the development of talent is non-linear (Abbott et al., 2005) and requires a process of systematic development (Gagné, 1995; Simonton, 1999). Talent is a complex blend of genetic factors and a conducive development environment rather than being polarised by an ongoing nature-nurture debate (Abbott, 2006).



### **1.2.2. Talent Development in Sport**

Talent development relates to providing players with a suitable learning environment, so they have the opportunity to realise their potential and develop the talent that was previously identified (Williams & Reilly, 2000). The talent development process is not simply an extrapolation from initial identification to future performance, but instead is influenced by maturation and the developmental environment (Vaeyens et al., 2008). Côté, Lidor and Hackfort (2009) postulate that talent development emphasises acquired motor and psychological skills rather than innate capacities, with a specific emphasis on the quantity and quality of training that is required to reach top level performance. Henriksen (2010, p.159) suggests that talent development is the “progressive mutual accommodation that takes place between an aspiring athlete and a composite and dynamic sporting and non-sporting environment that supports the development of the personal, psycho-social and sport-specific skills required for the pursuit of an elite athletic career”.

The purpose of talent development programs is to “increase athletes' potential by means of a variety of institutional measures designed to accelerate talent development” (Vaeyens, Gullich, Warr, & Philippaerts, 2009, p.1367). The process of development within sport is generally influenced by pursuing either early specialisation, characterised as engaging in one sport on a year-round basis (Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Römer, 1993) or a pattern of sampling, which involves engaging in a variety of sports during development (Côté, 1999; Côté, Baker, & Abernethy, 2007). With the designing of talent pathways and models being complicated by the fact that “both approaches can lead to expertise development under optimal conditions” (Côté et al., 2009, p.8).

### **1.2.3. Talent Development Models**

In his influential text on talent development, Bloom (1985, p.532) states that “without the purposeful step-by-step talent development process, it is unlikely that even the individuals we studied would have reached the high levels of talent.” The study of talent and its subsequent quest for development has led to several pervasive models being presented within academia (cf. Gagné, 1991; Ericsson et al., 1993; Bayli & Hamilton, 1996; Côté, 1999; Simonton, 1999; Abbott & Collins, 2004; Bailey & Morley, 2006; Henriksen et al., 2010; Gulbin, Croser, Morley, & Weissenteiner, 2013).

Bloom (1985) provided one of the first systematic attempts to understand developmental processes which elite athletes engaged in on their development pathways, highlighting the importance of initial playful engagement with activities through to increased dedication and seriousness and psychosocial support which varied throughout development. A key aspect of Bloom’s research was the focus on the evolution of talent rather than being governed solely by genetic dispositions (Van Tassel-Baska, 2001). Ericsson and colleagues (1993) then coined the phrase ‘deliberate practice’, in which highly effortful forms of practice is needed to attain elite performance, yet this practice does not always account for most of the variance between expert performers (Hambrick et al., 2014). Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde and Whalen (1993) focused on adolescent development and key variables that impact on talent development at that stage. This work added insights into the desire for challenge and complexity, the importance of individual commitment to a field and insights into creating flow states were useful for structuring appropriate adolescent programs (Van Tassel-Baska, 2001). Bayli and Hamilton, (1999) recommended that sports be delineated by early or late specialisation and developed accordingly through various

stages in their Long-Term-Athlete-Development model. Ford and colleagues (2011) concluded that this generic approach is one-dimensional and lacks empirical research for its fundamental basis.

Simonton's (1999) formula for talent development considers the role of both individual differences (emergenic factors) and the development of these differences (epigenetic), whilst useful for outlining the exponential and nonlinear nature of talent development, it would need insights into all the factors that contribute to development and performance within the sporting sphere to concretely apply the formula to a sporting context (Abbott, 2006). Research from Simonton (1999) underlines the current predictive issues with single capacity, snap-shot testing being used to predict talent as talent is shown here to be a multiplicative profile of all essential components needed to excel within the domain.

Côté and colleagues (Côté, 1999; Côté, Baker, & Abernethy, 2007; Côté, Horton, MacDonald, & Wilkes, 2009) developed the Developmental Model of Sport Participation (DMSP) which sought to describe developmental pathways from initial engagement through to recreational participation or elite performance accounting for psychosocial and physical development. A Psychological Characteristics of Developing Excellence (PCDE) framework was presented by MacNamara, Button and Collins (2010), which included not only mental skills but also attitudes, emotions and desires which are needed to successfully realize potential. The deployment of such PCDEs are complicated by the "dynamic, individualized, and complex nature of the pathway to excellence" (MacNamara et al., 2010, p.71).

Bailey and Morley (2006) suggested that current performance is a poor indicator of ability since other influences such as training, parental investment and social values

can play an important role in talent development. The authors also suggest that talent development needs to be viewed as a multidimensional construct because wide ranges of abilities including creative, cognitive, intrapersonal, interpersonal and ability are important contributors within the complex process of developing talent.

Gulbin, Croser, Morley and Weissensteiner (2013) presented their framework based on Foundations, Talent, Elite, Mastery (FTEM) for the optimisation of sport development. A difference from this and other stage models is an absence of chronological age to recognise the variability of development trajectories across sporting contexts and individual participants. The model also attempted to illustrate the fluidity of development by proposing connectivity between patterns of participation (i.e., active lifestyle, sports participation and sporting excellence; Bailey et al., 2010). The model was developed in partnership with the Australian Institute of Sport, who cites the model as providing “practical methods to assist sport stakeholders managing an athlete's career and those who work in developing sport systems” (AIS, 2018b, para 6). MacNamara and Collins (2013) refute the applicability of the model citing its lack of insight into features of effective development environments and process markers, limitations of a staged approach when development is not linear, the neglect of psycho-behavioural development facilitators and they also questioned its generalisability across cultures and sport systems. The model authors retort these protestations suggesting that bio-psycho-social components had been liberally applied throughout the model (Gulbin, Croser, Morley, & Weissensteiner, 2014).

Each theory makes a meaningful contribution to the field of talent development, but the majority do not provide testable concepts that can advance the understanding of development (Côté et al., 2012). Issues with many models is that they are inherently based on a ‘pyramid’ shape which has inherent problems related to prediction of future

levels of performance, encouraging early specialisation and describes linear development of talent (Bailey & Collins, 2013). Generalised models often fail to account for specific pathway trajectories and transitions encountered by athletes during development (Gulbin, Weissensteiner, Oldenziel, & Gagné, 2013) with the field of talent development being plagued by “theoretically weak and empirically questionable frameworks and models” (MacNamara & Collins, 2013, p.795).

#### **1.2.4. Talent Development in Football**

Elite football holds an almost magnetic attraction for young footballers (Christensen & Sørensen, 2009). Due to the increasingly open labour market combined with the increasing popularity of the sport, it will become harder for youth footballers to reach professional levels (Haugaasen & Jordet, 2012). Within the English football academy system, organisational and environmental considerations have come to the fore following the introducing of the Elite Player Performance Plan (Reeves et al., 2018). Development pathways across countries are relatively homogenous (Ford et al., 2012), with football development practices tending to focus on the physical, technical and tactical development of players (Richardson, Relvas, & Littlewood, 2013) while neglecting psychosocial factors (Gledhill et al., 2017) and psychological components (Abbott & Collins, 2004) associated with development. Gledhill and colleagues (2017) identified psychosocial factors that can differentiate between performance levels and are positively associated with progression in football (e.g., adaptive lifestyle choices, practice and play behaviours). A factor which makes identifying and developing talent within football complex is that a player may not need exceptional capacities within each of these physical, psychological, technical and tactical demands (Stølen et al.,

2005) and players can compensate for deficiencies in a particular area with strengths in another (Meylan et al., 2010) which has been termed a ‘compensation phenomenon’ (Bartmus et al., 1987). Williams and Reilly (2000) proposed several potential predictors of talent in football (Figure 1).

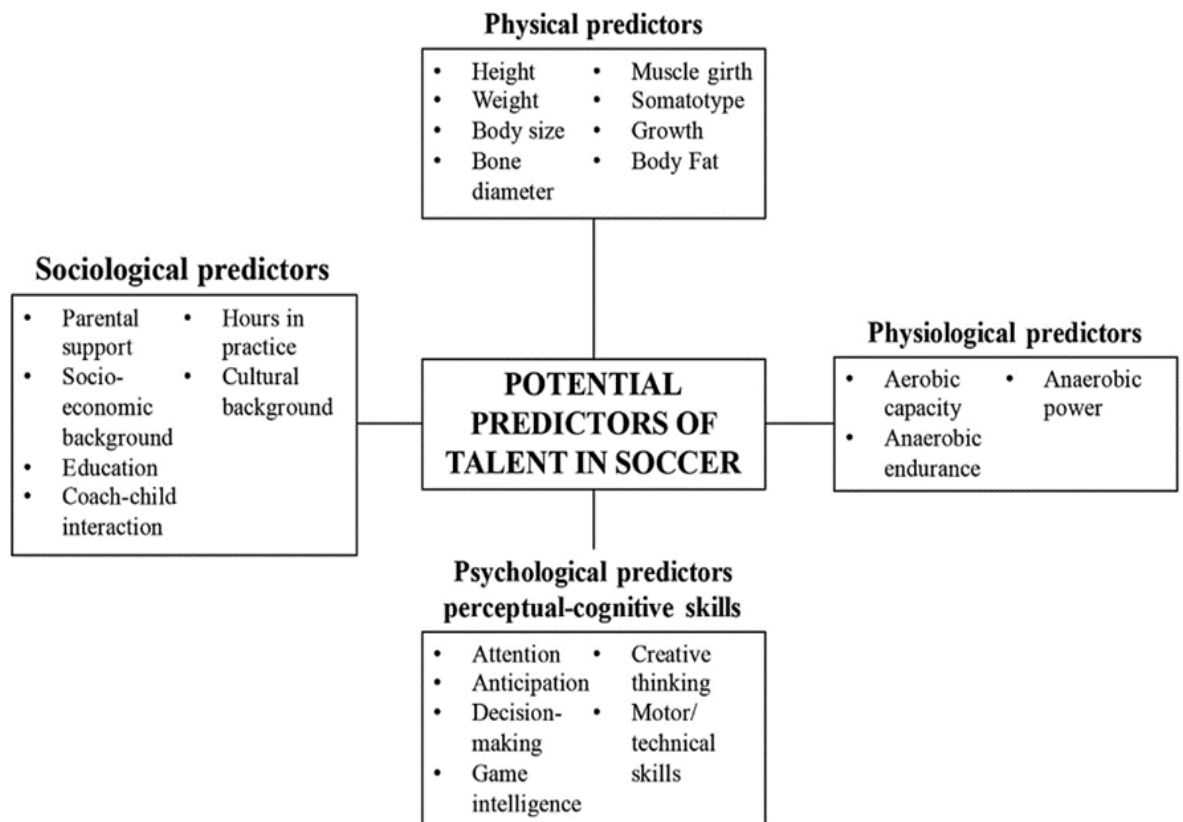


Figure 1 Potential predictors of talent in football (Williams & Reilly, 2000)

Ericsson (1996) suggested that the development of expertise depends on the amount of time spent on effortful, highly structured practice which has as its specific goal of improving performance. Gledhill and colleagues (2017) supported this by reporting that following their systematic review, professional football players have had more specific football play and game-play activities in childhood than those that did not reach the elite level. Ward and colleagues (2007) found that deliberate engagement in

football-specific is more likely to lead to elite status, while others have argued that football play was more predictive of football ability than actual football practice (Roca, Williams, & Ford, 2012). Haugaasen and Jordet (2012) argue that there is no evidence to suggest that developmental activities differentiate between those who reach elite status and those that don't. This clamour for contact time, perhaps advanced by the 10,000 'rule' which permeated youth football, leads to an increased professionalisation at a younger age which may be harmful to a player's development (Relvas et al., 2010). Following a systematic review, Gledhill, Harwood and Forsdyke (2017) identified a range of psychosocial factors that are associated with talent development in football; psychological factors (e.g., discipline, self-control, self-awareness, adaptive perfectionism, self-acceptance, commitment, determination), social factors (e.g., sibling relationships, autonomy supportive coaching, peer experiences, parenting styles, parent climate, player-parent relationships, socioeconomic background, perceptions of team cohesion, dual career demands) and player-level behavioural indicators (adaptive lifestyle choices and volitional behaviours, amount of football behavioural engagement, quality of football specific practice and play, appropriate use of coping strategies).

Identifying maturation and growth characteristics are inherent within talent development pathways (Williams & Reilly, 2000). The Long-Term Athlete Development Model, upon which the FAI base its development system encourages the identification of players as early, average and late maturing players to design "appropriate training and competition programs in relation to optimal trainability and readiness" (Balyi et al., 2005, p.23) yet a systematic bias towards early maturers exists within youth football (Meylan et al., 2010). Consequences of a talent development system that focuses on narrow physiological 'snap-shots' of performance can often be

evidenced in the presence of a relative age effect with the cohort (cf. Helsen et al., 2000; González-Víllora et al., 2015). A further complication of snapshot physiological testing within youth development is that physically dominant players at youth level may not sustain this advantage into senior levels (Beunen et al., 1997; McCarthy et al., 2016; Fumarco et al., 2017).

### **1.3. Characteristics of Successful Talent Development Environments (TDEs)**

A trend within high-performance sport has been the increasing systematisation of athlete identification and development, which incurs increased pressure to identify ‘talent’ as early as possible and then place those identified into “optimal environments” (Baker et al., 2017, p.1). It has been established that the talent development environment of an athlete affects their development (Araújo & Davids, 2009; Henriksen et al., 2010; Martindale et al., 2010) with Ivarsson and colleagues (2014) identifying a link between athlete perceptions of low quality, unsupportive talent development environments with increased levels of stress. A criticism often aimed at sport psychology academia is that it focuses on the individual and ignores the environment in which they exist (Eubank, Nesti, & Littlewood, 2017). The talent development environment should challenge athletic pursuits while providing appropriate social support (Bloom, 1995; Martindale, Collins, & Daubney, 2005).

Recent research has attempted to examine the characteristics of effective talent development environments (Martindale, Collins, & Abraham 2007; Henrikson et al., 2010). Martindale, Collins and Abraham (2007) identified five main characteristics of



effective talent development environments. These were possessing long term aims and methods, wide-ranging coherent messages and support, emphasis on appropriate development, not early success, individualised and on-going development, and integrated, holistic and systematic development. Henriksen (2010) identified eight features of a successful development environment; training groups with supportive relationships, proximal role models, support of sporting goals by the wider environment, support for the development of psychosocial skills, training that allows for diversification, focus on long-term development, strong and coherent organisational culture and integration of efforts. In a multi-disciplinary study of development across a number of sports in Australia, Toohey and colleagues (2017) identified high performing talent environments as ones that balanced winning and skill development over a win at all cost mentality and had structured, well managed pathways providing athletes with positive experiences.

Organisational structure and governance have been shown to influence the talent development environment (Martindale et al., 2007; Henriksen et al., 2010). The 'Environmental Success Factors' model from Henriksen and colleagues (2010, 2011), positions organisational culture at its core. This includes three levels of cultural artefacts (visual manifestations), espoused values (social principles, norms, standards, aims and objectives), and basic assumptions (i.e., underlying reasons for actions). In a successful talent development environment, organisational culture adapts, integrates and stabilises the factors that provide the environment's success (Henriksen et al., 2010). Related to this holistic development, a key mechanism for achieving the aims and objectives of the talent development environment is a combined approach of all relevant stakeholders involved in the process (De Knop, Van Hoecke, & De Bosscher, 2004). A lack of communication between key stakeholders involved in the

development process can impact negatively on the progression of youth footballers (Relvas et al., 2010). Woodman and Hardy (2001) identified similar organisational stressors, for example basic communication failures, ambiguity concerning organisational direction and a lack of role definition and/or duplicity of role. Organisations can often have multiple and unclear goals and processes (March & Olsen, 1995). The issue of governance is often about defining these processes and methods as means to achieving aims and objectives (Kraatz & Block, 2008; Gammelsaeter, 2010). Often when there are a number of stakeholders or competing 'organisational fields' (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), power conflicts can result from dependencies on ever changing resources (Gammelsaeter, 2010; Lucidarme, Babiak, & Willem, 2017). In football, such resources can include financial, geographic advantages, physical and human resources (i.e., players, coaches and administrators) (Larsen et al., 2013).

Along with assessing the structural characteristics of a successful talent development environment, it is important to analyse them in relation to their appropriateness to the players' developmental stage. A number of descriptive models of an athlete's career have been devised (Bloom, 1985; Salmela, 1994; Stambulova, 1994; Côté, 1999; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). Wylleman and Lavallee's (2004) developmental model of transitions faced by athletes comprised of the following four athletic stages: initiation, development, mastery and discontinuation. This included a life-span perspective relating to athletes' development in four domains (athletic, psychological, psychosocial, and academic/vocational). This model has been used as a conceptual framework for research into transition experiences faced by various sport performers (cf. Pummell et al., 2008). The model consists of layers which outline transitions and stages, psychological development, academic and psychosocial development. The

third layer represents the transitions and stages occurring in athletes' psychosocial development and denotes the individuals who are perceived by athletes as being (most) significant during that particular transition or stage (e.g., parents, coach, peers, siblings). For example, families are reported to have the greatest influence on talent development during childhood and into later adolescence whilst the coach (or teacher) appears to be the dominant influence as the athlete moves towards stages of mastery (Côté, 1999). Thus, there are a variety of macro level and micro level influential factors which impact on an athlete's journey through a talent development environment which subsequently influences career development (Stambulova et al., 2009; Henriksen et al., 2010).

### **1.3.1. Holistic Ecological Approach to Talent Development**

Human development is the result of changing relations between the person and their dynamic, multilevel environmental context (Lerner, 2002). Bronfenbrenner (1977) referred to the ecology of human development as:

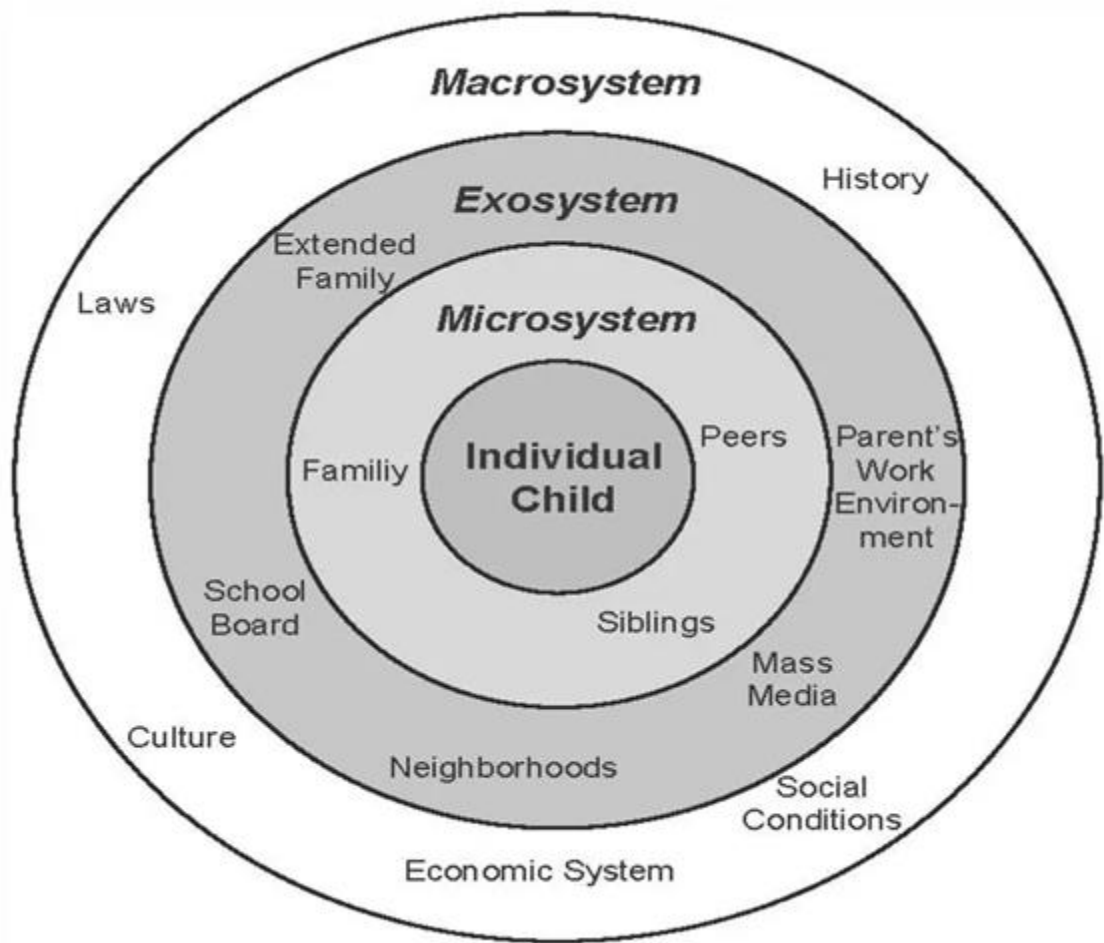
*“the scientific study of the progressive, mutual accommodation, throughout the life span, between a growing human organism and the changing immediate environment in which it lives, as this process is affected by relations obtaining within and between these immediate settings, as well as the larger social contexts, both formal and informal, in which the settings are embedded.” (p.514)*

In his ecological theory of human development (which later led to the bio-ecological theory) Bronfenbrenner (1979) described the environment as a series of nested structures, viewing an individual as part of their environment, not separating them out. The earlier work of Bronfenbrenner (1977, 1979) focused on aspects of context and can be used as a starting point to understand the indirect influences that constrain

development in various contexts, including actors and processes (Domingues & Goncalves, 2014) to explain how human development occurs (Rosa & Tudge, 2013). Bronfenbrenner adopted Brim's (1975) terminology when producing the names for his interconnected structures (Rosa & Tudge, 2013) (Figure 2). These nested structures listed the microsystem as the most proximal setting that a person is situated, a setting with particular features (i.e., work, school, home) where participants engage in particular activities with particular roles (e.g., daughter, parent, teacher) for periods of time.

A mesosystem comprises the interrelations among microsystems, a "system of microsystems" (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p.515) which is expanded when an individual enters a new setting and diminished when the opposite occurs (Rosa & Tudge, 2013). During adolescence this can include interactions between family, school and peer groups. The exosystem is an extension of the mesosystem which embraces other social structures that don't directly contain the person yet do impinge upon their settings (e.g., requirements of parents' work, neighbourhood, mass media, government agencies) (Bronfenbrenner, 1974, 1977).

The final level is the macrosystem, unlike the preceding levels, this does not refer to a specific context, rather to general prototypes which exist in the culture or subculture, it is the "overarching institutional patterns of the culture or subculture, such as the economic, social, educational, legal, and political systems, of which micro, meso and exosystems are the concrete manifestations" (p.515). The macrosystem envelops all of these contexts, but to have influence on the developing person it has to be experienced within one or more of the microsystems in which the person is positioned (Tudge et al., 2009). Bronfenbrenner aided the comprehension of 'context' as a thick, rich, multidimensional construct (Cross, 2017).



*Figure 2 Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (adapted from Niederer et al., 2009)*

Bronfenbrenner's theory of human development has undergone successive changes from the initial proposals in the 1970s to his death in 2005 (Rosa & Tudge, 2013) with reformations extending and critically revising the original model (Domingues & Goncalves, 2014). Bronfenbrenner (1989) later personally criticized his original theory for discounting the role that the person plays in their own development, by focusing too much on context. The key factor in Bronfenbrenner's theory development became mechanisms known as "proximal processes" (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994, p.568) which relates to the connection between aspects of individual (e.g., social class) and aspects of the context (e.g., culture). From this conceptualisation of the individual

not being a passive operator within an environment, the focus of this research centred on Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) taking a greater bio-ecological approach focusing more on reciprocal interaction (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). These environmental *processes* (e.g., through solitary play, interacting with groups) are the “engines of development” (Tudge et al., 2009, p.200) as it is through the engagement in these activities and interactions that individuals make sense of the world and their place in it, while also impacting the environment. Although typically utilised in research as interaction with others (Tudge et al., 2016), proximal processes can also involve interactions with objects or symbols (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). These interactions become increasingly complex through the development process (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). The effectiveness of these proximal processes can lead to actualisation of genetic potentials, with outcomes such as differentiated perceptions and response, directing and controlling one’s behaviour, coping with stress, acquiring knowledge and skill, establishing and maintaining mutually rewarding relationships and modifying and constructing one’s own physical and social environment (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994). The ability of these processes to influence development varies substantially as a consequence of personal characteristics, remote and immediate contexts and the relevant time periods that these interactions occur (Nobre et al., 2014).

*“The form, power, content, and direction of the proximal processes effecting development vary systematically as a joint function of the characteristics of the developing person; of the environment—both immediate and more remote—in which the processes are taking place; the nature of the developmental outcomes under consideration; and the social continuities and changes occurring over time through the life course and the historical period during which the person has lived.”*

*(Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998, p. 996)*

The *person* aspect of the reformulated bio-ecological theory of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) acknowledges the relevance of the biological and genetic aspects of the individual. Individual characteristics were explained in three forms; demand, resource and force. Demand characteristics are personal characteristics (age, gender, physical appearance) which can influence interactions as they have the capacity to “invite or discourage reactions from the social environment” (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998, p.1011). Resource characteristics aren’t as immediately obvious and include characteristics that relate to mental and emotional resources (e.g., intelligence, past experiences) and to social resources (e.g., educational opportunities, housing, parental nature). Force characteristics relate to differences in psychological attributes, for example temperament, persistence and motivation. To explain the effective differences between dispositions, Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) compared the terms developmentally-generative for positive characteristics and developmentally-disruptive for negative characteristics. Impulsiveness, aggression, distractibility, inability to defer gratification, apathy, lack of interest and activity withdrawal were proposed as examples of developmentally disruptive characteristics, while positioning curiosity, readiness to defer gratification to pursue long-term goals, tendency to engage in and initiate activity alone or with others as examples of developmentally-generative characteristics.

*Context* includes the four levels of systems initially described in the earlier work, namely micro-meso- exo- macro systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1976). The focus on *time* is the main differentiating factor of this theory to that of other ecological theorists (cf. Newell, 1986; Gibson, 1988, 2002) (Gabbard & Krebs, 2012). The study of time reflects that chronological age itself is not substantive to analyse development. Time is used to order and explain historical sequences and patterns of actions within

contexts, which includes micro-time interactions within specific contexts (i.e., family, peers) up to macro-time, which reflects sociohistorical events (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). To fully understand proximal process, one must also recognise that distal processes are also affecting the developing individual indirectly (e.g., historical, cultural, sociological conditions).

The quality of proximal processes on development is provided initially by family environments (e.g., activities engaged in and encouraged by parents, toys given for the child to engage in and also responding to cues and initiatives provided by children), at some point to further skill learning and development, knowledge and materials are needed from outside the home. If the environmental context (e.g., availability of local clubs, quality of coaches, play characteristics of local environment) in which the family are situated contain these resources then it is placed at an advantage. In contrast, families in disadvantaged environments may not yield the same level of return for their proximal processes (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994). For processes to operate successfully they also need stability that to be effective the proximal processes driving development "must occur on a fairly regular basis over extended periods of time" (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994, p.576) with the disruptive effect of unstable, inconsistent and unpredictable environments. Feelings of stress generated by such disruptive environments can undermine psychological development.

Despite being commonly cited within academia, only a small number of articles have accurately used the mature version of the theory (mid-1990s) when claimed to have done so (Tudge et al., 2009; Tudge et al., 2016) which demonstrated a lack of awareness of the change in the model and key interplay between components (Tudge et al., 2016). Many of these studies failed to accurately take a contextualist view of the theory and instead view it from a mechanist paradigm, which is to break down causal



factors related to development and examine them separately instead of assessing the synergic relationship between variables (Tudge et al., 2016). This model provides conceptual models and frameworks which argues for the potential relevance of factors rather than being a predictive theory of development with causal arrows (Weisner, 2009). The theory was formulated to examine not “the forces that have shaped human development in the past, but . . . those that may already be operating today to influence what human beings may become tomorrow” (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000, p. 117), with the relationship between biology, immediate family and community environment and wider societal landscape facilitating and guiding development (Gabbard & Krebs, 2012). Development contexts (e.g., environments containing aspiring youth footballers) have ‘developmentally instigative’ characteristics, that with interaction to the developing individual’s characteristics serve to impede or facilitate development (Bronfenbrenner, 1993).

### **1.3.2. Bio-ecological Talent Development in Sport**

Bennett, Vaeyens and Fransen (2018) suggested that development from being a promising youth football player to a senior international is confounded by many factors which act on a global level (e.g. population size, financial and logistical resources, available talent pool, strength of domestic competition) and an individual level (e.g. relative age effects, location effects, coaching). The process of actualising genetic potential to determine development outcomes through appropriate environmental experience and interaction (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994) is reminiscent of Gagné’s (1995) view of talent as the systematic development of natural abilities. Although primarily used as a theoretical framework within education, health

sciences and family development research, ecological development has been studied within sport science disciplines (c.f. Bengoechea, 2002; Krebs & Sartori, 2003; Araújo & Davids, 2009). For example, Dorsch, Smith and Dotterer (2016) examined the association of person, process and context with parent's involvement in youth sport. Nobre, Coutinho and Valentini (2014) used the theory to assess motor development of children in Brazil. Gabbard and Krebs (2012) studied the influence of environmental influences on children's motor development, with Strachan et al., (2016) focusing on an ecological approach to understanding high performance sport and positive youth development. Reeves and Roberts (2019) used Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 2005) bio-ecological model of human development as a framework for their study of the talent identification processes and development environments in European professional football academies.

In Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological system, development occurs because of "the synergistic relation between individual and context in the course of proximal processes" (Tudge et al., 2016, p.430). For example, football culture isn't directly responsible for development, but more so its influence on the proximal process relationships (i.e., degree of parental support, resources available to clubs) of which the individual is also exerting an influence. Utilising the framework from Bronfenbrenner, proximal processes within the sport development environment could include coach interactions and responsiveness, peer relationships, family, clubs and national team experiences.

Henriksen (2010, p.160) presents a holistic ecological approach to talent development (Figure 3) which he defines as;

*“. . . a dynamic system comprising a) an athlete's immediate surroundings at the micro-level where athletic and personal*

development take place, b) the interrelations between these surroundings, c) at the macro-level, the larger context in which these surroundings are embedded, and d) the organizational culture of the sports club or team, which is an integrative factor of the ATDE's effectiveness in helping young talented athletes to develop into senior elite athletes.”

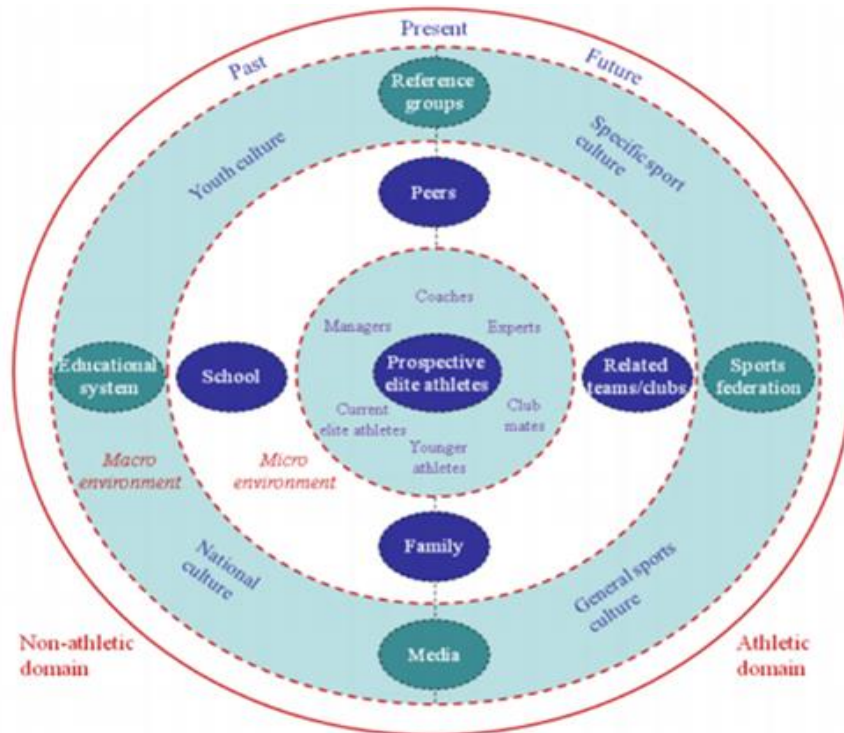


Figure 3 The Athletic Talent Development Model (Henriksen et al., 2010)

As this model draws on the earlier work of Bronfenbrenner (1977, 1979) it focuses on the concept of the nested structure, without directing alluding to the later adaptations of the theory which focused on the proximal process and how these interactions might be influenced by a developing individual’s characteristics (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994; Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000). Alternatively, Krebs (2009) suggested that the bio-ecological model offers the possibility of new research designs for greater insights into athlete’s personal characteristics, due to the reciprocal processes between developmentally disruptive or generative characteristics and the context, time and proximal processes at play.

Drawing on Bronfenbrenner’s Theory of Human Development, Krebs (2009) developed a ‘Bio-ecological Model of Sports Talent Development’ (see Figure 4) which is designed “to create new avenues for the investigation of the process of sports talent development” (p.131). Choosing the development of sports talent as the central proximal process, the model extrapolates development from initial sport simulation to advanced sport specialisation, with the arrows insinuating progressively more complex interactions between the elements of process, context, time and person. This model has potential for conceptualising talent development in sport (Abernathy, 2009).

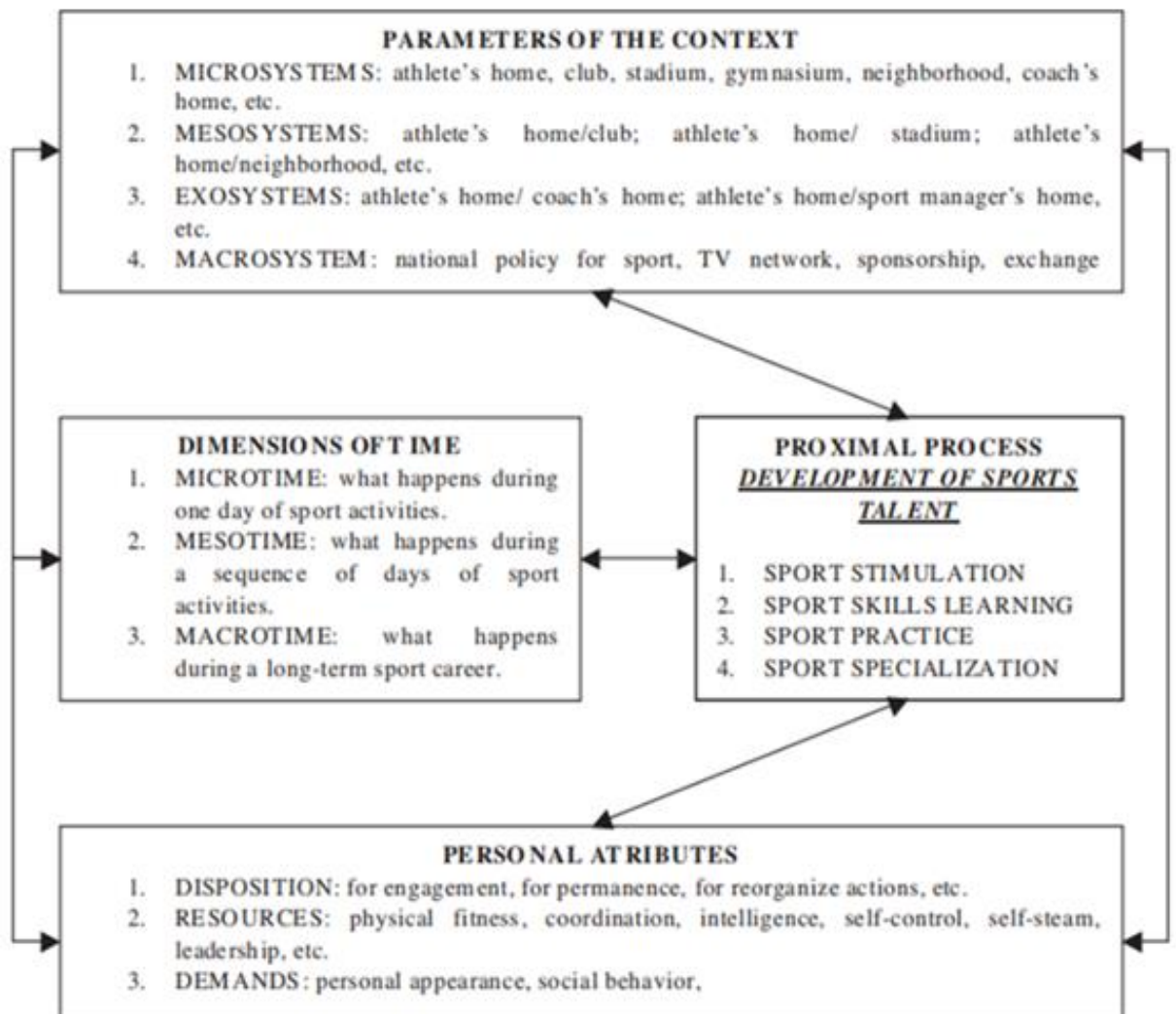


Figure 4 The Bio-ecological Model of Sports Talent Development (Krebs, 2009)

## **1.4. Football Structures in the Republic of Ireland**

### **1.4.1. Sporting Culture in Ireland**

Williams (1958, p.6) emotively proclaimed that “the making of a society is the finding of common meaning and directions, and its growth is an active debate and amendment under the pressures of experience, contact, and discovery, writing themselves into the land.” Allison (1982) argued for studying the links between culture and socialisation through the medium of play and sport, as it teaches children rules that guide their behaviour and that of others. Sport has been recognised as being uniquely positioned within Irish society for its role in shaping characteristics and philosophies and being a powerful unifier within society which helps to define the nation (Federation of Irish Sport, 2013). The relationship between football codes in Ireland (Association football and Gaelic Games) is complex and unique, with both playing a significant role in the sporting culture of Ireland. Within Irish football elite youth development pathways, many youth footballers often play both codes (Doyle et al., 2013).

### **1.4.2. History of Football in Ireland**

The place of sport within Irish society has been transformed many times during the twentieth century (Cronin et al., 2008; Griffin & Strachan, 2019). Association football (soccer) is the most popular team sport in Ireland, played by 4.1% of the overall population (7.8% of the male population) (Irish Sports Monitor, 2017). The main sporting historiography in Ireland has focused on the Gaelic Athletic Association (cf. Cronin, 1998; McGuire & Hassan, 2012) with the spread of football remaining unaccounted for definitively (Curran, 2012). Organised football in Ireland began in

1880 with the formation of the Irish Football Association (IFA). This period witnessed a growth of sport organisation in Ireland with the governing bodies for Gaelic Games (Gaelic Athletic Association) and rugby (Irish Football Rugby Union) forming in 1884 and 1874 respectively. By the end of that decade, the IFA had a membership of 124 clubs, with the vast majority of those based around Belfast (Byrne, 2012). Within the Republic of Ireland, football popularity grew initially in the ‘garrison towns’ of the north (Garnham, 2004), border counties, Dublin and smaller rural pockets (Giulianotti, 1996). For example, in Donegal, where the North-East of the county maintained their strong links with Derry city, a soccer stronghold became established by the mid-twentieth century, while the South and South-East were entrenched with Gaelic football (Curran, 2012).

As football and Gaelic Games drew from the same socio-economic base, the rivalries between both codes were more intense than those with cricket or rugby (McElligott, 2016). In 1886, two years after the birth of the GAA, their delegates voted unanimously not to engage in competition with teams operating outside GAA rules (Byrne, 2012) to reduce the threat to its existence by the rival football codes (McElligott, 2016). With a resurgence of Irish nationalism in the early 1900s, Gaelic games were seen as a method of preserving “Gaelic culture against the anglicizing influences which were constantly pervading Irish society” (Rouse, 1993, p.333). Rule 27, known as the ‘Foreign Games’ rule, was passed in 1902 which forbade members of the GAA from playing or attending “imported pastimes”, this rule remained until 1971 (Puirseal, 1984, p.129). Across the border counties, the War of Independence (1919-1921) is thought to have influenced local organisers to discontinue their involvement with association football, although there was no widespread transferral of clubs from soccer to Gaelic football (Curran, 2012). Media campaigns against

imported games and their purveyors, enhanced governance and coordination within the GAA and a rising nationalistic sense saw the GAA wrestle control of popular sport in many rural areas whereas in other areas the strong organisational culture of football or rugby remained dominant (McElligott, 2016). Within Ireland, the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) is considered to be representative of Irish culture and national sport providing the Irish population with a sense of both place and identity (Puirseal, 1984; Cronin, 1994; Cuthbert, 2018). Soccer has come to represent a fundamental shift within Irish identity, with the international element (i.e., representation of an Irish team at the soccer World Cup and European Championships) allowing for ‘measurement’ against other nations and the development of a more contemporary sporting identity (Cronin, 1999). The success of the Irish football team in the late 1980s and 1990s forced a rethink on the defining cultural characteristics of ‘Irishness’, given that, for decades, football had been considered as a foreign sport (Holmes, 1994; Toms, 2015), with Holmes (1994) suggesting that association football reflects a more heterogeneous and pluralist representation of Ireland. The socio-historical influence of religious and cultural differences in Ireland also resulted in football not being offered in some schools which limited the potential talent detection and development pool.

While football fought a battle between codes, it was also undergoing an internal battle for supremacy with the Belfast based IFA. Political opinion began to mobilise around the need for a greater say in the decision-making structure for a Southern based organisation (Byrne, 2012). At an IFA annual general meeting in 1890, it was concluded that to grow the popularity of the game outside of the North East of the island, that a greater sense of autonomy was needed in Dublin. Thus, a separate divisional association, affiliated to the Belfast-based parent body (IFA), was devised;

hence the Leinster Football Association was formed in 1892. This uneasy alliance would last for 30 years until 1921, when the Football Association of Ireland (FAI) was formed in the back-drop of political and governing tensions between the North and South of Ireland (Byrne, 2012). In 1923 the organisation became known as the Football Association of the Irish Free State (FAIFS) to represent the separate political status of both nations (Ryan, 1997). Political wrangling followed in an attempt for the FAIFS to get official political recognition by FIFA, which was achieved in 1923. While football was seen as a foreign game which threatened Irish nationhood, the English FA (and the Scottish and Welsh FAs) were petitioning other European countries against the recognition of a governing entity representing the Republic of Ireland (Ryan, 1997; Byrne, 2012). Conversely, playing football internationally actually allowed for the spread of the newly generated Irish culture (i.e., flag, anthem) with the split being seen by many as an expression of the spirit of nationalism (FAI, 2009a).

The 'foreign' status attached to football may have hampered its development (Bourke, 2003, 2011) and it is still used within popular culture (cf. Connaughton, 2018). The national league is poorly resourced and structurally weak (Elliott, 2014) yet the demand for top level football remains insatiable, with friendly matches between clubs from other countries regularly selling out at the Aviva stadium (McDonnell, 2017) and there are over 120,000 visits by Irish people to UK club matches each year (O'Sullivan, 2015a). Curran and Toms (2017) assert that despite a burgeoning of research in the area of Irish sport historiography, there is still much to be uncovered about the development of both codes of football and what they can tell us about Irish culture. An overview of the key moments in Irish football history, influential Irish and



international moments, culture and other sporting influences that have impacted on football in Ireland today can be found in Appendix A.

### **1.4.3. Football Governance Organisations within the Republic of Ireland**

The Southern governing body reverted to its original name (the FAI) in 1937. Today, the primary stakeholders in football governance in the Republic of Ireland today are the FAI, Schoolboy Football Association of Ireland (SFAI), 32 associated schoolboy leagues (e.g., Dublin District schoolboy league) and individual clubs and members. Figure 5 illustrates an overview of the governing bodies (and structures) tasked with football administration in the Republic of Ireland.

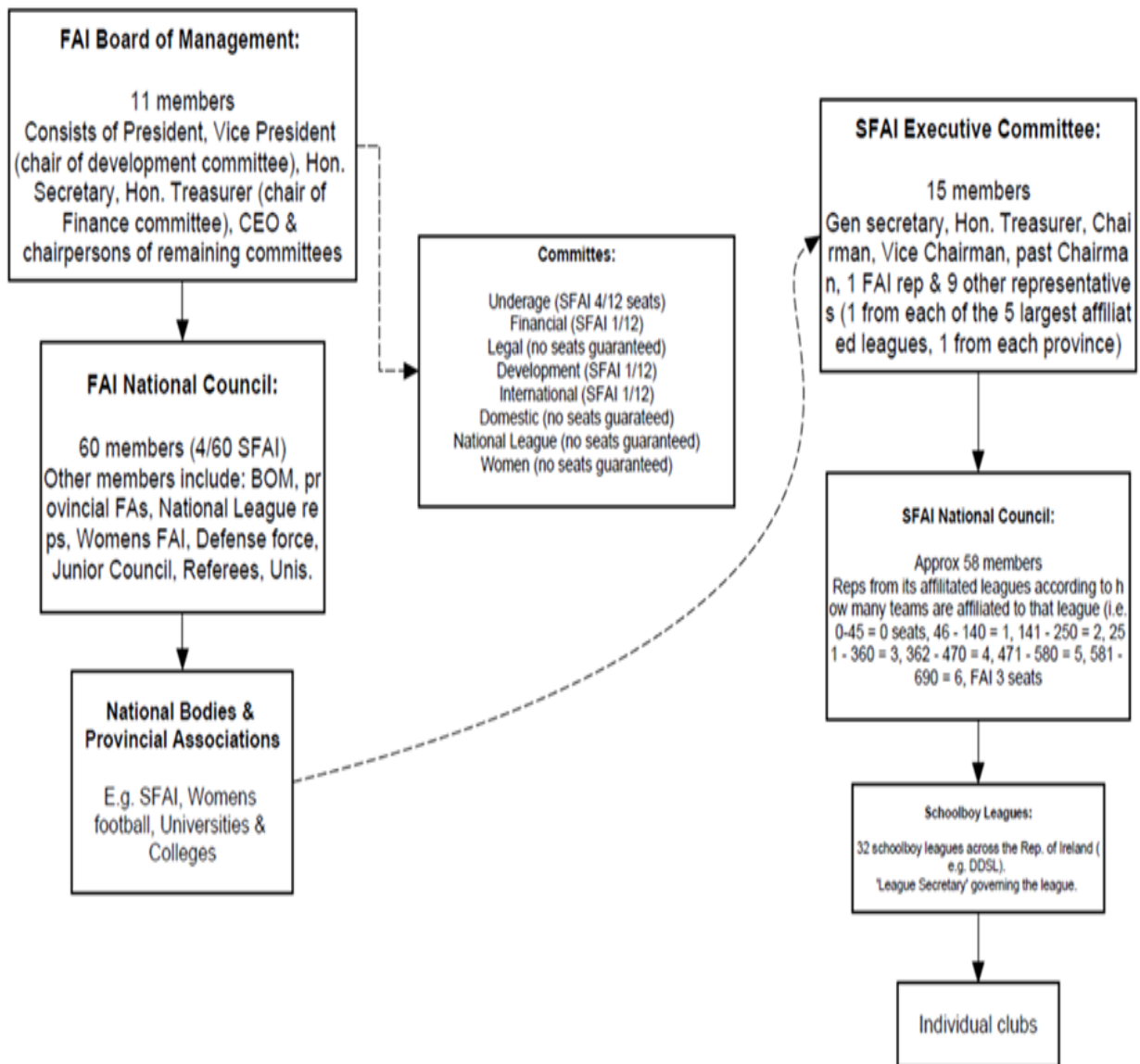


Figure 5 Football Governance in the Republic of Ireland

#### 1.4.3.1. Football Association of Ireland (FAI)

The Football Association of Ireland (FAI) is the national governing body for the sport in the Republic of Ireland. It was accepted as a member of FIFA in 1923 and became a member of UEFA in 1954. As illustrated in Figure 5, the Board of Management is the apex of the organisation and is comprised of 11 members. These include the Chairperson of various committees with responsibility for the areas of Underage, Finance, Legal, Development, International, Domestic, National League and

Women's football. According to the FAI "committees are balanced and represent all stakeholder interests, with a number of committee members elected by Council and a further number selected by the CEO, President and Council Representative" (FAI, n.d. a, para 7). While highlighting that "no one member can sit on more than two committees" (para 8), the CEO also sits as a voting member on the Finance and Legal and Corporate Affairs Committees (FAI, n.d. a).

#### **1.4.3.2. The Schoolboy Football Association of Ireland (SFAI)**

Youth development within Irish football begins within the structures of the Irish schoolboy leagues (governed by the Schoolboy Football Association of Ireland, SFAI, which is affiliated to its parent body, the FAI). The SFAI was established by the FAI in 1934 to run youth football (up to u16) and has jurisdiction over affiliated leagues and their clubs and players. The SFAI receive funding from the FAI but also seek and receive sponsorship from independent sources to support its activities (Bourke, 2007). The organisation is governed by an Executive Committee and a National Council (see Figure 5). Although the SFAI was established in 1934, some regional leagues did not begin until much later (e.g., Clare and District league began in 1985, Midlands schoolboy league formed in 1996). This differed from most urban centres and those with traditional links to association football, where development occurred at a quicker pace, with competitions and league structures in place in Limerick, Waterford and Galway by the end of the 1940's. Dublin retained an accelerated pace of growth in schoolboy football and by 1957, there were approximately 123 teams in Dublin, out of a country-wide total of 200 (Curran, 2017). Tradition and length of a time that a football governing body has existed has been shown to be linked to current performance (Schneider, 1996) and this has been borne out with the continued

dominance of the Dublin District Schoolboy League (DDSL) and affiliated clubs in SFAI tournaments.

The SFAI cater for almost 100,000 players from more than 1,000 clubs across 32 leagues (FAI, 2009b), consisting of almost 6,000 teams; this begins on average between the ages of seven to nine (Doyle et al., 2013). The SFAI administer national competitions from under 11 to under 16 years of age. Under the umbrella of the SFAI, there are 32 individual leagues, spanning the 26 counties of the Republic of Ireland. The individual leagues administer county-based competitions from under 8s to under 16s. These leagues are autonomous entities in relation to competition structures within their leagues, but act as a federation under the stewardship of the SFAI. In accordance with the SFAI rulebook (section 26, p.7), a “properly constituted” league is one which; promotes the game of association football and is governed by the rules of the SFAI, is governed by regularly elected officers and management committee, has the right to dispose of its own funds through the management committee and doesn’t report or disclose any of its business to any organisation other than the SFAI (SFAI, 2018). Each league has a representative on the National Council, with some leagues also having a seat on the Executive Committee (Figure 5).

The FAI have reduced the voting power of the SFAI on the FAI’s Council and continues to receive criticism about its lack of funding to the SFAI and underage football in Ireland (Murphy, 2015). The complex nature of the organisation and competition structures of youth football in Ireland was outlined by the FAI (2016) which suggests that, “...affiliates manage provincial competitions while their affiliated leagues manage local competitions. The Association provides support in areas such as administration, sponsorship, promotion, venues, match officials and various other logistics for the national competitions” (p. 28). In its Underage Review (2009b), the

FAI asserted that there was a need to establish a strong oversight group to coordinate the multiple strands of the underage game (e.g., schoolboys, schools), to ensure that all activities are harmonised and in line with FAI policy.

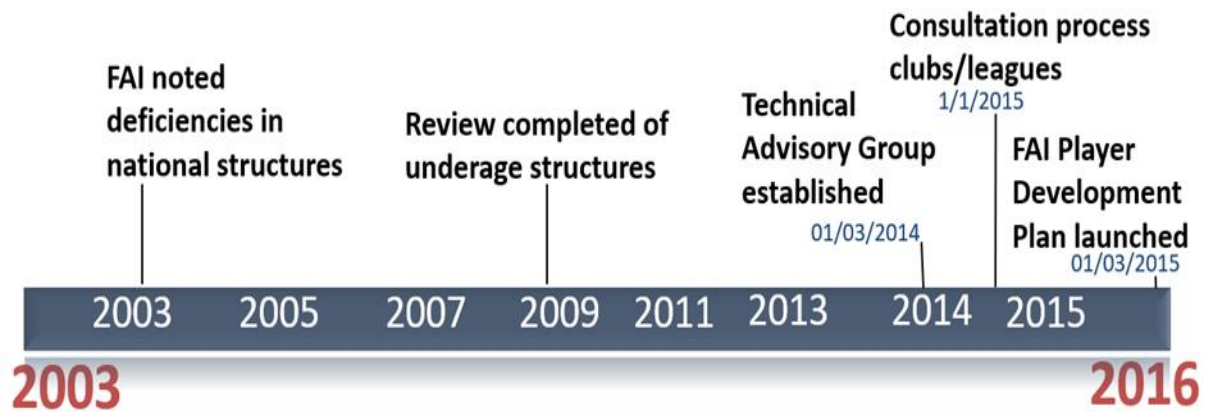
#### **1.4.3.3. Dublin District Schoolboy League**

The largest of the 32 schoolboy leagues is the Dublin District Schoolboy League (DDSL), which is one of three leagues based in Dublin. It is the largest league of its kind in Europe, with over 200 clubs and 16,000 players (Kelly, 2017). As well as being the largest league, the DDSL is also seen as one of the most powerful and politically influential leagues in the country. The DDSL is frequently at odds with other leagues regarding elite player movement towards DDSL clubs due to their enhanced visibility to English clubs (Bourke, 2002). There also exists discontent regarding the favourable nature of the relationship between the DDSL and the FAI, exacerbated by the appointment of a mediator by the FAI to mediate between the DDSL and the SFAI over a range of on-going issues, which included the SFAI threatening to defy FAI wishes not to exclude the DDSL from national cup competitions (Fallon, 2013).

#### **1.4.4. National Development Structures**

In the prologue to the FAI's 2004-2008 National Development Plan, former underage and senior team manager Brian Kerr, outlined how he had identified "the deficiencies in current methods of player development and the lack of structured, clear programmes or pathways for young players" (FAI, 2003, p.6). As one of its main actions, a working group was to be established to review and make recommendations regarding the further development of league structures operating at grassroots levels (section 5.2). In 2009 a review of underage football in the Republic of Ireland was commissioned

by the FAI and conducted by a management consultancy company, PMPGenesis. Given autonomy to implement the findings, the SFAI rejected 44 of the 51 guidelines (Delaney, 2014) which focused on strategies to improve coaching, parental education and discipline, facility development and sporting initiatives in underage football. This report also suggested that a ‘Competition Management Unit’ be established within the FAI to ensure that proposed competition policies are adhered to within the underage game. These policies included the introduction of mandatory small side games up to under twelve, no league tables published below under twelve, no trophies to teams engaged in small side games and a uniform approach to football development across Ireland. This unit was not developed by the FAI and these policies were not implemented by the SFAI, despite regular motions being raised at their AGMs by their grassroots coaches and administrators. In 2015 the FAI launched their ‘National Player Development Plan (PDP) for youth football’ which included similar recommendations regarding small sided games, non-competitive football, roll-on roll-off subs, standardised ball weight and size. This was overseen by a Technical Committee comprising of the FAI High Performance Director, other FAI staff and three representatives from the SFAI and FAI Schools Department. In March 2015, the FAI issued a directive to all leagues asking for their full cooperation with the implementation of these changes (see Figure 6).



*Figure 6 Timeline of the FAI's National Player Development Plan implementation*

Currently between the ages of 14-18, a youth footballer is typically playing across the various development structures of organised club league competitions (or National leagues), national club competitions, inter-league competitions (e.g., Kennedy Cup), school football, Emerging Talent Programme and perhaps international underage squads (see Figure 7).

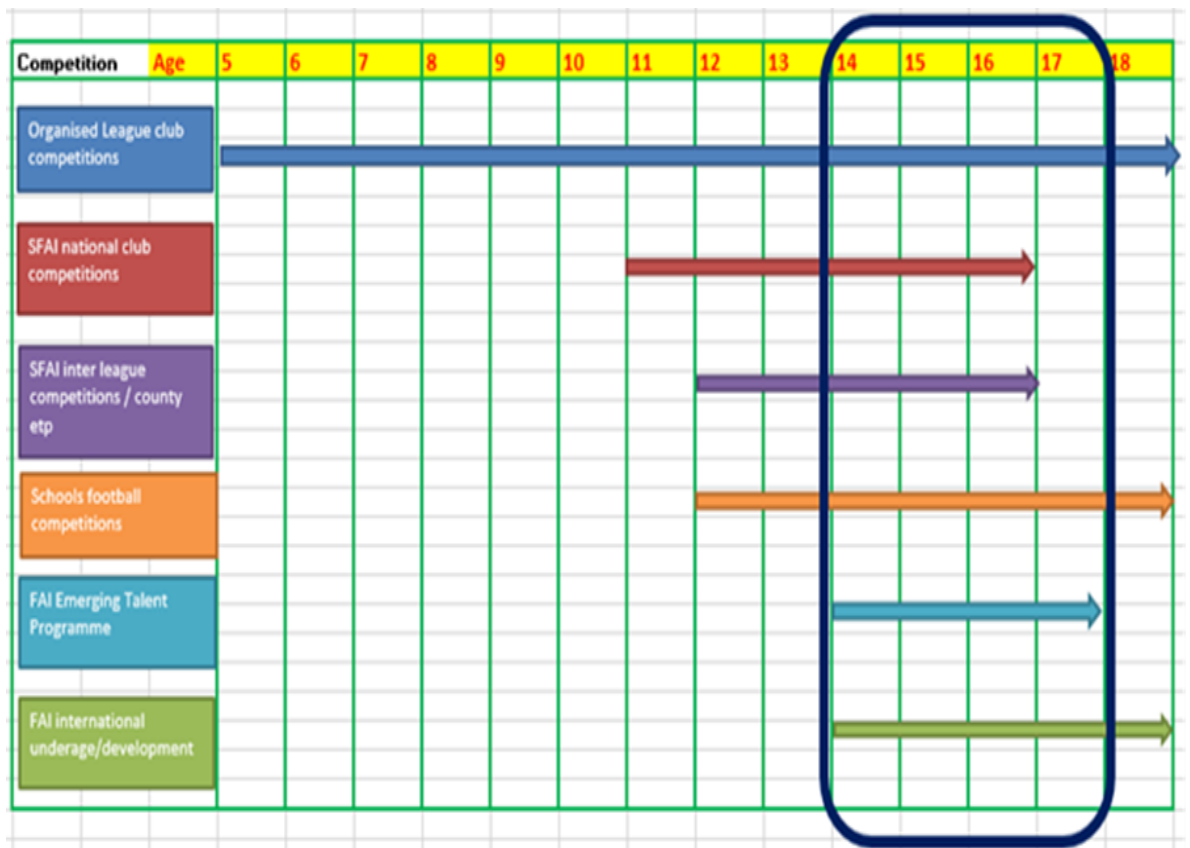


Figure 7 Competition structures and governing bodies in underage football in the Republic of Ireland

#### 1.4.4.1. Kennedy Cup

Originating in 1976, the Kennedy Cup is a major part of the Irish football calendar (FAI, 2013b). The tournament is held annually, with each of the 32 leagues entering a squad of twenty u14 players. It involves six games per team being played over a five-day period. The Kennedy Cup has its critics in schoolboy football with the suggestion that there is a culture of ‘peaking for the Kennedy Cup’ amongst youth coaches and that it acts as a “meat market” for Dublin based clubs and scouts of UK clubs (O’Sullivan, 2015b, para. 3). This led to one League of Ireland footballer recalling how 90% of the DDSL squad were selected for UK trials during his experience of the tournament, with many subsequently signed on schoolboy terms (Byrne, 2011). This



week of competition is used as a mechanism for FAI staff to identify talent for progression onto the Emerging Talent Programme squads and FAI development squads (FAI, 2013b).

#### **1.4.4.2. Emerging Talent Programme**

Following recommendations proposed in their 2004 Development Plan, in November 2006, the FAI launched the Emerging Talent Programme (ETP) on a phased basis which is now a nationwide programme within the Republic of Ireland (26 counties). The appropriateness of the ETP to adequately develop the elite pool of youth Irish footballers is a key consideration for the FAI (J. Delaney, personal communication, October, 2012). At the time of the research being conducted, the ETP consisted of 32 league centres and 12 regional centres (which are fed by the 32 league centres) (Figure 8). Two of the twelve ETP regional centres are based in Dublin, which is due to the presence of three feeder schoolboy leagues within the county, with the Dublin District Schoolboy League (DDSL) being the largest of the 32 feeder schoolboy leagues in the country in terms of participation (Bourke, 2007). The age groups catered for within the regional centres are 14-17 years. The ETP is the primary development vehicle for elite youth footballers aged 14-17 years. The ETP is financed and organised by the Football Association of Ireland. Its stated purpose includes providing emerging talent with a more challenging level of training and development, the opportunity to train within their own area in a structured and quality environment, to allow national teams training themes and styles of play be developed countrywide and to provide a higher quantity and quality of players for national and international teams (Football Association of Ireland, n.d. b).



*Figure 8 Republic of Ireland map showing the location of ETP centres (FAI, 2013c)*

According to the FAI (n.d. b), the programme is benchmarked against worldwide best practice and is their premier training for elite players nationwide. Along with their regular club training, players selected to attend the regional centres get an hour and a half coaching per week, for twenty-four weeks of the year. The ETP is the “primary source of talent from which the underage International squads are selected” (FAI, 2013a, para.1). In 2013, the under 15s International squad was predominantly composed of members of the ETP programme (with the exception of one player based at Ipswich town). There were similar numbers with the 2013 under 16s age group with 41 of the 44 capped players being home-based and training at a regional centre.

The ETP admits players at a critical period in their athletic development, as players are experiencing physiological and anthropometric changes, moving into a period of ‘specialising’ in their sport (Côté, 1999) and are facing psycho-social factors which impact on transitions (e.g., athletic and self- identity) (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Petitpas, 2000). At age fourteen, players are transitioning from the initiation to development phases of development (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2003), a phase marked by increasingly serious training patterns (Côté, Baker, & Abernethy, 2007). Players are also entering adolescence during this stage, with growth and adolescence considered the main confounding factors in the future prediction of levels of expertise (Pearson, Naughton, & Torode, 2006). The FAI CEO John Delaney commented on the appropriateness of the ETP saying “There was much comment during the week about how we need a system to produce upcoming international players. We have one – and it is actually working” (as cited in Egan, 2013).

#### **1.4.4.3. National under 13, under 15, under 17 and under 19 Leagues**

There exists a lack of congruence about the development structures, evidenced by the fact that the largest schoolboy clubs who have an excellent history of producing Irish internationals (Kelly, 2017) are traditionally distinct entities from the League of Ireland (LOI) senior clubs. In 2011, the FAI developed a nationwide under 19 league to provide a development pathway into the senior League of Ireland, with League of Ireland senior clubs being mandated to establish an under 19 team.

Following the development of the under 19 league, proposals for an under 17 league were announced. As this would potentially involve players aged under 16 (i.e., under the remit of the SFAI) it was met with opposition from the SFAI, who looked to exert power and control over the age groups cognisant of the FAI High Performance Directors’ future plans of under 13 and under 15 national leagues to follow imminently

(O’Sullivan, 2015c). In 2014, following an application process, the FAI announced that twenty-six expressions of interest were received from entities outside existing senior LOI clubs for entry into the under 17 national league. This included the most successful schoolboy clubs in the country (Fallon, 2015). A schoolboy league clubs’ omission from the national league could see them lose players to LOI clubs who can offer an obvious progression pathway from under 17 to senior LOI football. This could see players moving from their local clubs to LOI clubs at an earlier age (cf. Findlater, 2017). According to O’Sullivan (2015c) a school boy club could earn €20,000 in training compensation from UEFA per year of registration with that club, and the prospect of playing in an under 17 national league could see them retaining players in Ireland for longer, thus participation in the under 17 league is attractive to school boy league clubs financially. According to the FAI:

*“The working group reviewed aspects such as facilities, coaching qualifications, and in particular player pathway, with an emphasis on structures linking to senior football. The working group also took geographical location and strategic development of the game nationally into account when making its decisions.” (FAI, 2015a, para.5).*

Reacting to their non-inclusion in the LOI under 17 national league, the DDSL devised an under 17 ‘Super League’ which included teams like St. Kevin’s boys, St. Josephs, Belvedere and Cherry Orchard which attempted to act as direct competition for the FAI run LOI under 17 league.

The under 15 national league began in 2017. The FAI High Performance director Ruud Dokter stated that “having the under 15 League in place further develops the pathway to elite football for the country’s most talented footballers” (FAI, 2017a, para.3). In addition to the 20 existing Premier League clubs, the u15 League was made up of three schoolboy Leagues – Kerry Schoolboys League, Mayo League, Monaghan/Cavan

Partnership – and DDSL club, St Kevin’s Boys. The initial inclusion of St. Kevin’s boys as a standalone club in the National under 15 league reportedly led to legal challenges being proposed by other clubs after they were refused sole entry (O’Riordan, 2017). St Kevin’s Boys were permitted to compete in the shortened inaugural season after agreeing to work towards creating a partnership with Bohemian FC, which would allow St Kevin’s Boys to join existing partnerships into the National Leagues. Seven other LOI clubs forged partnerships with schoolboy clubs or Leagues, including Bray Wanderers (St Joseph’s Boys), Drogheda United (Drogheda Schoolboys, Home Farm, NECSL Schoolboys), Dundalk (Malahide United), Galway United (Galway FA and Schoolboys), Shamrock Rovers (Corduff United, Kildare Schoolboys), St Patrick’s Athletic (Belvedere, Cherry Orchard, Crumlin United), and UCD (Mount Merrion). Thus the schoolboy league club retained a presence within the highest level of the national age groups and the cost implication of running an underage squad isn’t solely borne by the LOI club. Having an underage presence is required by the FAI (2017b) as part of the annual club licencing procedure, with section SPO 1.02 stating that:

*“The licence applicant must at least have the following youth teams within its legal entity, another legal entity included in the reporting perimeter or a club affiliated to its legal entity: a) at least one team at U19 level, b) at least one team at U17 level, c) at least one team at U15 level, d) at least one youth team within the age range of 10 to 14.”*

The under 13 national league began in 2019, being the obvious next step to developing coherent national structures according to Dokter;

*“We’ve the 19s, the 17s, the 15s — the 13s is the next step. Seven or eight years ago, there was no pathway for elite players. There was*

*no structure for national competition, players had to go to Dublin to be challenged. Look where we are now.”*

*(as cited in O’Riordan, 2017, para 18).*

### **1.4.5. Talent Development in Irish Football**

As evidenced in Figure 7, players are influenced by the talent development structures of their respective schoolboy leagues, the SFAI and the FAI throughout their formative years. The leagues provide exposure to the organised game format and a league development programme from age five to sixteen. These players play under SFAI rule formats in national club competitions from under eleven to under sixteen and the ‘elite’ players represent their leagues in inter-league competitions (and league Emerging Talent Programmes centres) from under 12 to under 16. The players are under the remit of the FAI in their exposure to the Emerging Talent Programme (ETP), schools football, the under 15, under 17 and under 19 league formats and the underage international and development squads. Various Junior footballing bodies administer football past the age of sixteen.

Youth development within Irish football begins with players joining their local schoolboy league club. This occurs on average between the ages of 7-9 (Doyle et al., 2013). The ‘best’ players within each county are invited to join their county development squad. County development squads begin at under 11. The county development squad doubles as the Emerging Talent League centre. This entails an hour a week extra training. County development squads continue to u16 (this includes the Kennedy Cup squad at u14). Players progress onto the Emerging Talent Programme Regional centres. This caters for players from 14-17 years of age. Players are concurrently playing for their local club. When a player has progressed through

the ETP, the typical development pathway would see him joining a National League under 15, under 17 or under 19s squad. The potential gap in competitive structure from the under 19s league to senior football has the potential to halt the development of youth footballers within the system. These under 19 squads are linked to senior National League of Ireland teams and progression to the senior squad is the next pathway step, with the intention at this level of football being to facilitate “the best, playing against the best” (FAI, 2013c). Youth footballers generally also play with school-based teams in fact Doyle et al., (2013) reported that, on average, an ETP player played for four teams while being involved with the programme, with seven percent of the sample playing with seven or more teams. As participant development itself is non-linear and dynamic (Abbott et al., 2005), it is essential for ‘late-developers’ or those that were overlooked in the talent identification process, that the FAI offer flexibility and a way back onto the elite development programmes to avoid limiting the available talent pool.

An alternate pathway for the development of Irish talent is marked by migration overseas (generally to England) (cf. Bourke, 2003). The FAI appear to align with Wallersteins’ (1974, 1979) world systems theory approach using this path of migration as a ‘dependant development’ pathway for their talented athletes (Darby, 2007) and, in a sense, have become a donor nation. The perception within grassroots football is that to continue their development, a relatively high volume of youth footballers (estimates of 50 per year) move from Ireland to British academies (Bourke, 2003). Certain Irish schoolboy league clubs have developed mutually beneficial relationships with British clubs for increased access for these talented Irish players to the UK club whilst also boosting the attractiveness of the Irish club as a potential stepping-stone to a UK academy for nationwide players. For example, in the early 2000s, Cherry

Orchard received approximately £50,000 each year in equipment, coaching resources and cash to give a Premier League club increased access to their best young Irish players, with the English club also attempting to use the relationship to also build brand loyalty and club image in Ireland (Malone, 2001).

Elliott (2014) identified concerns from Irish footballers regarding the structural inadequacies of the Irish domestic league as a viable talent development pathway which necessitated migration to progress player development. The underdevelopment of Irish football can be seen as a result of many factors, including the split between the Southern and Northern clubs in the 1920s, the competition of others sports for players and spectators, the negative impact of satellite broadcasts of English football on attendances in Ireland and the management and organisational capabilities of the governing structures (McGovern, 2000).



## **1.5. Research Paradigms Utilised**

A research paradigm is a set of beliefs which dictates what should be studied, how it should be conducted, and how the results should be interpreted (Patton, 1990; Smith, 2010). Paradigms shape our view of the role of the researcher, the nature of the world and the relationship between the world and its parts (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The paradigmatic approach leads to subsequent considerations of ontology, epistemology and methodology (Creswell, 2013; Sparkes & Smith, 2014). The dominant paradigmatic and philosophical research perspectives utilised in this thesis are positivism/post-positivism and interpretivism.

Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) suggested that mixed method research involves mixing quantitative and qualitative research data in a collection of studies. Benefits of a mixed method approach include expansion and triangulation of data to measure different components and limit shortcomings of one approach, the complementarity of approaches yielding contrasting insights and providing scope for one approach influencing the subsequent development of research questions or strategies (Smith, 2010). The rationale for using a mixed-method approach is to “understand more fully, to generate deeper and broader insights, to develop important knowledge claims” (Greene & Caracelli, 1997, p.7). This mixed-methods, explanatory sequential study design implies the collection and analysis of quantitative data and then qualitative data in two consecutive phases within one study (Creswell, 2012). Advantages of this type of study include opportunities for the further exploration of the quantitative results in more detail resulting in higher quality of inferences (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003; Ivankova, Creswell, & Stick, 2006).

Researchers have been engaged in “paradigm wars” (Burke Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004, p.14) regarding the superiority of quantitative or qualitative research methods, with purists emerging on both sides (cf. Campbell & Stanley, 1963; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Maxwell & Delaney, 2004) who advocate an “incompatibility thesis” between methods (Howe, 1998, p.10). Alternatively, it has been suggested that using one method cannot adequately answer some research questions (Greene & Caracelli, 1997) particularly in the area of talent identification and development (Collins, MacNamara, & Cruickshank, 2019).

Where positivist and post-positivist methodologies have been utilised (Study One), an objectivist perspective was maintained (Smith, 2010) as from a post-positivist stance researcher bias must be controlled (Lincoln, Lytham, & Guba, 2011). The epistemological belief supports the role of statistics in constructing our knowledge about a given research question, with minimal interaction between the researcher and those being researched (Creswell, 2013). Study Two and Study Three offer an interpretivist perspective, which subscribes to the idea that there are multiple realities through lived experiences and interactions with others (Creswell, 2013; Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Within an interpretivist perspective, it is noted that researcher values may enhance the understanding of topics so should be reconciled within the research (Lincoln et al., 2011).

The issue of membership to the group being studied is a key consideration within qualitative research. Insider research refers to when researchers conduct research with cohorts of which they are members, sharing experiences, language and an identity with participants (Asselin, 2003). Insider strengths are often seen as the outsider’s weaknesses, and vice versa (Merriam et al., 2009). An outsiders’ strength stems from a greater curiosity with the unfamiliar, possessing a level of critical distance which is

necessary for appropriate analysis, having the ability to ask taboo or seemingly naive questions and not being seen as aligned to particular groups and thus potentially gaining more information (Hellawell, 2006; Merriam et al., 2009). Disadvantages to an outsider status can relate to difficulties of gaining access to and securing the trust of relevant groups and potentially lacking experiential knowledge (Bridges, 2001; Clarke et al., 2010). Insiders may make more nuanced and emphatic interpretations of participants experiences (Hockey, 1993), however once this argument is applied to broad categories of gender, race, position held, then “the different social, personal and situational characteristics that constitute their individuality may well outweigh the shared characteristics; and there may indeed be greater barriers to mutual understanding than there are gateways” (Bridges, 2001, p. 373).

Hockey (1993) introduced the notion of a continua of insider to outsider status instead of being two completely distinct positions. Labaree (2002) argued that you can simultaneously be, to some extent an outsider and to some extent an insider, so in effect not talking about one continuum but a multiple series of parallel ones (e.g. based on gender, age, position held). Hellawell (2006) identified an enhancement of research quality once researchers began to reflect critically on perceptions of where they stand in relation to their status to the participants, through a process of reflectivity. The author considered her outsider / insider status during initial study formulation, data collection and analysis through conducting detailed reflections on the research process, with an awareness of one’s own personal perceptions (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009) and this position was challenged and extended by the research team. Compatible with Labaree’s (2002) insights on parallel continua, the author shared cultural, identity and language insider status with the participants, whilst simultaneously being an outsider due to not being part of the football governance landscape, a current player

or administrator within Irish football. Bridges (2001) argued that a culturally sensitive outsider can enhance the understanding of the cohort being researched.

In summary, a mixed method approach to this research was necessitated by the aim and objectives of this thesis. This overarching ‘pragmatic’ position utilised by the researcher (Patton, 1988) follows that philosophical assumptions are “logically independent and therefore can be mixed and matched to achieve the combination most appropriate for the given inquiry problem” (Greene & Caracelli, 1997, p.8). Objective insight into talent development processes demonstrated by the ETP is followed by the exploration of lived administrative and developmental experiences.

## **1.6. Clarification of the Research Aims and Structure of the Thesis**

The environmental and sociological conditions experienced by an elite youth player is an important determinant of success (Williams & Reilly, 2000). Tannenbaum (1983) links these environmental, cultural and sociological factors as being some of “the links between promise and fulfilment” (p. 95). Managing talent through this phase of specialising and investment in a sport (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004) with these circumstances is a challenging and complex process and in relation to the specific challenges faced within Ireland, is currently neglected by academic research. Organisational support provided by the FAI to deal with the various transitions faced by their youth footballers is central to the appropriate development of the athletes (Henriksen et al., 2010). The existing literature fails to capture the influence of the respective ‘organisational fields’ (i.e., FAI, SFAI), and societal, cultural and

situational influences of these transitions for Irish footballers. Research is also lacking on the application of bio-ecological theory to these talent development systems and interactions in the sporting domain. The interaction between the developing individual and social partners are key to understanding change, thus this study aims to assess the mechanism of development from both the macro and micro perspectives within Irish football.

The following three chapters provide empirical data which seek to answer the overarching research objectives (to quantify the demographics of those involved in the FAIs elite development pathway (ETP), to assess talent development practices of all authoritative bodies within Irish youth football with respect to organisational, athletic, psycho-social, cultural and environmental issues and to examine the dominant challenges faced by young Irish footballers following their entry on, and subsequent progression through, the football talent development pathways in Ireland). Chapter Five will combine the findings from the four preceding chapters and provide a holistic insight into the talent development processes and practices by governing organisations in Irish youth football.

## **Chapter Two: Study One**

### **An analysis of players involved in the FAIs talent development programme (ETP)**

*The form, power, content, and direction of the proximal processes effecting development vary systematically as a joint function of the characteristics of the developing person; of the environment—both immediate and more remote—in which the processes are taking place; the nature of the developmental outcomes under consideration; and the social continuities and changes occurring over time.*

*(Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998, p. 996)*

#### **2.1. Introduction**

Sport systems comprise of many socio-spatial factors, including the distribution of players and clubs, distribution of associations, geopolitical impact and the geographic impact of professional sport and player migration (McGowin, 2010). These dimensions can affect the political and economic processes involved in developing footballers (Poli et al., 2014; Serra-Olivares et al., 2016). The environmental and sociological conditions experienced by an elite youth player are important determinants of success (Williams & Reilly, 2000). Tannenbaum (1983) identified these environmental, cultural and sociological factors as being some of “the links between promise and fulfilment” (p. 95). Some of the factors that impact on this link are relative age and place of birth and football development (Curtis & Birch, 1987; Musch & Grondin, 2001; Côté, Macdonald, Baker, & Abernethy, 2006; Bruner,

Macdonald, Pickett, & Côté, 2011; Rossing et al., 2016). Pfeffer and Salancik (1978, p.1) state that “to understand the behaviour of an organisation you must understand the context of that behaviour—that is, the ecology of the organisation, with organisations being constrained and affected by their environments.” Development is shaped by the characteristics of the environment, both immediate and remote in which development is taking place (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; Henriksen, 2010). Thus, the primary talent development pathway within Ireland will be analysed concerning the date of birth, place of birth and migration of players within the Irish system.

## **2.2. Aim**

This study aimed to quantify the demographics of those involved in the FAIs elite development pathway (ETP).

### **2.2.1. Research Questions**

- Is there a Relative Age Effect in existence within the ETP?
- Is there a relationship between success at underage levels and RAE?
- Does a birth-place effect exist within the ETP?
- What is the equity of provision for populations per ETP centre?
- What movement of players is occurring from the home club to stronger regions in the country?
- Is there a relationship between RAE and player movement?

## **2.3. Literature Review**

### **2.3.1. Relative Age Effect Overview**

The relative age effect (RAE) refers to a preference for selecting athletes born earlier in the age-band due to enhanced maturational factors (Baxter-Jones, 1995). A child with a chronological age of 12 years may possess a biological age of between 9 and 15 years (Borms, 1986). Grondin, Deshaies and Nault (1984) first identified the relationship between birth date and success in their study of the National Hockey League where they identified an overrepresentation of players born at the start of the year which they attributed to the 1<sup>st</sup> January cut-off date used in hockey.

In the thirty years since then, several authors have studied the possible presence of a relative age effect across several sports. This research has included a broad range of sports and activities including tennis (Edgar & O'Donoghue, 2005; Gerdin et al., 2018), dance (Van Rossum, 2006), baseball (Thompson et al., 1991; Grondin & Koren, 2000; BoLun et al., 2018), cricket (O'Donoghue, et al., 2004; Connor et al., 2019), Ice- hockey (Musch & Grondin, 2001; Sherar et al., 2007; Wattie, et al., 2007; Bruner et al., 2011; Hancock, Ste Marie, & Young, 2013; Turnnidge et al., 2014; Geithner et al., 2018), waterpolo (Barrenetxea-Garcia et al., 2018), rugby league (Till et al., 2010) rugby union (Jones et al., 2018), basketball (Delorme & Raspaud, 2009; Schorer et al., 2011; Steingrover et al., 2017; Ibanez et al., 2018); with football particularly (Verhulst, 1992; Dudink, 1994; Musch & Hay, 1999; Helsen, et al., 2005; Vaeyens, et al., 2005; Vincent & Glamser, 2006; Ashworth & Heyndels, 2007; Jimenez & Pain, 2008; Butler & Butler, 2015; Mikulič et al., 2015; Sæther et al., 2016; Skorski et al., 2016; Sierra-Diaz et al., 2017; Brustio et al., 2018; Figueiredo et al., 2019) having received the majority of academic attention in relation to the relative age



effect. A tendency exists within youth football to select players for youth teams who are born early in the selection period (for example, closer to January) (Augste & Lames 2011). Within association football (soccer), a relative age effect has been identified in a number of countries, for example; Germany (Cobley, Schorer, & Baker, 2008; Augste & Lames, 2011; Ostapczuk & Musch, 2013), Spain (Jimenez & Pain, 2008; Gutierrez Diaz Del Campo et al., 2010; Gil et al., 2013), France (Delorme, Boiché, & Raspaud, 2010a), America (Glamser & Vincent, 2004; Jones et al., 2019), at club level (Helsen et al., 2005; Figueiredo et al., 2019), international level (Glamser & Vincent, 2004; Helsen et al., 2005), and professional level (Ostapczuk & Musch, 2013; Fumarco & Rossi, 2018; Yagüe et al., 2018) resulting in the potential for talented players to be overlooked (Gutierrez Diaz Del Campo et al., 2010). The percentages of elite youth footballers born in the first half of the year have been reported as between 55-60% (Verhulst, 1992; Musch & Hay, 1999; Hirose, 2009), 60-70% (Helsen et al., 1998; Gil et al., 2013) and 70-80% (Gil et al., 2007; Carling et al., 2009). Patel and colleagues (2019) found that within a Category one English football academy, Quarter one born players were six times more likely to be represented than Quarter four born players, with Lovell and colleagues (2015) finding that almost 50% of all under 9 to under 18 youth players in professional English academy clubs were born in the first quartile.

Players advanced in biological maturity generally perform better than those that are less advanced (Beunen et al., 1988; Malina, Bouchard, & Bar-Or, 2004), which can lead to a systematic exclusion of later maturing boys within team sports (Philippaerts, et al., 2006; Ostojic et al., 2014). The advanced physical (Tanner & Whitehouse, 1976; Armstrong & Welsman, 1997; Naughton et al., 2000; Malina et al., 2004; Delorme & Raspaud, 2009; Gil et al., 2013; Gastin & Bennet, 2014), cognitive (Bisanz, Morrison,

& Dunn, 1995; Jimenez & Pain, 2008) and social (Thompson, Barnsley, & Battle, 2004; Dhuey & Lipscomb, 2008) development of these older players can lead to increased propensity for this relatively older population to be chosen for representative squads and teams. Using these factors as markers for potential future performance can result in a biased view of potential and can facilitate recruitment into advanced teams or structures for earlier maturing individuals (Delorme, et al., 2010b). A focus on short term success over longer term development can lead to a selection bias towards those players born earlier in the year, thus creating unfair advantages within a development system, as these advantages are perpetuated throughout the key developmental stages of a youth athlete (i.e., through access to better coaching facilities, higher competition and exposure to scouts). Doyle and colleagues (2013) found that defenders and goalkeepers were the positions most likely to secure trials to British clubs from Ireland. These are traditionally positions which were predicated on advanced physical and anthropometric maturity.

### **2.3.2. RAE Explanatory Factors**

Several factors have been suggested to explain the presence of RAE; maturation, environmental factors, birth patterns within socioeconomic classes and season of birth on personality traits (Teolda da Costa et al., 2010). The most widely used hypothesis has been maturational differences between players.

#### **2.3.2.1. Physical Advantages**

Within a one-year age bracket in youth football, there will be a match of chronological ages but not necessarily biological ages. In adolescence, chronological age and

biological age rarely progress concurrently to the same degree (Vaeyens et al., 2008). The variance between biological age for the given chronological age group is likely to be greater than the 12 month age band (Helsen et al., 2005). Hirose (2009) identified significant differences between chronological and skeletal age in u12 to u15 age band categories in elite youth footballers. Earlier maturation can affect the development of several anthropometric and physiological variables (Armstrong & Welsman, 1997; Naughton et al., 2000; Malina et al., 2004; Gil et al., 2013; Gastin & Bennett, 2014).

#### **2.3.2.2. Peak Height Velocity**

Malina et al., (2004) identified an estimated age at peak height velocity for a European sample of adolescent males at between 13.8 and 14.2 years. In their longitudinal study of elite, sub-elite and non-elite soccer players, Philippaerts et al., (2006) found an average age of peak height velocity to be 13.8 (+/- 0.8 years). Buchheit and Mendez-Villanueva's (2013) study of elite youth footballers found an average age of peak height velocity of 14.3 years. In terms of actual growth, peak height velocity is within the range of 8.2 to 10.3 centimetres per year (Malina et al., 2004; Philippaerts et al., 2006), thus varying significantly across a one chronological year age-band of youth sport participants.

#### **2.3.2.3. Maturation and Physical Performance**

The hypothalamic-pituitary-gonal axis induces and progressively secretes the testicular hormones which are responsible for morphological and biological changes during puberty (Grumbach & Styne, 1998). Maximal strength and power growth are attained immediately following peak height velocity (Breunen & Malina, 1988; Naughton et al., 2000) or along with peak height velocity (Philippaerts et al., 2006) due to muscle mass growth. Changes in limb length can also affect power output (Virus et al., 1999).

Throughout the adolescent years, there is a significant increase in lean body mass which enables the more developmentally advanced athlete to recruit more muscle mass during exercise providing an enhanced capacity for performance (Clarkson & Going, 1996). Muscle mass development is non-linear in males, with an average 0.6% increase in muscle mass per year from 0 to 13.5, with a rate of approximately 30% per year for the next two years (Malina, 1991). Trunk strength also reaches maximal velocity either with PHV (Philippaerts et al., 2006) or directly after the growth spurt (Yague & De La Fuente, 1998) and has been identified as a discriminating characteristic amongst elite u15 and u16 players (Vaeyens et al., 2006). Maturational advantages were shown for handgrip strength and explosive leg strength amongst elite youth footballers (Vandendriessche et al., 2012; Lloyd et al., 2014). Pubescent males who develop earlier than their counterparts are advantaged by this higher percentage of lean muscle mass (Naughton et al., 2000; Hirose, 2009) being most evident in athletic pursuits that require speed, power and strength (Armstrong & Welsman, 1997). These characteristics have been identified as being important within football (Reilly et al., 2000; Mohr et al., 2005).

A relative age effect was observed in the cardiorespiratory scores of 9-10 and 11-12-year olds which was maintained after controlling for somatic maturation (Roberts et al., 2012). Aerobic capacity reaches maximal growth capacity following peak height velocity (Breunen & Malina, 1988) with aerobic 'trainability' reaching exponential levels following puberty (Kobayashi et al., 1978; Rowland, 1997). Within the age band of u15, aerobic capacity is the most pervasive discriminating characteristic between elite and non-elite youth soccer players (Vaeyens et al., 2006). Anaerobic potential (enhanced rates of ATP release) and the ability to cope with high-intensity energy demands has also been linked to adolescent development (Berg & Keul, 1988).

Philippaerts et al., (2006) identified a spurt of anaerobic capacity at PHV. Agility and 10m, 20m and 30m test times were positively related to maturation (Vandendriessche et al., 2012; Standing & Maulder, 2017). A decline in sprint speed has been noted prior to peak height velocity due to a disruption of motor coordination (Beunen et al., 1988; Philippaerts et al., 2006) which would also adversely affect late developers in relation to selection. This ‘adolescent awkwardness’ wasn’t present in Buchheit and Mendez-Villanueva’s (2013) study on pre and post PHV youth soccer players, suggesting that regular and intense training can stabilise motor functions. Increased levels of speed may also be related to superior stride frequency and efficiency amongst the more mature males (Waters et al., 1983). Sprint time is a discriminating factor between players of different competitive levels (Gonaus & Muller, 2012) and especially discriminating amongst the younger cohort (under 13, under 14) (Vaeyens et al., 2006).

#### **2.3.2.4. Anthropometric Advantages**

Anthropometric differences can also be present across youth footballers. In a sample of under 16 and under 17 Belgian soccer players, the early maturing sample possessed higher morphological measures than their later maturing peers (Vandendriessche et al., 2012). Relative age can be weakly correlated with maturational status in many youth athletes (Whiteley, Johnson & Farooq, 2017), however Hirose (2009) found that quarter one elite youth footballers were significantly taller than quarter four players in Japan at under 14 level. Within French basketball, Delorme and Raspaud (2009) have shown that the players born at the start of the competitive year are on average significantly taller than their later-born teammates. Longer leg length and greater height within the sample born early in the year were found by Gil et al., (2013) in their study of youth footballers in Spain. Height and weight advantages were found within

a relatively older sporting sample at the Winter Youth Olympic Games (Raschner et al., 2012). Anthropometric advantages (i.e., height) at youth level have also been associated with higher adult wage premiums (Persico et al., 2004). Half of this wage difference was attributed to participation in sports teams, due to the increased physical size they are more likely to be identified as leaders or the ‘best’ in the group (Dhuey & Lipscomb, 2008).

#### **2.3.2.5. Cognitive Advantages**

Cognitive skills related to game intelligence and tactical awareness are becoming more relevant in the football talent identification process (Sarmiento et al., 2018). Only a limited amount of studies have been conducted on pubertal maturation on cognitive processes (Blakemore et al., 2010). Jiménez and Pain (2008, p.955) state that “in youths, a year’s difference can lead to a significant variation in cognitive skills (reflected in-game analysis, perception, tactical ability or strategy).” A difference in cognitive processes was not conclusively supported by Teolda da Costa et al., (2010) who found only one statistical difference out of four possibilities (high defensive tactical performance index) when related to birth date in favour of those born in the first half of the year. Players born in all quarters had similar tactical performance indexes and movement patterns (Teolda da Costa et al., 2010). The results were notably similar concerning offensive tactical aspects of performance.

Relatively younger athletes have been described as potentially being more likely to convert to senior success due to an ‘underdog hypothesis’ (Gibbs, Jarvis & Dufer, 2012) or ‘reversal of advantage’ (McCarthy & Collins, 2014) caused by a necessity to develop and/or possess higher levels of technical, tactical or psychological skills.

Further research is needed to analyse this relationship (Patel et al., 2019), with Cummings et al., (2018) not finding an association between self-regulation and relative age, yet the authors suggest that other factors (e.g. resilience, decision-making, motivation, technical and/or tactical ability) could be cultivated in relatively older players. McCarthy, Collins and Court, (2016) also suggest that psychological factors (such as adversity related experiences and high levels of challenge during development) are potential mechanisms for the development and/or deployment of a range of advantageous psychological characteristics by relatively younger players within a cohort.

#### **2.3.2.6. Social and Maturation Advantages**

In educational settings, children born earlier in the year are often perceived as being more mature than their younger counterparts, thus get chosen more often to serve in leadership roles or positions of authority (for example in an education setting as hall monitors) (Dhuey & Lipscomb, 2008). In a study of Swedish children, Fredriksson and Ockert (2005) found that children born just after the cut-off date performed better than those born later in the year in school. Bedard and Dhuey (2006) reported similar findings with significantly higher test scores in math and science for relatively older students. McPhilips and Jordan-Black (2009) found evidence of the birth of month relationship showing increased performance in literacy tests for students born later in the cut-off age categories. Self-esteem development has also been shown to be affected by the concept of relative age, following identifiable differences in ability due to maturation not necessarily by ability (Thompson et al., 2004).

### **2.3.2.7. Seasonal Variations**

Season of birth variations concerning health (such as risk factors for developing obesity, the occurrence of various cognitive disorders) (Torrey et al., 1997; Philips & Young, 2000) have been discussed as potential confounding factors to explain the relative age effect (Musch & Grondin, 2001). As a relative age effect has been demonstrated across various cut off dates, and indeed within different hemispheres that share the same cut-off date this suggests that relative age and not seasonal variations are responsible for the differences (Wattie et al., 2008).

### **2.3.3. Social Agent Model of RAE**

Observing the proliferation of descriptive RAE studies, Hancock, Adler and Côté (2013) proposed a theoretical model to explain RAE's in sport. This approach suggests that RAE mechanisms (such as size, maturity and skill) are ultimately interpreted and propagated by social agents (parents, coaches and athletes) through Matthew, Pygmalion and Galatea effects respectively. Applying Merton's (1968) 'Matthew effect', which has been explained by Rigney (2010) as initial advantages leading to further advantages; the social agent being explained by the 'Matthew effect' is parents. The degree to which initial enrolment bias exhibited by parents towards subjective interpretations of their child's size, strength and ability result in parents being "accountable for the genesis of RAE's" (Hancock et al., 2013, p.3).

Two forms of self-fulfilling prophecies (Pygmalion and Galatea) have been used to describe the influence of coaches and the athletes in RAE. The Pygmalion effect (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968) refers to the higher expectation placed on an individual, then the greater the result that they will ultimately attain. Hancock, Ste-Marie and



Young (2013) apply it to a sporting context, suggesting that the coach forms preferential expectations of players falsely based on physical maturity; these expectations are then transferred into differential treatment. This treatment can include more reinforcement, praise and instruction (Solomon et al., 1998). Concerning equity of playing time between a relatively older and younger sample, Baker and colleagues (2010) found no difference in the treatment of both groups. As another form of self-fulfilling prophecy, the Galatea effect is delineated by the Pygmalion form where its effects apply to the actor upon whom expectations are placed (Merton, 1957). The Galatea effect could amplify the presence of RAE by an athlete who had potentially false beliefs of superior ability due to enhanced physical maturity which could encourage facilitative behaviours, for example, more diligent training and attendance (Hancock et al., 2013).

#### **2.3.4. Place of Birth Effect**

The spatial football landscape is a crucial consideration for the equity of any Football Association and its constituent members, as organisational processes can shape these landscapes and influence player development (i.e., through the location of ‘centres of excellence’ in certain areas). Theories of development emphasise the importance of the synergistic relationship between environmental and individual characteristics for elite development (cf. Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Baker & Horton, 2004; Weissensteiner, Abernathy & Farrow, 2009). A number of researchers have examined the spatial patterns of talent production (Bowen & Fludd, 1982; Curtis & Birch, 1987; Abernathy & Farrow, 2005; Côté et al., 2006; MacDonald et al., 2009; Bruner et al., 2011; Woolcock & Burke, 2013; Hancock et al., 2017; Campbell et al., 2019) which appears

to be an essential environmental characteristic for elite performance (Côté et al., 2006). The spatial dimensions of sport include; the distribution of players and clubs, availability of facilities, league competitions, community affiliations and the effects of socio-spatial processes (McGowin, 2010; Rossing, et al., 2016). These differing developmental contexts and environmental and institutional processes can shape sporting landscapes and player production (Baker et al., 2009; Woolcock & Burke, 2013). MacDonald and colleagues (2009) suggest that “the birthplace effect is powerful and systematic and plays a significant role in sport expertise” (p. 236). In an analysis of date of birth and birthplace (using the Human Development Index - HDI), Teoldo da Costa, Cardoso and Garganta (2013) identified that player birth date, population size and HDI values of the cities of birth were significant factors in their football development due to relatively positive socioeconomic and psychosocial factors.

A place of birth effect has been noted in the US, UK, Germany, Finland, Israel and Jamaica (cf. Baker et al., 2009; Bruner et al., 2011; Turnnidge et al., 2014; Lidor et al., 2014; Campbell et al., 2019), yet the variation in optimal population size for sports expertise attainment suggests that results are buffered by geographic, sport specific and sociocultural factors (Hancock et al., 2017). Interestingly, variations have been identified between the numbers which define a smaller setting within a birth-place analysis, from less than 1,000 (Curtis & Birch, 1987) to 500,000 (Côté et al., 2006; MacDonald et al., 2009). In their study of college footballers in the South of America, Bowen and Fludd (1982) found that half of the total participants were from towns of less than 30,000, with 15% coming from moderate-sized towns (30,000-100,000), and 37% from larger communities (greater than 300,000). Although noting that exceptions do occur, Baker and colleagues (2009) found that elite Olympic athletes were less

likely to come from very small or excessively large communities. An over-representation of players from smaller and medium-sized communities was found in Canadian professional and Olympic hockey players, while players from large cities and rural areas were underrepresented (Curtis & Birch, 1987). MacDonald and colleagues (2009) found an over-representation of athletes from cities with less than 500,000 population and an under-representation of athletes from cities with a population of over 500,000. This was consistent with Côté et al., (2006), who noted a higher probability of becoming an elite athlete in cities with a population of fewer than 250,000. Campbell et al., (2019) found that schools in regions with 5,000 to 29,999 inhabitants were 1.8–1.9 times more likely to produce athletes that would progress to the senior levels of Jamaican sprinting compared to athletes from larger cities. In addition to population size, the density of the location is another important variable in analysing talent production, with Hancock et al., (2017) noting that high-density areas resulted in a lower chance of attaining expert status within male volleyball players in Portugal. Rossing et al., (2016) found that the optimal development community size for an elite footballer was of medium size (30,000-50,000) but ideally with a high population density, whereas elite handball players came from less densely populated communities. The athletic infrastructure and social structure in communities influence the probability of becoming an elite athlete (Rossing et al., 2016; Hancock et al., 2017).

### **2.3.5. Place of birth explanatory factors**

The opportunities afforded to the development of expertise and playing standards between smaller and larger cities differ (MacDonald et al., 2009; Weissensteiner et al.,

2009) with sporting and social infrastructure related to population size influencing talent development (Hancock et al., 2017). Smaller cities (less than 500,000 inhabitants) and towns have been reported to provide unique advantages in terms of talent development environments, expertise development and opportunities (MacDonald et al., 2009). These opportunities could include access to elite clubs which have been shown to influence the probability of becoming an elite footballer (Rossing et al., 2018). Specifically, smaller cities and towns tend to provide more opportunities for play (as street and traffic danger is reduced), superior social networks and development of social and motor skills (Côté, 1999; Evans, 2006; Baker et al., 2009; MacDonald et al., 2009). In smaller communities' children were more likely to walk or cycle to school, whereas children in larger communities (especially those living in apartments) are significantly more likely to be sedentary (Mitas et al., 2009). Psychosocially, smaller towns, may allow for greater integrative approaches to sport participation that engage family units, foster coach-athlete relationships and promote positive social norms (MacDonald et al., 2009). Socially cohesive neighbourhoods can ease parental concerns about time spent outside the home and in the surrounding areas (Kneeshaw-Price et al., 2013). Further possible explanations for the place of birth effect have been described by Curtis and Birch (1987), for example the idea that sport as a potential profession offers an avenue for social mobility, of which there may be fewer opportunities in lesser populated areas, compared to more densely populated areas where there may be more opportunities. Originating in a small town may also promote physical toughness, which may be valued in a team sport (Curtis & Birch, 1987).

Curtis and Birch (1987) recommended further exploration of the accessibility of resources in relation to population size (i.e., a community that is large enough to have

facilities but not so large that demand outweighs participation opportunities). Côté and colleagues (2006) advanced the theory of differing psycho-social and physical environmental conditions experienced by athletes from large urban centres and smaller rural locations, suggesting that the more informal and familiar environment is more conducive to success and to lower levels of dropout (Imtiaz, Hancock, Vierimaa, & Côté, 2014). Limited sporting opportunities can create a stronger cultural norm for dominant sports in smaller communities (Rossing et al., 2016). There may also be per head of capita less elite teams in larger areas than smaller cities resulting in more opportunities to make these squads and thus becoming visible to scouts (Curtis & Birch, 1987).

### **2.3.6. Interaction between Place and Date of Birth**

There exists a complex interrelationship between relative age effect and the place of birth research. Grondin, Deshaies and Nault (1984) showed that the level of RAE was stronger in cities where more players were available to form teams and compete for those places. The larger the potential pool of players, the more significant the effect of inequitable distribution with an over-representation of those players born earlier in the year (Musch & Grondin, 2001). Turnnidge, Côté and Hancock (2014) and Bruner et al., (2011) found no relationship between place of birth and relative age effect. Progressing from macro to microenvironments, in their study of youth soccer in Spain, Jimenez and Pain (2008) found a stronger RAE in clubs regarded as being successful, from big cities or with a reputation for their youth teams. Differences in the availability of players due to geographical issues, population levels and competition between clubs can influence the difference between birth date distribution across clubs (Jimenez &

Pain, 2008) with those clubs or leagues having lesser competition for places which can show a reduced RAE. A sport and culture specific examination should be considered, along with an analysis of the unique development system of the given country when analysing RAE and the birthplace effect (Lidor et al., 2014).

### **2.3.7. Player Migration**

Between 2009 and 2018 there has been a significant trend in the European footballing labour market towards less stability and greater international mobility (Poli et al., 2019). Research on player migration has traditionally focused on global and international patterns (cf. Littlewood, Mullen, & Richardson, 2011; Esson, 2015; Kirk & Weaver, 2018; Nolasco, 2018), including theories such as World System and Resource Dependency focusing on structural historical relationships between footballing countries of varying stature, with one holding a pattern of domination over the other (Bale, 2004; Darby, 2011). Relationships between footballing associations have been associated with “inequality, disparity and conflict” (Darby, 2000, p.37). Immanuel Wallerstein’s World System theory can be used as a framework within which to analyse international football, nation development and interactions (Darby, 2000; Magee & Sugden, 2002). Wallerstein (1974, 1979) sees a world system as a world economy, integrated through a market rather than a political centre, in which two or more regions are interdependent with respect to necessities, and two or more centres compete for dominance.

Sorinel (2010) outlines how Wallerstein draws from the resource dependency theory, which focuses on understanding the ‘periphery’ by looking at ‘core-periphery’ relations. Wallerstein proposes four different categorisations of world regions, core,

semi-periphery, periphery and external, with peripheral regions engaged in a dependency relationship with core countries. These core countries can exploit and impoverish the periphery by organising trade relations to support their interests. One of the essential structures of the world systems theory is a power hierarchy between core and periphery; powerful and wealthy core countries exploit and dominate weak and poor periphery societies (Sorinel, 2010) with the advancement of the core being at the expense of the periphery (Bergesen, 2015). Often with European clubs' recruitment of African football talent mirroring "the neo-colonial trends in which raw materials are traded without genuine investment in infrastructure and training" (Lanfranchi & Taylor, 2001, p.168). Periphery countries can be structurally constrained which can reproduce their subordinate status, a resultant deskilling of the periphery leagues has been evidenced in African football (Darby, 2000). This 'unequal exchange' leads to a process of capital accumulation and reinforces the power dynamic between the regions. Semi-periphery states act as a buffer zone between the core and periphery zones; it is dualistic as it can find itself exploited by the core yet in tandem is often an exploiter of the peripheries themselves. The semi-periphery can serve as a linkage between the core and periphery, avoiding polarisation between the two (Wallerstein, 1979). European football continues to be at the centre of professional football development with an internal structure of powerful leagues, which includes England, Spain and Germany (Duke, 1994; Magee & Sugden, 2002).

This approach to migration can be viewed as "yielding top heavy determinist accounts" which are not sensitive to individual journeys and agency or irregular migratory patterns (Engh & Agergaard, 2015; Esson, 2015, p. 48). Poli (2010) argues that the study of football migration based purely on financial inequities is limited. Advantages are also socially constructed according to the profiles of the players, who

are the epicentre of the development of their own transfer network intermediary relationships (i.e., with club officials, managers, scouts) with individual characteristics (i.e., biographies, linguistic skills) determining the formation of migratory channels (or transfer networks) (Bale, 1991; Poli, 2010; Agergaard & Ungruhe, 2016). It is not only economics that influences migration, but also history, geography, athletic development, politics and cultural similarity (Maguire & Pearton, 2000; Molnar & Maguire, 2007; Elliott, 2014). Carling and Schewel (2018) suggest that migration research should take into account a two-step approach to its analysis, the evaluation of migration as a potential action and then the realisation or non-realisation of such mobility.

Carling (2002) described migration as an aspiration/ability model, where migration first involves a wish to migrate, and secondly, the realisation of this wish (Figure 9). To build on the model by Carling (2002) which can be used “for analysing migration within most contexts” (p.8) in a football development context, aspiration is defined by a belief that migration is preferable to non-migration. The degree can vary and is generally characterised by a choice/coercion balance. Among those that aspire to migrate, some will have the capabilities, the ‘talent’ to do so. Those players who have aspirations but are not identified as having the requisite ability are *involuntary non-migrants*. *Voluntary non-migrants* differ as they stay due to a belief that non-migration is preferable to migration.



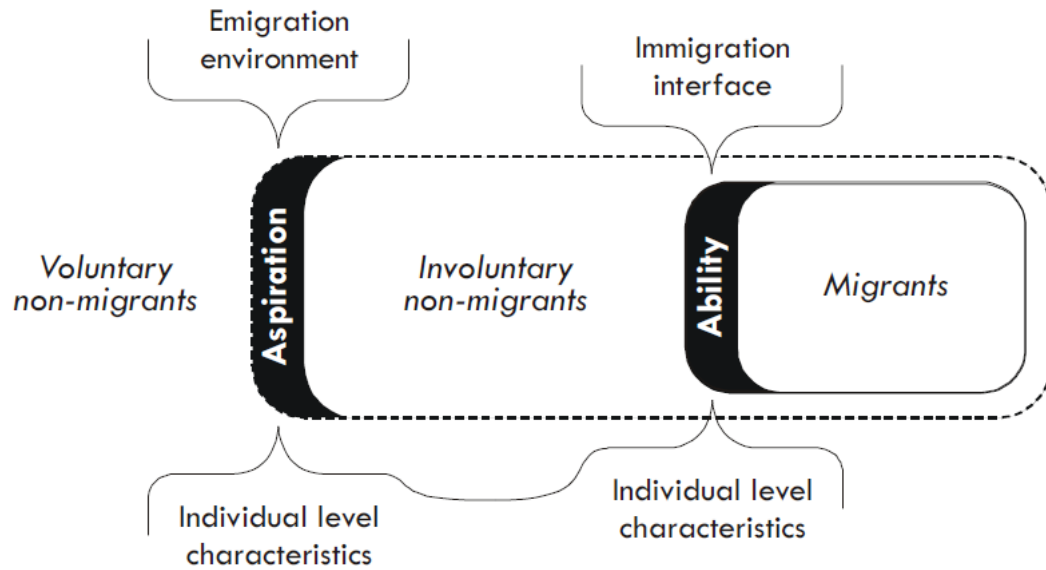


Figure 9 Carling (2002) *The aspiration/ability model*

### 2.3.7.1. 'Brawn Drain'

Resource dependency theory postulates that the key for organisational survival is the ability to acquire and maintain resources (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978) and that the concentration of resources will lead to the concentration of power in the organisational environment (Nienhüser, 2008). Labour is a critical resource in the football industry. McGovern (2000) suggested that less powerful clubs in donor leagues are trapped in a vicious cycle, losing players to more powerful clubs and associations which has been referred to as the 'brawn drain' (Bale, 1991). The outcome is that their product remains low, thus reducing their chances of developing a spectacle to entice fans, and cyclically losing out on finance which could lead to the betterment of the donor club/league. Youth players within these 'deskilled' leagues subsequently are exposed to fewer role-models to facilitate and enhance development (Henriksen et al., 2011; Balish & Côté, 2013). Applying these concepts to football, Elliott and Weedon (2010) explored whether indeed a 'feet drain' exists or whether a 'feet exchange' occurs whereby from

mingling with often technically superior foreign players, the indigenous players benefitted from copying and emulating such technical abilities.

Teoldo de Costa et al., (2013) noted a mass migration of young footballing talent from areas of origin to avail of enhanced facilities and resources at crucial development stages, with increased social visibility and selection for the national team being the primary motivators for such migration during early training years. Geographical mobility has become an important part of career development (Vertovec, 2001). A behavioural model to explain internal migration (within country borders) was introduced to the social sciences by Lowry (1966), its central tenet being that individuals and families weigh the costs and benefits of their options and migrate when the benefits outweigh the migration costs. Individuals will migrate from areas where the return on their skill level is relatively low to markets where the return is relatively higher (Borjas, 1987), with internal migration becoming a form of human capital investment (Molloy, Smith, & Wozniak, 2011). This has received minimal attention within sport academia, with research on migration patterns of athletes focused on the transnational element of migration (cf. Darby, 2011; Elliot & Harris, 2011; Ryba & Stambulova, 2013) even though migration involves the movement of players both within and between nations and continents (Richardson et al., 2012).

### **2.3.8. Irish Football Migration History**

The organisation of the European market for footballers has undergone several changes since 1995 when the European Court of Justice delivered the ‘Bosman’ judgement, which legislated for freedom of movement for labour within the European Union (EU). This subsequently had a profound effect on the European transfer market.

FIFA regulations (2010) for the status and transfer of players set a lower age limit of sixteen for the movement of players to academies within the EU. Due to UEFA legislation on home-grown/ home-trained players, clubs have been encouraged to sign players from Europe at age sixteen to accumulate three years in their host academy (Richardson et al., 2005). These players, therefore, become eligible for home-grown status within their club irrespective of their nationality. From the 2008-09 season, UEFA legislation required clubs competing in European competitions (UEFA Champions League and Europa League) to include a minimum of eight home-grown players in the squad of twenty-five players. UEFA introduced this legislation in 2005 so that these player eligibility rules would protect minors and re-nationalise and re-localise clubs. Due to the above regulations, the patterns of home-based players involved at an international representative level change after the age of sixteen.

Irish migration to the UK can be traced back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, yet academic discourse on Irish diaspora sport historiographies is at a relatively early stage of investigation (Darby & Hassan, 2007). British football clubs have a long history of recruiting young Irish football players (Curran & Kelly, 2018) going back as far as the 1890s (Scally, 1998). Bourke (2002) found that 45% of migrating Irish footballers joined an English club between the ages of fifteen to sixteen. Sixty-eight per cent of the footballers on the 2013 under 17 Irish squad played their football outside of Ireland, while 85% of the footballers on the 2018 panel play their football outside of Ireland. At the under 19s European Championships held in Romania in 2011, the average number of players per squad (excluding Ireland) that were playing their football abroad from their country of representation was fifteen per cent. Seventeen out of the eighteen players on the Irish team (94%) for that tournament were based outside of Ireland (16 based in England, one in Scotland); demonstrating a

developmental migratory pattern between Ireland and the UK. Bourke (2003) found that 65% of the Irish youngsters that went to England were from Dublin and that the leading feeder clubs were all based in Dublin. In his examination of motivations for young Irish footballers to migration to England, Elliott (2014) identified perceived inadequacies in the Irish system, the ambition of the players to pursue and develop professional careers, geographical proximity, migrant networks and cultural proximity as the primary migration drivers. McGovern (2000) argued that the underdevelopment of Irish football is partly due to the recruitment patterns of English clubs and the status of Irish clubs as sellers of labour. In a study of ETP youth footballers; Doyle, Finnegan and McArdle (2013) identified that 20% of the players had been on trial with a British professional club in the previous 12 months, with players from the Dublin ETP securing more trials than those from other centres.

### **2.3.9. Player Movement within Irish Schoolboy Leagues**

It is claimed that the standards of coaching, playing and facilities are higher within Dublin than elsewhere in the country (O’Sullivan, 2015b). Examining the results of the SFAI national cups for 2012/13, Dublin based clubs won all age groups from under 12 up to under 16 (u12 Malahide Utd, u13 St. Francis, u14 St. Kevin's Boys, u15 Cherry Orchard, u16 Belvedere). From the years 2010-2019, the prestigious Kennedy Cup tournament (under 14) was won by Dublin based leagues on nine occasions (DDSL eight times, NDSL once) and once by the Kerry schoolboys league. Including the three Dublin leagues of Dublin District Schoolboy League, North Dublin Schoolboy League and Brenfer, Dublin leagues have won 29 out of the 37 Kennedy Cups since its inception in 1976, with the DDSL winning 27 of these (SFAI, 2013).

In February 2015, the under 16 Ireland squad contained thirteen players based in Dublin, three based in England and four based elsewhere in Ireland, of the thirteen based in Dublin, five were drawn from St. Kevin's Boys and four from Cherry Orchard. In late 2015, the under 16 home-based (i.e., Ireland based only) development squad contained thirteen Dublin based players in a squad of eighteen, this trend is not uncommon amongst schoolboy football, along with two from Cork, two from Waterford and one from Galway meaning that certain dense population locations were not represented.

A trend has been for larger DDSL clubs to form alliances with UK based clubs (e.g., St. Kevin's boys with West Bromwich Albion FC). The benefit for the Irish club being that the professional club would act as a source of trials and increased exposure for their elite youth players and the professional clubs holds coaching courses and training camps within the Irish club, which increase the attractiveness of these clubs to Irish youth footballers (Bourke, 2002). This lure of increased exposure can lead to a movement of players from outside the boundary of the DDSL into the league and in some cases of clubs relocating from their schoolboy league to the DDSL competition structures. One prominent scout revealed that he gave 70-80% of his focus to the six leading schoolboy clubs in Dublin because "if you want the best, you have to shop at the best place" (Maher, 2015, para 17). The exposure to scouts and perceived higher standard of football has fuelled the internal migration of young elite footballers to Dublin.

#### **2.3.9.1. Internal club movement**

Apart from individual player movement, some clubs from counties surrounding Dublin (e.g., Westmeath based team, Athlone FC) play in the DDSL instead of solely in their geographically closest league. There are allowances within the rule book of

the SFAI for clubs to enter a different schoolboy league than the league in their immediate geographical location, for example: “All clubs must play in the divisional league covering their area but a club may enter a team(s) in another divisional league with the permission of their own divisional league” (SFAI, 2012, p.13). This movement by clubs is due to the increased attractiveness of the DDSL, generated by the enhanced visibility of their players to scouts and perceptions of a higher standard of football available to challenge their teams.

## **2.4. Study Rationale**

No previous attempt has been made to identify social and environmental facets of talent development in Ireland, for example identifying a bias for selecting players born earlier in the competitive year, tracking the spatial dimensions of talent selection and internal migration in Irish football, or identifying areas where players are disproportionately produced. Understanding the link between the developmental environment of sport and expertise can provide insights into best practice of sport system design and organisation (MacDonald et al., 2009). These ‘*when*’ and ‘*where*’ contextual factors have a lasting effect on initial exposure to the sport, commitment to the sport and chances of attaining elite levels of performance (Côté et al., 2003). The notion of migration as a developmental transition has also been lacking in research (Richardson et al., 2012). This study aimed to examine the place and date of birth and the internal migratory channels of youth elite Irish footballers engaged on the Football Association of Ireland’s primary development pathway; the Emerging Talent Programme. Research Questions included:

- Is there a Relative Age Effect in existence within the ETP?
- Is there a relationship between success at underage levels and RAE?
- Does a birth-place effect exist within the ETP?
- What is the equity of provision for populations per ETP centre?
- What movement of players is occurring from the home club to stronger regions in the country?
- Is there a relationship between RAE and player movement?

## **2.5. Methodology**

### **2.5.1. Participants**

The sample consisted of (n=1936) fourteen-year-old, elite youth male football players who had been selected onto one of the 12 regional ETP centres (Figure 8) in the Republic of Ireland, by FAI regional staff. This was the entire sample of players that had been represented on the programme since the inception of the programme in 2006 up to 2012 (birth years of 1992 – 1998). Each player had represented one of 12 regional ETP centres (Figure 8).

### **2.5.2. Procedure**

Upon request from the lead author via a participant letter and information sheet (Appendix B), the FAI's national coordinator of the ETP voluntarily provided the data set from the ETP registration data. The coordinator signed the consent form indicating that the data would be anonymised, and that no player information would be identifiable (Appendix C). The participant data was generated by each regional centre, who are required to submit player details to the FAI ETP coordinator following each new cohorts (annual) entry onto the programme in September. The data-set included the date of birth, home county address and club of each player. The ETP data set was emailed to the lead researcher and was in Microsoft Excel worksheet format. This information was transferred into SPSS version 21.0 to allow for further analysis. The lead researcher coded the given information to relate to the variables outlined below. Date of birth, month of birth and quarter of birth were obtained and coded. Each schoolboy league, club and county of origin were given a unique number and coded



to allow for further statistical computation. The data was cross-checked and referenced between the Excel and SPSS formats to check for consistency upon transfer.

### **2.5.3. Statistical Analysis**

In assessing the relative age effect, due to the FAI's administrative cut-off dates, January was selected as the first month of the year and December as the last. Therefore, quarter one relates to the 1<sup>st</sup> January – 31<sup>st</sup> March, quarter two relates to 1<sup>st</sup> April – 30<sup>th</sup> June, quarter three relates to 1<sup>st</sup> July – 30<sup>th</sup> September, with quarter four referring to 1<sup>st</sup> October – 31<sup>st</sup> December. For the date of birth analysis, Delorme et al., (2010b) recommended that researchers use birth dates statistics by month and sex of the corresponding population of licenced players to calculate the actual distribution of birth-dates. The FAI does not currently record the number of youth football players in Ireland; therefore the national birth rates were used to access distribution. As there is some evidence to suggest variability in the birth rate across the seasons in many countries (James, 1990) the expected birth-date distribution statistics were collected and calculated based on Central Statistics Office figures using the corresponding months of births for males within the sample years (1992-1998). It is essential to utilise the frequencies of the parent population rather than a uniform distribution to avoid bias (Delorme & Champely, 2015). The percentages of birth for this sample from the national population were: quarter one: 24.8%, quarter two: 25.4%, quarter three: 25.3%, quarter four: 24.5% (CSO, 2011).

County address was used a proxy for the place of development for the athlete as the FAI collected this at age fourteen. For this study, it is assumed that this is the best representation of the most likely 'place' of youth development for each player.

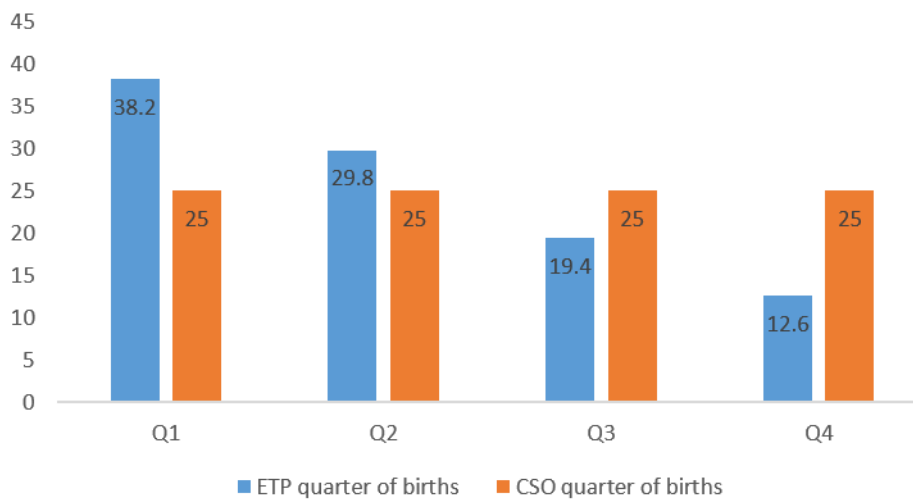
Relative county and province population statistics and corresponding dates of birth were sourced from the Central Statistics Office. The twenty-six counties of the Republic of Ireland are used as the distinguishing geographic locations, to allow for further coherent analysis of the data; these twenty-six counties are then combined into the four provinces of Ireland (Leinster, Ulster, Munster and Connacht). Within these four provinces, there are 32 schoolboy leagues.

Analyses were performed using SPSS 21.0 at the  $p \leq .05$  level of significance. Descriptive statistics were generated to identify certain patterns of ETP representation. Chi-square goodness of fit tests were conducted to identify potential differences between expected dates of birth versus actual dates of birth in quarter of birth and month of birth (Jimenez & Pain, 2008; Gutierrez Diaz Del Campo et al., 2010; Raschner et al., 2012; Gil et al., 2013). Effect size ( $w$ ) was calculated by taking the square root of the chi-square divided by the number of participants. Cohen (1992) proposed that results of .1, .3 and .5 represent a small, moderate and large effect sizes, respectively. Odds ratios were conducted to illustrate the variance between over and underrepresented counties (Côté et al., 2006). The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test ( $p \leq 0.05$ ) and Levene test ( $p \leq 0.05$ ) were used to test for normality. Normal distribution was rejected, which suggested the use of nonparametric statistics. Data is presented using bar-graphs and a geospatial analysis of talent production. Côté et al., (2006) calculated odds ratios for categories of cities ordered by population size. There appears to be no consistent relationship between the population of a county and participation in the ETP; therefore, this is not an appropriate categorisation for this study. The odds ratios for comparison of participation rates were calculated (cf. Côté et al., 2006), but within this study, it was conducted between the most and least represented counties (due to the high number of counties involved).

## 2.6. Results

### 2.6.1. Relative Age Effect

A relative age effect is evident, with an unequal distribution of ETP player birthdates across the quarters emerging. Sixty-eight per cent of the entire ETP sample was born in the first half of the year, with ‘quarter of birth’ representation reducing from a peak in quarter one (38.2%) down to 12.6% in quarter four. Figure 10 presents the distributions of the quarter of birth for the ETP players compared to the Central Statistics Office population data for the same sample. A chi-square goodness of fit test was conducted to assess expected versus observed quarter of births. The result showed that admission to the Emerging Talent Programme is not independent of quarter of birth ( $p < 0.05$ ,  $\chi^2 = 256.817$ ,  $w = .388$ ).



*Figure 10 ETP Quarter of Births Compared to CSO Statistics*

Further analysis of the breakdown of quarter of birth by individual months (Figure 11) using chi-squared goodness of fit to assess the variance, found a stronger effect than analysing the dates of births in quarter format. ( $p < 0.05$ ,  $\chi^2 = 295.465$ ,  $w = .416$ ).

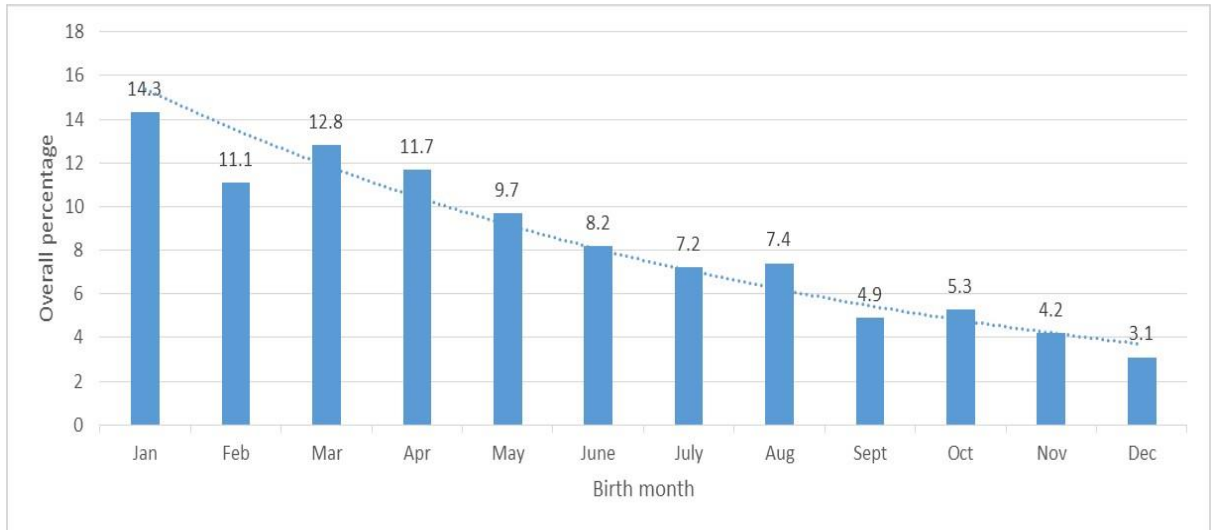


Figure 11 Birth-months of Players on the ETP

On analysing the percentages of birth, per quarter and by year of birth (1992-1998), quarter one consistently had the highest percentage of representation. Results showed that quarter one birth rate peaked for the 1996 category, at a rate of 44.9% (Figure 12).

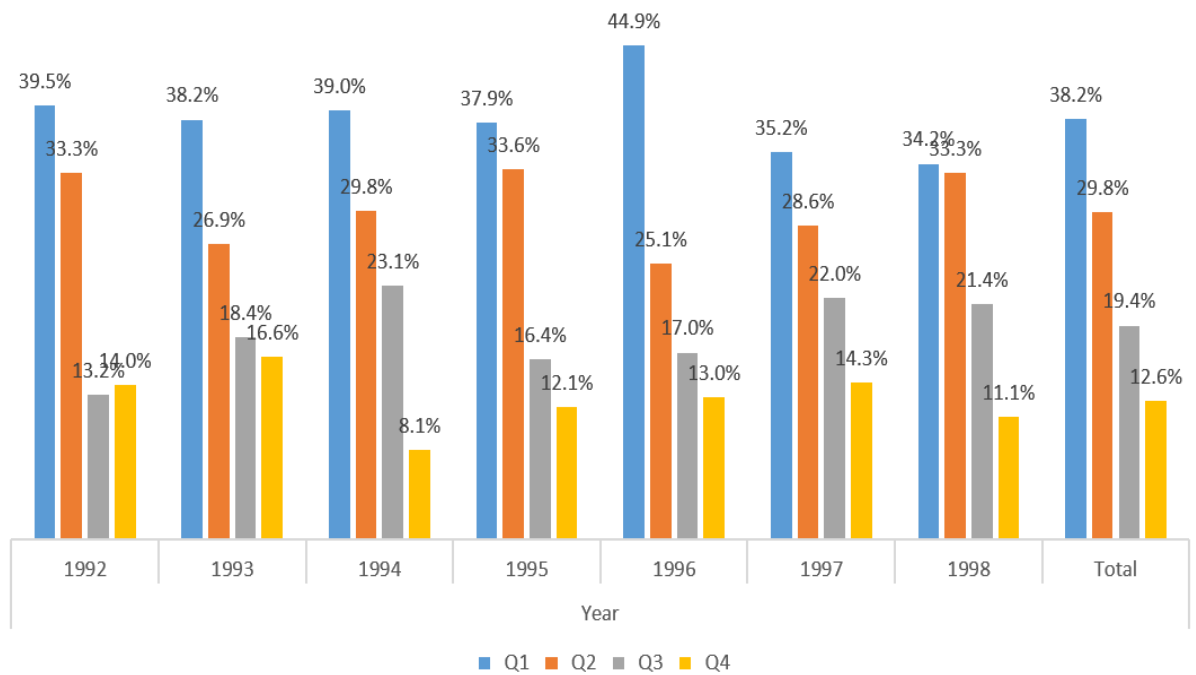


Figure 12 RAE by each of the study (births of 1992-1998)

RAE of each of the four provinces were calculated (Table 1). Each province displayed a statistically significant RAE ( $p < 0.01$ ) with moderate to large effect sizes.

Province	Q1 (%)	Q2 (%)	Q3 (%)	Q4 (%)	$\chi^2$	P value	w	w classification
<i>Leinster</i>	288 (39.5%)	225 (30.9%)	137 (18.8)	79 (10.8%)	141.118	0**	0.439	Mod/large
<i>Munster</i>	187 (38.6)	129 (26.7)	96 (19.8)	72 (14.9)	61.537	0**	0.356	Moderate
<i>Connaght</i>	111 (35.8)	100 (32.3)	60 (12.6)	39 (12.6)	44.09	0**	0.377	Moderate
<i>Ulster</i>	64 (35.6)	53 (29.4)	38 (21.1)	25 (13.9)	19.422	0**	0.328	Moderate
					**denotes $p = < 0.01$			

*Table 1 RAE across the 4 provinces of Rep. of Ireland*

Each of the 32 leagues were then analysed further, of particular note is the largest schoolboy league in the country, the Dublin District schoolboy league (DDSL), which demonstrates a stronger effect size than the overall sample and of any other league ( $p < 0.00$ ,  $\chi^2 = 90.82$ ,  $w = 0.512$ ) (see Table 2). Fourteen out of the 32 leagues were deemed to have a RAE present (if effect size between the county and relative age was statistically significant at the  $p \leq 0.05$  level and was not an association likely to be driven by sample size ( $w \geq 0.3$ )). Nine of those fourteen schoolboy leagues house an ETP centre, whereas the remaining three centres are in counties which didn't display a significant RAE.

School boy league	Total (%)	Q1 (%)	Q2 (%)	Q3 (%)	Q4 (%)	$\chi^2$	P value	w	w classification
Athlone	37 (2.17)	16 (43.2)	8 (21.6)	6 (16.2)	7 (18.9)	6.784	0.079	0.428	Mod/large
Carlow	23 (1.35)	9 (39.1)	7 (30.4)	5 (21.7)	2 (8.7)	4.652	0.199	0.45	Mod/large
Cavan/Monaghan	30 (1.76)	9 (30)	8 (26.7)	10 (33.3)	3 (10)	3.867	0.276	0.359	Moderate
Clare	36 (2.11)	17 (47.2)	8 (22.2)	6 (16.7)	5 (13.9)	10	0.019*	0.527	Large
Cork	89 (5.22)	33 (37.1)	27 (30.3)	16 (18)	13 (14.6)	11.809	0.008*	0.364	Moderate
DDSL	347 (20.36)	152 (43.8)	100 (28.8)	61 (17.6)	34 (9.8)	90.821	0**	0.512	Large
Donegal	74 (4.34)	28 (37.8)	21 (28.4)	13 (17.6)	12 (16.2)	9.135	0.028*	0.351	Moderate
Drogheda	11 (0.65)	3 (27.3)	6 (54.5)	1 (9.1)	1 (9.1)	6.091	0.107	0.744	Large
Dundalk	42 (2.45)	18 (42.9)	7 (16.7)	8 (19)	9 (21.4)	7.333	0.062	0.418	Mod/large
Galway	124 (7.28)	44 (35.5)	42 (33.9)	25 (20.2)	13 (10.5)	20.968	0**	0.411	Mod/large
Inishowen	55 (3.23)	19 (34.5)	17 (30.9)	13 (23.6)	6 (10.9)	7.182	0.066	0.361	Moderate
Kerry	76 (4.46)	35 (46.1)	13 (17.1)	14 (18.4)	14 (18.4)	18	0**	0.487	Mod/large
Kildare	20 (1.17)	4 (20)	7 (35)	6 (30)	3 (15)	2	0.572	0.316	Moderate
Kilkenny	37 (2.17)	14 (37.8)	14 (37.8)	8 (21.6)	1 (2.7)	12.405	0.006**	0.579	Large
Limerick county	24 (1.41)	8 (33.3)	9 (37.5)	2 (8.3)	5 (20.8)	5	0.172	0.456	Mod/large
Limerick desmond	36 (2.11)	17 (47.2)	6 (16.7)	9 (25)	4 (11.1)	10.889	0.012*	0.55	Large
Limerick district	54 (3.17)	16 (29.6)	16 (29.6)	11 (20.4)	11 (20.4)	1.852	0.604	0.185	Small
Longford	26 (1.53)	8 (30.8)	6 (23.1)	6 (23.1)	6 (23.1)	0.462	0.927	0.133	Small
Mayo	81 (4.75)	25 (30.9)	26 (32.1)	14 (17.3)	16 (19.8)	5.568	0.135	0.262	Small/mod
Midlands	42 (2.47)	18 (42.9)	16 (38.1)	5 (11.9)	3 (7.1)	16.476	0.001**	0.626	Large
NDSL	44 (2.58)	20 (45.5)	13 (29.5)	8 (18.2)	3 (6.8)	14.364	0.002**	0.571	Large
NEC	35 (2.05)	14 (40)	6 (17.1)	8 (22.9)	7 (20)	4.429	0.219	0.356	Moderate
North Tipperary	26 (1.53)	9 (34.6)	8 (30.8)	6 (23.1)	3 (11.5)	3.231	0.357	0.353	Moderate
Roscommon	33 (1.94)	13 (39.4)	11 (33.3)	6 (18.2)	3 (9.1)	7.606	0.055	0.48	Mod/large
SDFL	6 (0.35)	2 (33.3)	1 (16.7)	1 (16.7)	2 (33.3)	0.667	0.881	0.333	Moderate
Sligo/Leitrim	51 (2.99)	18 (35.3)	17 (33.3)	12 (23.5)	4 (7.8)	9.627	0.022*	0.434	Mod/large
South Tipperary	39 (2.29)	18 (46.2)	10 (25.6)	10 (25.6)	1 (2.6)	14.846	0.002**	0.617	Large
Waterford	71 (4.17)	23 (32.4)	23 (32.4)	16 (22.5)	9 (12.7)	7.592	0.055	0.327	Moderate
West Cork	12 (0.70)	3 (25)	4 (33.3)	3 (25)	2 (16.7)	0.667	0.881	0.236	Small/mod
Wexford	58 (3.40)	20 (34.5)	23 (39.7)	11 (19)	4 (6.9)	15.517	0.001**	0.517	Large
Wicklow	56 (3.29)	16 (28.6)	22 (39.3)	11 (19.6)	7 (12.5)	9	0.029*	0.4	Mod/large
WVEC	9 (0.53)	2 (22.2)	4 (44.4)	1 (11.1)	2 (22.2)	2.111	0.55	0.484	Mod/large

\*denotes  $p = <0.05$  \*\*denotes  $p = <0.01$

Table 2 RAE analysis of 32 schoolboy leagues

To analyse a potential relationship between RAE across dominant clubs within SFAI national competitions, the winners of the 2013 SFAI national underage cups from under 14 to under 16 were identified, these clubs all played in the DDSL. The under 14 winners St. Kevins had 81.3% of their ETP sample born in the first half of the year (with 43.8% born in quarter one), the under 15 winners Cherry Orchard had 81% of their sample born in the first half of the year (with 51.6% born in quarter one) and under 16 winners Belvedere had 61% born in the first half of the year (44% born in quarter one).

## 2.6.2. Place of birth

Using the four provinces as distinguishing geographical locations, a chi-squared goodness of fit test using expected distribution (from CSO data) was conducted. This demonstrated that selection onto the ETP was not independent of place of birth ( $p < 0.05$ ,  $\chi^2 = 149.457$ ,  $w = .278$ ). As can be seen in Table 3, Leinster is underrepresented on the ETP in relation to its CSO statistics when compared to the overall sample (OR .767, 95% CI .706-.834), with the remaining provinces overrepresented. Population bases per centre vary between provinces, with Leinster having 15,462.4 boys per centre catchment area to Connacht who have 8715.5 boys to each centre. Further statistical analysis at county level was not appropriate due to a number of leagues spanning county borders (e.g., West Waterford East Cork league, Sligo Leitrim league).

Province	ETP centres (%)	CSO (%)	Feeder population per 1		Expected number	Residual difference	OR	95% CI
			centre	ETP (%)				
Leinster	5 (41.6)	77312 (53.59)	15462.4	799 (41.3)	1037.5	-238.5	0.767	.706-.834
Munster	4 (33.3)	39695 (27.52)	9923	597 (30.8)	532.7	64.3	1.122	1.023-1.231
Connacht	2 (16.7)	17431 (12.08)	8715.5	327 (16.9)	233.9	93.1	1.4048	1.248-1.581
Ulster	1 (8.3)	9824 (6.81)	9824	213 (11)	131.9	81.1	1.628	1.411-1.879
Total	12	144,262		1936	1936			

*Table 3 Representation on the ETP by province*

Odds ratios were calculated on the likelihood of gaining selection into a centre; dependant on whether that county had an ETP centre based there. Populations within counties that had a centre were almost 50% more likely to gain selection than those without a centre (OR 1.455, 95% CI 1.314 – 1.612). Three of the statistically highest represented counties by relative population (Donegal, Kerry and Waterford) have an

ETP regional centre located within the county. There were four centres within the next category, and two centres represented within each of the last two categories. As can be seen in table 4, Dublin, Cork and Kildare have three of the highest rates of boys born from 1992-1998 but have amongst the lowest relative representation rates. The large proportional representation of counties such as Waterford, Mayo and Sligo (compared to their populations) is notable here.

The odds ratio of each county relative to the overall sample in terms of gaining selection were then assessed. As can be seen in Table 4, Donegal and Kerry have the highest odds with Leitrim, Kildare and Dublin having the lowest odds. This analysis shows that 2.933% of the relative Donegal population got a place on the ETP compared to 0.767% of the relative Dublin population (OR 3.911, 95% CI interval is 3.217-4.754), emphasising unequal access onto the programme across counties. Using the ordering of counties in terms of odds from table 4 to create A-E grouping (i.e., group A is Donegal, Kerry, Longford, Waterford and Sligo), these were then plotted on a map of Ireland (Figure 13).



Category	County	% in ETP	% in CSO	% total pop on ETP	Odds Ratio	95% CI
A	Donegal*	8.209	3.7577	2.933	2.22	1.884-2.616
A	Kerry*	5.885	3.07496	2.570	1.938	1.6-2.347
A	Longford	1.446	0.837	2.318	1.744	1.195-2.543
A	Sligo	2.633	1.558	2.270	1.706	1.288-2.261
A	Waterford*	4.182	2.48367	2.261	1.7	1.357-2.128
B	Mayo*	4.543	2.9	2.103	1.579	1.272-1.959
B	Limerick*	6.608	4.529	1.959	1.468	1.223-1.759
B	Wicklow*	4.388	3.05347	1.930	1.446	1.161-1.800
B	Galway*	7.692	5.63	1.835	1.373	1.161-1.625
B	Carlow	1.652	1.214	1.828	1.368	0.961-1.946
C	Roscommon	1.701	1.35	1.695	1.267	0.895-1.792
C	Westmeath*	2.529	2.0234	1.679	1.255	0.943-1.67
C	Louth*	3.252	2.692	1.622	1.212	0.941-1.560
C	Cavan	1.962	1.65046	1.596	1.192	0.862-1.647
C	Tipperary	3.924	3.58237	1.471	1.097	0.871-1.382
D	Wexford	3.098	3.1193	1.333	0.993	0.767-1.286
D	Kilkenny	2.013	2.164	1.249	0.93	0.676-1.279
D	Laois	1.446	1.60471	1.210	0.9	0.618-1.309
D	Clare	2.22	2.589	1.151	0.856	0.632-1.160
D	Meath	3.304	3.9837	1.114	0.828	0.644-1.063
E	Cork*	7.95	11.2566	0.948	0.7035	0.597-0.83
E	Monaghan	0.826	1.402	0.791	0.586	0.358-0.961
E	Offaly	1.033	1.80227	0.769	0.5696	0.366-0.886
E	Dublin*	15.07	26.39988	0.767	0.5677	0.520-0.642
E	Kildare	2.168	4.697	0.620	0.458	0.337-0.623
E	Leitrim	0.258	0.645	0.537	0.397	0.165-0.957
* denotes the presence of an ETP centre in the county						

Table 4 Analysis of representation on ETP by county

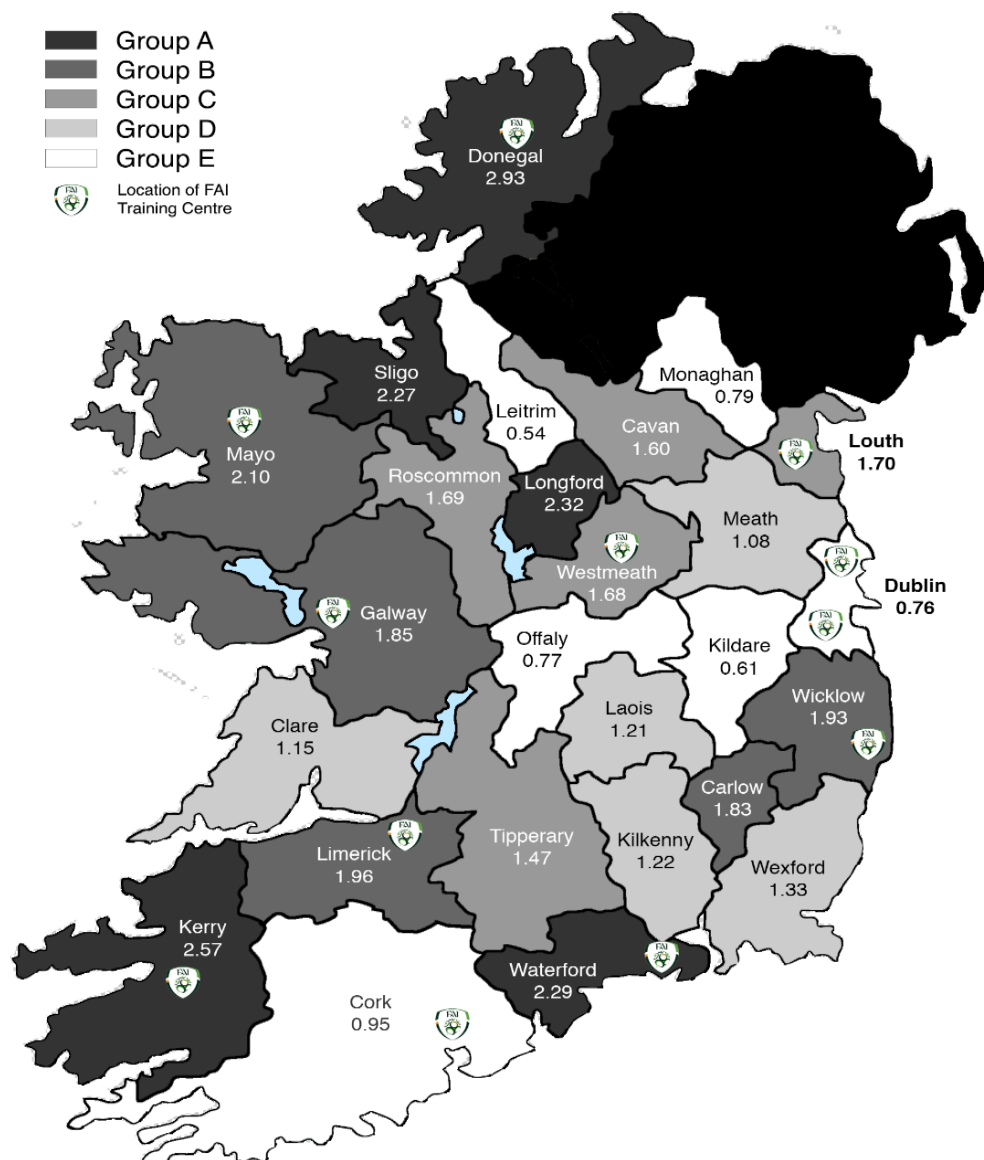


Figure 13 Map of Ireland showing the likelihood of players getting selected for the ETP

### 2.6.2.1. Schoolboy leagues

The DDSL was the most prominently represented league on the ETP programme, with 20% of the overall sample (Figure 14). Each of the 32 schoolboy leagues received representation on the programme. As leagues span across counties and without a registration system, it is impossible to access relative representation (i.e., by using chi-squared goodness of fit analysis). Players from 431 clubs were on the ETP over the

seven years. Representation varied across the leagues, with DDSL having 34 clubs represented and the SDFL having four clubs represented.

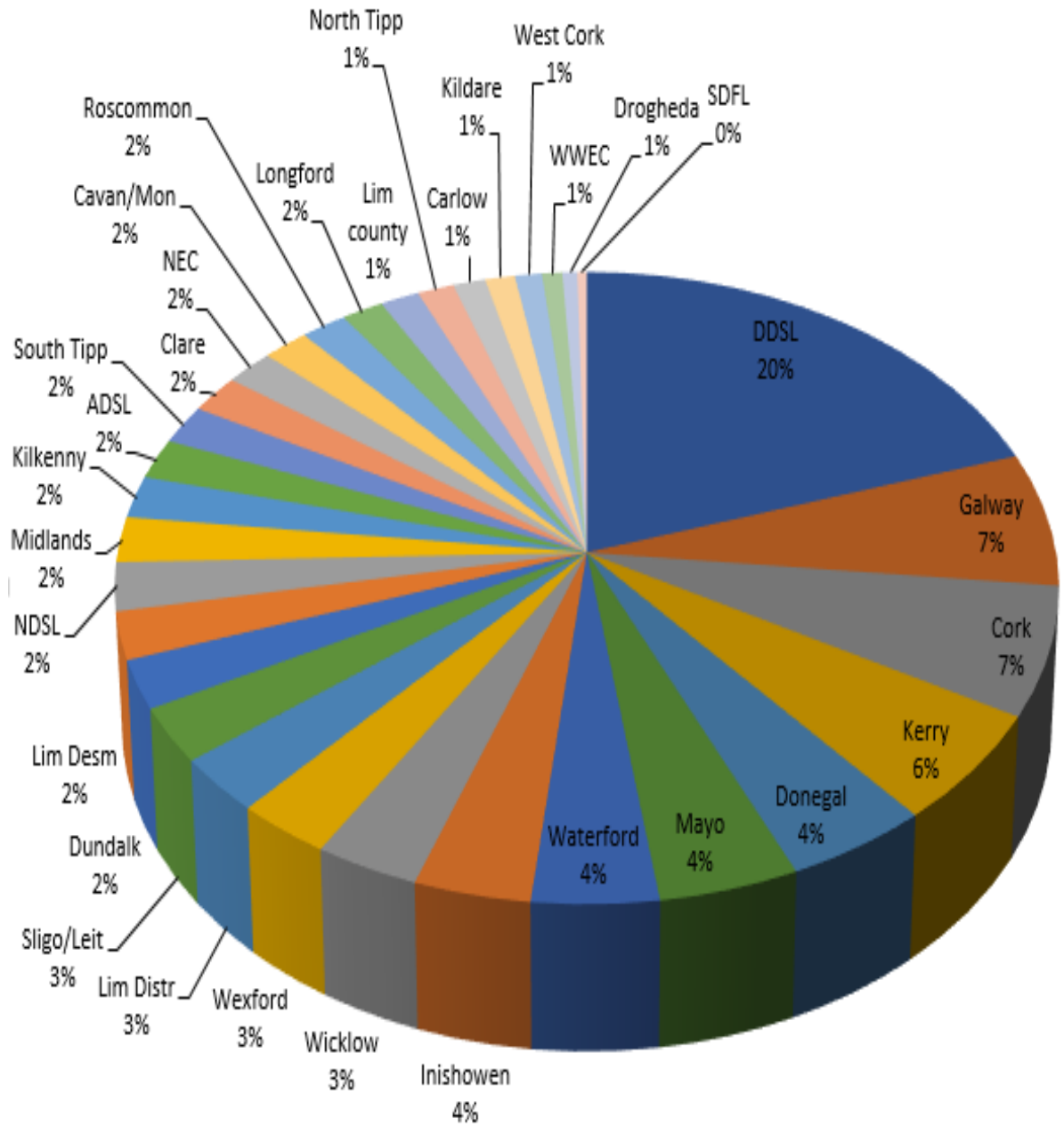


Figure 14 Percentage of players from each league to be represented on the ETP

### 2.6.3. RAE and Place of birth

When the 26 counties were grouped by relative population according to CSO data into five groups, the largest population group had a slightly higher rate of first quarter births than the other four groups, but overall the chi-squared analysis showed no significant difference ( $\chi^2$  10.219,  $p=0.597$ ). Further investigation is not viable due to the large variations within each county (i.e., rural, small towns, large towns, cities).

The relative age effect of the most represented clubs on the entire programme were analysed, the three clubs with the highest quarter one percentages within this sample were based in Dublin (Cherry Orchard 51.6%, St. Kevin's 43.8% and Malahide Utd 43.5%) and compete in the Dublin District Schoolboy league (DDSL). When analysed, the DDSL relative age effect is stronger than the overall sample, with a quarter one percentage of 43.8%, down to a quarter four rate of 9.8% (Figure 15).

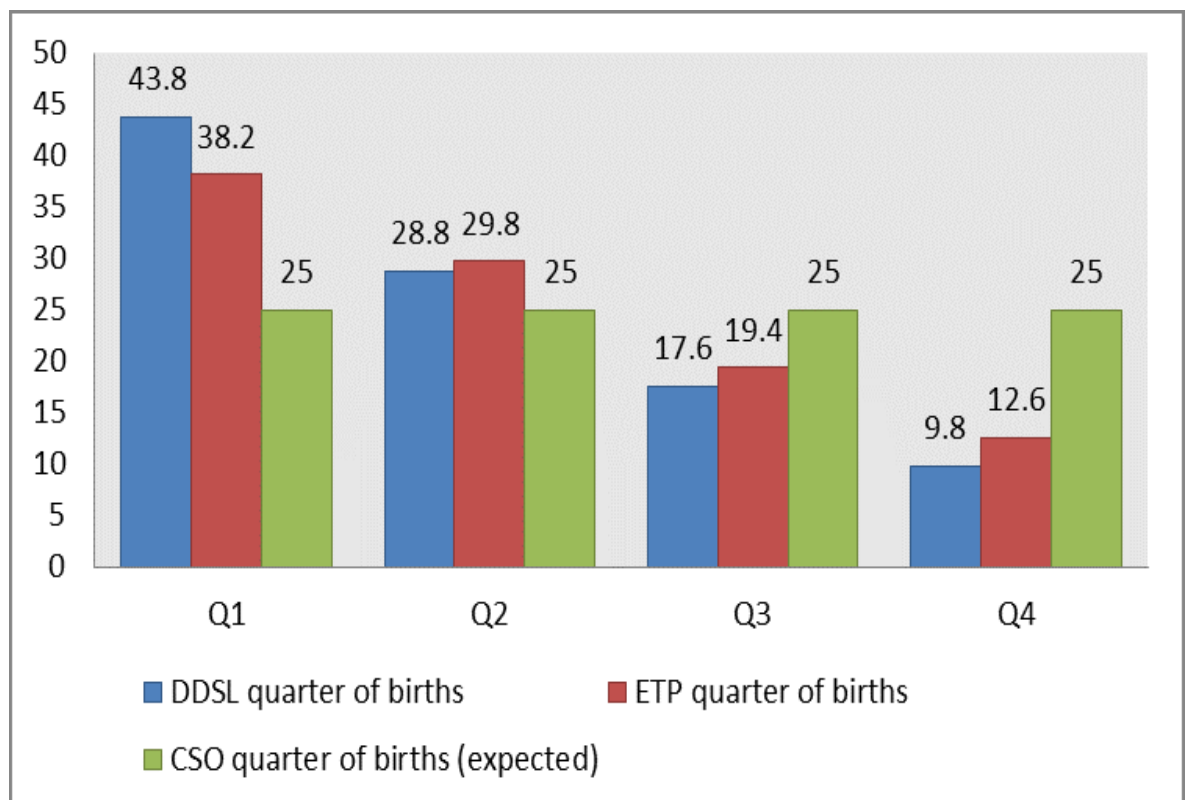


Figure 15 RAE comparison of DDSL, full ETP sample and CSO data

#### **2.6.4. Player movement**

The initial player data contained the county of birth/development and the current club of each player. This allowed for an analysis of internal player movement. It should be noted that this is not a comprehensive list of all players who migrated between counties, only the section of those who did so and progressed to get selected for an ETP centre for their new league. There is no data currently on the overall numbers of players who move clubs (due to the absence of a National Association database). This analysis of player migration data into the DDSL is particularly complicated by the fact that some clubs that compete in the DDSL are based in a different county (i.e., Athlone) thus their cohort of players are going to be drawn from outside the DDSL. For this reason, an analysis of migratory players into the DDSL focused only on the clubs who have their primary location within County Dublin. An example of this further complexity is St. Josephs, due to its geographical proximity to County Wicklow, St. Josephs draw from there, but the club was founded with the purpose of providing “youth services through football for children in the greater Dun Laoghaire area” as stated on their website thus will be included in migratory statistics for the DDSL (St. Joseph’s Boys AFC, 2018, para. 1).

The volume of players from outside their schoolboy league county varied between schoolboy leagues. The DDSL had 27.1% of players from outside Dublin, which was statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$ ). This was the highest from all the 32 leagues, most of which displayed no patterns of movement (Table 5). When the other urban centres were analysed, migration was not a significant feature (i.e., no players from outside country Cork played in the Cork schoolboy league, 4.2% players in Galway league lived outside of Galway, 2.6% of players in the Waterford league lived outside of Waterford).

Schoolboy league	Origin			
	From County of SBL		Outside county of SBL	
	Count	Row N %	Count	Row N %
Athlone	38	95.0%	2	5.0%
Carlow	23	95.8%	1	4.2%
Cavan/Monaghan	30	88.2%	4	11.8%
Clare	38	100.0%	0	.0%
Cork	128	100.0%	0	.0%
DDSL	277	72.9%	103	27.1%
Donegal	87	100.0%	0	.0%
Drogheda	11	100.0%	0	.0%
Dundalk	46	95.8%	2	4.2%
Galway	132	99.2%	1	.8%
Inishowen	70	100.0%	0	.0%
Kerry	109	99.1%	1	.9%
Kildare	20	90.9%	2	9.1%
Kilkenny	38	90.5%	4	9.5%
Limerick county	29	100.0%	0	.0%
Limerick Desmond	46	95.8%	2	4.2%
Limerick District	54	98.2%	1	1.8%
Longford	31	100.0%	0	.0%
Mayo	84	100.0%	0	.0%
Midlands	44	97.8%	1	2.2%
NDSL	44	91.7%	4	8.3%
NEC	35	97.2%	1	2.8%
North Tipperary	27	100.0%	0	.0%
Roscommon	34	100.0%	0	.0%
SDFL	5	71.4%	2	28.6%
Sligo/Leitrim	54	100.0%	0	.0%
South Tipperary	39	100.0%	0	.0%
Waterford	74	97.4%	2	2.6%
West Cork	20	100.0%	0	.0%
Wexford	61	98.4%	1	1.6%
Wicklow	55	94.8%	3	5.2%
WVEC	15	100.0%	0	.0%

*Table 5 Origin analysis of players per schoolboy league*

The DDSL club of migrating destination was also analysed, 20 clubs in the DDSL were represented by players from outside of Dublin. The primary recipients of migrating players can be seen in Figure 16.

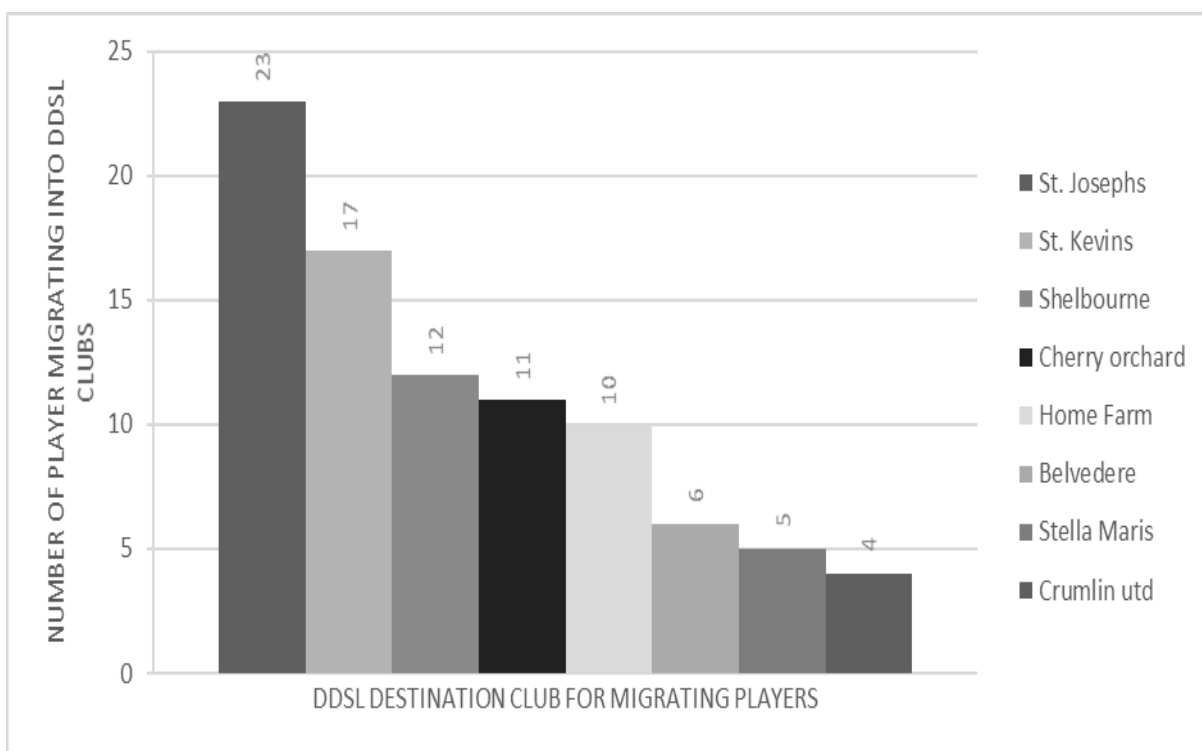


Figure 16 Clubs of migration destination in the DDSL

#### 2.6.4.1. Origin of DDSL migration

With 27.1% of the DDSL, ETP positions being made up from players outside that league, the developmental origins of those players were examined. An effect on individual leagues can be seen in Figure 17. There was a disparity in the significance of player loss across counties in losing their elite players to the DDSL. For example, there were 85 boys from Wicklow on the ETP panels yet 21 of those played in the DDSL, there were 42 players from Kildare on the ETP, with 16 of them playing for a team in the DDSL. Meath were more complex to analyse due to the higher number of clubs from Meath moving to the Dublin leagues but out of 64 Meath players, 18 of them played for clubs situated within Dublin (as opposed to those who played for Meath based clubs who play in the DDSL).

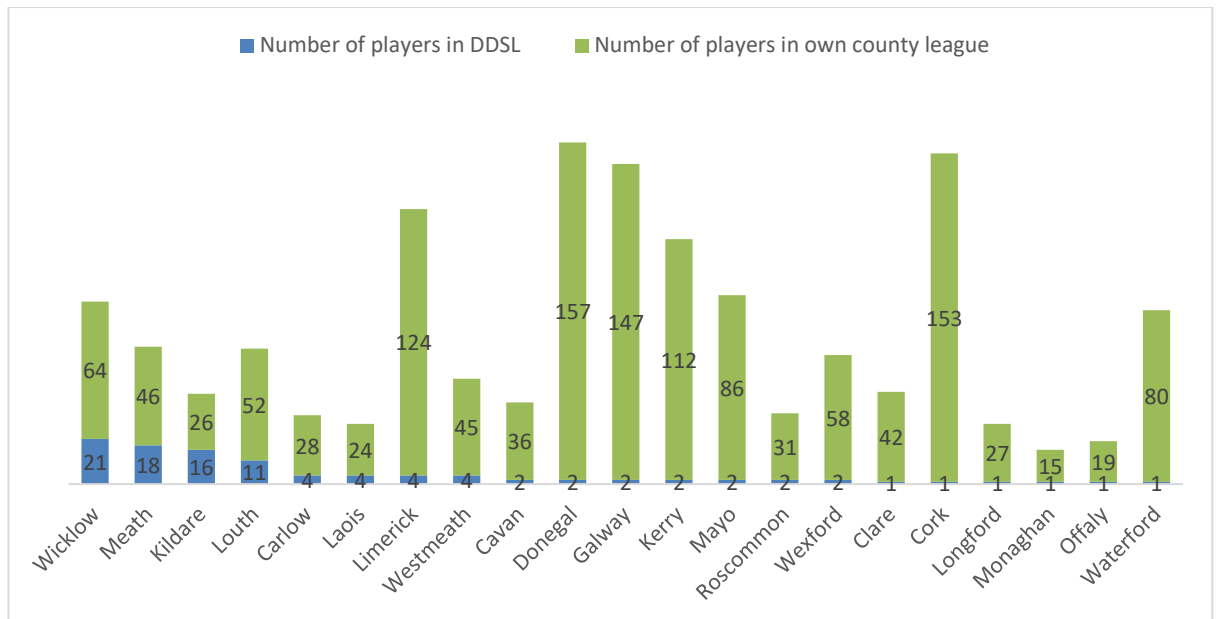


Figure 17 Comparison of county players playing in own league and DDSL

Figure 18 displays a map of Ireland showing migratory patterns from external counties to the DDSL. The primary donors of football migration to the DDSL were from neighbouring leagues. For example, Wicklow (primarily due to the St. Josephs link) accounts for 21% of the external players, other neighbouring counties of Meath, Kildare and Louth are the next highest net contributors with 18%, 16% and 11% respectively. Carlow, Laois and Westmeath form the next geographic ‘layer’ from Dublin and along with Limerick, were responsible for the next highest volume of movement to Dublin. Other counties accounted for 1% or 2% of the migrating players. No players moved from Kilkenny, Leitrim, Sligo, Tipperary to the DDSL (and progressed to get selected for the ETP there) within the relevant years.





*Figure 18 Migratory patterns in Irish schoolboy football*

### **2.6.5. RAE within migrating players**

The dates of birth of the migrating players were analysed. Quarter one was a higher figure than the overall sample, with 43% being born in quarter one. An interesting analysis showed that quarter four was 15%, which was higher than either the whole sample or the DDSL sample.

## 2.6.6. Research Questions Summary

- *Is there a Relative Age Effect in existence within the ETP?*

A significant RAE was found within the ETP sample, with the DDSL having the highest quarter one percentages of all the leagues.

- *Is there a relationship between success at underage levels and RAE?*

SFAI tournament winners displayed a higher percentage of quarter one and first half year born players than the CSO sample and the overall ETP sample (i.e. 81% u14 Cup winners' v 68% in the overall ETP sample).

- *Does a birth-place effect exist within the ETP?*

Access to the ETP centres was not independent of place of birth, it was influenced by population density and the location of centres.

- *What is the equity of provision for populations per ETP centre?*

Selection onto the ETP was not independent of place of birth, with Leinster underrepresented on the ETP in relation to its CSO statistics when compared to the overall sample with the remaining provinces overrepresented.

- *What movement of players is occurring from home clubs to stronger regions in the country?*

There was a significant migratory trend towards the DDSL, primarily from neighbouring counties.

## **2.7. Discussion**

This study sought to identify asymmetries in the birth month and geographical distribution and movement of elite youth Irish footballers, as recognised by the Football Association of Ireland. Statistics show an emergence of an over-representation of players born earlier in the year, thereby confirming the presence of a relative age effect in the ETP sample. The results also demonstrate that there are unequal opportunities provided to some elite youth footballers related to the place of birth and progression onto the elite development pathway. ‘Layers’ of player drain to the DDSL from surrounding counties was also identified.

### **2.7.1. RAE**

In line with FIFA’s cut-off dates for international underage competitions, the FAI uses a cut-off date of January 1<sup>st</sup> for progression onto its primary vehicle for elite talent development, the Emerging Talent Programme. Sixty-eight per cent of the ETP sample was born in the first half of the year. The birth-date distribution was more pronounced than a number of relative age effect studies (Verhulst, 1992; Musch & Hay, 1999; Hirose, 2009; Gil et al., 2013) but showed a slight decrease compared to other related studies (Gil et al., 2007; Carling et al., 2009). The variation in percentage figures often relates to the level of the sample, with elite squads often having a more prominent RAE (Gil et al., 2013). Carling et al., (2009) relate the pronounced RAE found in their study to height and weight differences, which enhanced perceptions of ability and thus impacted on final selection. This effect can be seen since the inception of the ETP in 2006 (see Figure 12) and demonstrated a consistent focus on maturity

within Irish youth soccer. Possible physical maturity status that can accompany early-born players (Hirose, 2009; Gil et al., 2013) should not be necessarily equated with enhanced skill levels (Hancock, Adler, & Côté, 2013) yet often it is the physically more mature footballer (mass and height) that gets selected onto development teams (Carling et al., 2009; Hirose, 2009).

Interestingly, the internal migration group of players saw the largest band of quarter four births (15% versus 13% in the overall population, 10% in the Dublin-born DDSL sample). Anecdotally, scouts tend to prefer players born in quarter four from the Irish system as it allows them to technically play a year younger when they sign in the UK (as the UK system goes from Sept-Aug) thus internal migratory channels with an eventual proposed outcome of transfer to the UK may drive this enhanced attractiveness of late-born players.

An even more pronounced relative age effect was identified within the DDSL (Figure 15). Dublin has the densest population of any county in the Republic of Ireland (CSO, 2011) and this supports Jimenez and Pain's (2008) findings within Spanish youth football, that clubs from higher population densities demonstrated a stronger RAE than less dense areas. Musch and Grondin (2001) suggest that the greater pool of players available to clubs perpetuate the likelihood that they will choose the more relatively physically mature player. Jimenez and Pain (2008) also demonstrated a higher level of RAE within the more successful clubs. The RAE of the winners of the 2013 SFAI national underage cups from under 14 to under 16 were identified, and these clubs showed a more pronounced RAE than the overall sample. St. Kevin's, one of the most successful underage clubs in Ireland, had exceptionally high percentile figures; with 81.3% of their footballers (ETP sample) born in the first half of the year, one of the highest statistics of RAE reported within academia. Using these successful clubs as a

case study demonstrates a consistently high percentage of footballers born in the first half of the year within youth Irish football. These clubs undergo yearly trial-based selection processes for their underage teams. A focus on short term performance could be enhancing and perpetuating this significant RAE within football in Ireland. This process not only discriminates against those born later in the year but also against those from the denser areas as the competition for places is increased.

A range of self-sustaining factors can emerge to further increase the gaps between the older and younger cohorts within the same age band. Continued selection onto representative teams, extra training and elite coaching, could provide these athletes with a performance advantage (Augste & Lames, 2011). Physically more mature players are more likely to be identified as ‘talented’, thus get selected for advanced coaching and training and compete at higher levels of competition such as ETP (Johnson et al., 2009). Success in youth sport can lead to an increased sense of motivation due to positive and reinforcing feedback obtained from coaches/parents/peers (Ostapczuk & Musch 2013). Augste and Lames (2011) suggest that this can lead to more considerable effort and better performance by the athlete. Conversely, de-motivation resulting from a lack of selection or the perception of selection bias could lead to increased levels of drop-out amongst this population (Delorme et al., 2010a) which in turn could perpetuate the increased levels of players representing the first two quarters.

### **2.7.2. Place of birth**

Despite Dublin based players being the most represented within the ETP sample in terms of numbers, relative to population it had one of the lowest ratios of representation on the ETP. The counties of Donegal and Kerry had the highest relative representation rate in terms of relative population (Table 4). While players tend to migrate to Dublin potentially seeking enhanced exposure; they would statistically have a better chance of making the ETP programme by staying in the rural locations (e.g., four times more likely to make the programme by being based in Donegal than Dublin). Of the ten highest relatively represented counties, seven of those have Emerging Talent Centres in their counties. Counties such as; Donegal, Kerry, Waterford, Mayo seem to benefit from having one of the twelve regional centres located in their counties (Table 4). There may be per head of capita, fewer elite teams in larger areas than smaller cities resulting in more significant opportunities to make these squads and thus becoming visible to scouts (Curtis & Birch, 1987). This would appear to be relevant to the Football Association's Emerging Talent Programme. A stated purpose of the ETP is to provide elite youth footballers with the opportunity to train in their geographical area (FAI, 2009), this is not happening on an equitable basis for some of the youth footballers.

### **2.7.3. Migration**

Utilising the basic concepts and terminology of World Systems Theory, the regions involved in various stages of talent development in Irish football could be seen as Core (British, mainly English clubs), Semi-periphery (DDSL clubs) and Periphery (clubs from leagues outside of the DDSL). Players move from periphery clubs (in schoolboy

leagues outside of Dublin) to clubs in Dublin. These are often the clubs with historical ties to English clubs. Poli (2010) also developed a typology for spaces related to migration, in relation to the Irish structures, regional schoolboy leagues clubs could be identified as the 'platform', the DDSL as a 'stepping stone' to gain access to another country where economic gains and sporting levels are higher and 'destination' space as British professional teams (p.502). The DDSL is frequently at odds with other leagues regarding elite player movement towards the DDSL clubs due to their enhanced visibility to these English clubs (Bourke, 2002). As a semi-periphery system, the DDSL simultaneously acquires resources from the periphery (other schoolboy leagues) while losing resources to British clubs (core). As described above, perhaps the DDSL acts as a buffer between the regional leagues and British professional football to prevent further polarisation between two regions.

The primary donor leagues are those which are geographically close to Dublin (Figure 18). There exists descending layers of internal migration towards the DDSL as one moves geographically away from this 'core'. According to Lowry's (1966) theory on internal migration, this could be due to more accessible transportation and travel demands being placed on parents (as players would have to travel to their Dublin club on average three times per week) and a more sophisticated network between clubs and coaches from neighbouring counties. Living close to elite youth football clubs can provide greater social linkage between home, school and the club for a youth player (Rossing et al., 2016) with proximity to elite sports clubs being an important predictor of expertise development (Rossing et al., 2018). In the absence of survey data on the motivations for migration it is impossible to be definitive on the reasons for migration, which could also potentially include commuting parents, schooling, or family connections. However, it is reasonable to conclude that the primary motivation for

travelling substantial distances and incurring significant time and financial costs is to enhance the potential for career advancement. Of the four boys who migrated from Limerick to the DDSL and played on the ETP (Figure 17), two of those went to the same club. This indicates that perhaps networks exist between clubs in Limerick and that club in the DDSL; akin to research by Poli (2010) who suggest that football migration is more related to interpersonal networks that facilitate migration rather than economic relationships. Certain clubs are prominent in attracting migrating players (Figure 16). These are often the clubs with historic ties to English clubs. As a semi-periphery system, the DDSL simultaneously acquires resources from the periphery (other schoolboy leagues) while losing resources to British clubs (core). As stated previously, perhaps the DDSL acts as a buffer between the regional leagues and British professional football to prevent further polarisation between two regions.

Players (and club teams) migrating from 'periphery' leagues often results in a deskilling of this league which relates to Andre Gunder Frank's theory of 'dependent underdevelopment' which Darby applies to football migration (Darby, 2000) as 'core' leagues continuing to prosper at the expense of 'periphery' leagues. Resource dependency theory postulates that control over resources drives power relations between organisations and that the scarcity of resources enhances the controlling organisations' domination within the environmental ecology (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). Within Irish football, elite youth players appear willing to migrate into the DDSL from neighbouring leagues, due to the enhanced visibility of the DDSL to professional club scouts and international underage coaches in order to secure a move to the UK, thus creating a 'double drain' system of player movement from their home counties. This places the DDSL in a strong position as a dominant, resource-rich organisation while resulting in a deskilling of the neighbouring 'donor' leagues. Elliott



and Weedon's (2010) concept of 'feet exchange' suggests that players within the DDSL may benefit from exposure to the migrating players. They would potentially have exhibited good technical ability to be signed by the club and may bring different playing experiences and learnings from the migratory journey.

Place of birth and population analysis showed that Dublin boys have fewer spots available to them on the ETP programme (Table 4). That statistic, combined with the insight that 27% of the places available went to boys from outside of the county, further underlines the lack of equity in terms of access to the elite player development pathway in high-density areas in the Republic of Ireland. A stated purpose of the ETP is to provide emerging talent with a more challenging level of training and development and the opportunity to train within their area in a structured and quality environment (FAI, n.d. b), this explains the geographical spread of centres but a lack of extra centres in high-density areas, and indeed in the surrounding commuter areas, has potentially led to unequal opportunities.

The League of Ireland (LOI) underage structures have progressed since this data collection. An aim of the new pathway is to reduce the dependency on DDSL clubs for player development, with the FAI High Performance Director stating that "seven or eight years ago, there was no pathway for elite players. There was no structure for national competition, players had to go to Dublin to be challenged" (as cited in O'Riordan, 2017, para. 18). Continued analysis of the migration patterns of youth football players will identify whether changing the competition structures in Ireland leads to a lessening of internal migratory patterns. A regional spread of quality leagues may result in players developing equitably across the country. This would reduce the 'asset stripping' of local leagues, while player development fees could further cyclically enhance the quality of resources in these periphery locations. To apply the

behavioural model by Lowry (1966), the benefits of having access to regional LOI clubs at underage level, may outweigh the migration costs of often extensive travel to Dublin.

## **2.8. Conclusion**

Managing talent through this phase of development in a sport (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004) with these circumstances (unequal access due to date and place of birth) is a challenging and complex process and in relation to the specific challenges faced within Ireland, is currently neglected by academic research. Results show that opportunities for selection onto an elite football development programme are not equal and that the likely development and successful progression of young players is hostage to their date and place of birth. Lefevre et al., (1990) suggested that many of the physical advantages assumed by early maturers level out in young adulthood. As maturation and growth may have an impact on characteristics identified amongst youth soccer players (Vaeyens et al., 2008) the differentiation power of certain fitness characteristics decrease with age (Gonaus & Muller, 2012) which suggests that the later maturing players can ‘catch up’ with their earlier maturing team-mates by being nurtured through the system (Meylan et al., 2010). In fact, age can be seen as a moderator to RAE (Cobley et al., 2009; Ostapczuk & Musch, 2013). Using these anthropometric measures (i.e., physical maturity) to discriminate within youth soccer may be misleading as this advantage may not be maintained into adulthood (Beunen et al., 1997). Bartmus, Neumann and de Maree (1987) use the term ‘compensation phenomenon’ to suggest that an athlete who experiences a deficiency in one area, for example, physical precocity may be able to compensate in another way such as tactical

development. The Football Association of Ireland should encourage a number of methods to potentially reduce this bias, for example rotating cut-off dates, thus reducing the constant bias towards relatively older participants (Vaeyens et al., 2005), providing additional support for the younger players during these sensitive development stages (Pierson et al., 2014) and looking at competition structures to reduce the continued dominance of Dublin based teams within underage competition. As participant development itself is non-linear and dynamic (Abbott et al., 2005) it is essential for ‘late-developers’ or those that were overlooked in the talent identification process due to relative age, that the FAI offer flexibility and a way back onto the elite development programmes to avoid limiting the available talent pool.

This study also identified the influence that the location of a Football Association’s regional training or development centre has on potential selection. The FAI must ensure that although there may be a need to locate these centres in areas related to accessibility, they must also be located in areas relative to population size. This study showed that the idea of ‘place of birth’ in the sense of city size relating to quantity and quality of play and practice, social factors, access to open spaces (Curtis & Birch, 1987; Côté et al., 2006) should also be assessed in relation to access and proximity to a development centre which was deemed key for access to development pathways. When locating talent development centres in relation to population bases, it is essential for Football Associations to consider not just the immediate players but to also consider the potential for neighbouring players to migrate to those areas, which can muddy the calculation of feeder centres needed in specific areas.

Player migration remains a central theme in the landscape of schoolboy football in Ireland. The paradoxical development options of moving to Dublin to avail of networks to UK professional clubs versus staying in a lesser populated area to avail of

the FAIs development pathway provide insights to the anomalies of the system. As a key for organisational survival is the ability to acquire and maintain resources (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978) the DDSL acquire resources (i.e., players) to avail of development fees upon transfer and to increase marketing opportunities as a ‘feeder’ club to professional clubs. Neighbouring counties to the ‘semi-periphery’ league in the system (i.e., DDSL) can avail of opportunities due to proximity (for either a whole club or an individual player to migrate) yet this will continually strip and ‘drain’ their leagues of the most talented players. The FAI must consider its talent development structures and assess if they welcome this ‘double feet drain’ (i.e., migrating from schoolboy league to the DDSL and on to a UK professional club). Further research on the introduction of the underage leagues and the subsequent impact on player movement would be welcomed. This could reduce the ‘asset stripping’ of local leagues, while player development fees could further cyclically enhance the quality of resources.

Developed in 2006, the Emerging Talent Programme aimed to mimic other talent development systems by readying players to engage in elite football in Europe (cf. Darby, Akindes, & Kirwan, 2007). Bourke (2007) and Elliott (2014) claimed that a barrier to young player development is the poor sporting infrastructure in Ireland; this chapter provides insights into potential inequities within the current model of talent identification and development in relation to date of birth, place of birth and internal migration patterns.

## Chapter Three: Study Two

### Assessing the talent development practices of all authoritative bodies within Irish youth football.

*The developmental potential of a setting in a mesosystem is enhanced to the extent that there exist indirect linkages between settings that encourage the growth of mutual trust, positive orientation, goal consensus, and a balance of power responsive to action in behalf of the developing person.*  
(Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p.216)

#### 3.1. Introduction

Study One demonstrated inequitable development pathways concerning place and date of birth, while also demonstrating the prevalence of internal migratory channels within youth football. When deciding how to analyse and interpret the patterns of development, the author reflects on Granovetter (1973), who stated that:

*“...the analysis of processes in interpersonal networks provides the most fruitful micro-macro bridge. In one way or another, it is through these networks that small-scale interaction becomes translated into large-scale patterns, and that these, in turn, feedback into small groups” (p. 1360)*

The talent development process is not simply an extrapolation from initial identification to future performance but is also influenced by maturation and the developmental environment (Vaeyens, Lenoir, Williams, & Philippaerts, 2008). Research indicates that successful player development is largely contingent on the environment that the athlete is situated in (Williams & Reilly, 2000; Mills et al., 2012). The opportunity, structures and environmental stability that a developing athlete

experiences is key to realising potential (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994). Research examining the influence of the environment created by talent development bodies is in its infancy and warrants further investigation (Mills et al., 2012). Study Two, therefore, attempts to account for and explain the developmental patterns identified in Study One, by accounting for the multiple interactions between governing organisations and the resulting suitability of the talent development structures. For example, Côté et al., (2006) suggested that while a place of birth analysis can be used to understand athletic development, results must be contextualised within the actual country and sport itself for a thorough investigation. For example, the recognition of sustained ‘layers’ of migration of players from neighbouring counties to the DDSL warrants further investigation into the outcomes on both the dependant and donor leagues. The FAI, SFAI, SFAI leagues and Junior Associations and clubs are positioned as key factors in the developing footballer's exosystem (cf. Bronfenbrenner, 1979), thus their coherence of approach and philosophies to player development is a key research area when seeking to understand talent development within Irish football.

Following the 2002 World Cup campaign in Japan/South Korea, the Football Association of Ireland (FAI) secured the services of a Scottish based consultancy organisation (Genesis) to evaluate the planning and organisational practices prior to and during the World Cup. Serious management, leadership and governance flaws within the FAI were identified by the Genesis review (2002). They reported that the FAI must accept a need for greater professionalism, develop effective voluntary leadership, professional management and structures. Organisational changes including the reduction in the number of board members, sub-committee formation and operational role-clarity were recommended, with a further recommendation that two independent “non-executive” directors be appointed to the board; a number of these

changes remain unimplemented (Fallon, 2016). The Genesis report also cited that the FAI had poor and ineffective communication with stakeholders and that they failed to recognise good organisational practice employed elsewhere in sport. The FAI assert in their strategic plan for 2016-2020 that ‘governance is at a high level and will be maintained as such’ (p34, para. 2) and they fully endorse best practice in governance (FAI, 2016). However, the FAI continue to face criticism about gender representation, lack of independent directors, age and term limits of board members and fiduciary transparency (Sweeney, 2017).

Coherent organisational structure and governance have been identified as a key aspect of successful talent development environments (Martindale et al., 2005; Henriksen et al., 2010) with stakeholder coherence and involvement also being important features (De Knop, Van Hoecke, & De Bosscher, 2004). Sporting organisations should have a vision, identity and purpose that is strategic and systematically implemented (Martindale et al., 2005). There remains a dearth of knowledge about the overall functioning and interactions of networks of organisations (Provan & Kenis, 2007; Chelladurai & Zintz, 2015) and resultant tensions or issues which can arise from such interactions (Bayle & Robinson, 2007). There is also a lack of research in this area which simultaneously investigates the perceptions of both internal and external stakeholders (Miragaia, Ferreira, & Carreira, 2014), despite Sotiriadou and colleagues (2008) advocating for governance research “to incorporate sport associations at a state and local level to provide a deeper and richer representation of the sport development process” (p.268).

Weak governance and scandals have seen sports organisations undergo reform to assess governance practices (Numerato et al., 2013; Parent & Patterson, 2013), with significant external pressures being placed on National Governing Bodies (King,

2017). Responding to pressures to professionalise is a key compliance related challenge for organisations (Nichols, 2013), with eradicating executive-level power abuses and improving stakeholder relationships being cited as enhancing organisational effectiveness (King, 2017). Positive outcomes in profit and non-profit organisations are associated with high-quality relationships between leaders, followers and organisations as a whole (Harris et al., 2011; Geertshuis et al., 2015). After a thorough analysis of national level, non-profit sports organisations, stakeholder satisfaction was identified as being the “most consistent determinant of performance” (O’Boyle & Hassan, 2014, p.307). UEFA recognised the importance of regular stakeholder consultation by including the concept into its National Association good governance strategy (UEFA, 2018). A key consideration is that if a group can affect an organisation’s viability, then the primary objective for that organisation is to create value for stakeholders; to do this effectively they must focus on how value gets created for stakeholders (Freeman et al., 2010). Frooman (1999) identified how the behaviour of stakeholders and their management of relations with the governing organisation to achieve their interests has been missing from theory. The identification and evaluation of stakeholders helps organisations to better respond to the environment that they operate in and to allow the formation and implementation of more informed strategies (Cummings & Doh, 2000).

The FAI, SFAI, SFAI leagues, clubs and the Junior Associations are the primary actors and key stakeholders in youth development. Their actions and interactions have a significant impact on the talent development practices and experiences of youth footballers in the Republic of Ireland, yet their relationship has never been theoretically examined. With the Genesis report criticism on stakeholder relationships being conducted 15 years ago and the current insistence by the FAI that governance



practices are at a high level, it is timely to instigate an exploratory study of the practices of the primary stakeholders in youth football and their relationship with the hierarchical levels of football governance within the Republic of Ireland with a view to analysing the impact of such relationships on subsequent structural equality and performance structures.

Below, the theoretical framework and its multiple constructs and interpretations are presented and an overview of sport governance and specifically football governance is provided with a focus on stakeholders in the talent development process. This chapter will extend the understanding of governance structures and development practices of stakeholders within the mesosystem of Irish youth football development and extend the understanding and causal factors associated with the contextual patterns of development identified in Study One.

## **3.2. Aim**

This study aims to assess talent development practices of all authoritative bodies within Irish youth football with respect to organisational, governing, athletic, psychosocial, cultural and environmental issues.

### **3.2.1. Objectives:**

- To explore the relationships between the main stakeholders on the TD pathways (i.e., SFAI, FAI) concerning the historical and current context of Irish football.
- To identify structural and resource inequalities within Irish youth football.

- To assess the ‘fit for purpose’ nature of the competition and performance structures within Irish youth football from the provider perspective.

### **3.3. Theoretical framework**

Valuable insights into the governance and management of organisations can be acquired by reflecting on a range of theories (King, 2017). Researchers have criticised the often-narrow focus on and overuse of certain theoretical frameworks within sports governance literature and advocate a multi-theoretical approach (Pye & Pettigrew, 2005; Hoye & Doherty, 2011; Lowther, Digennaro, Borgogni, & Lowther, 2016) (e.g., stakeholder theory and network governance theory) as governance is influenced by a number of external factors (e.g., public opinion, policy decisions and stakeholders strategy) (Lowther et al., 2016). While the governing dynamics of a non-profit organisation can be viewed through the lens of stakeholder theory (Brown, 2002), little attention has been paid to the dynamics of stakeholder theory within sport governance of non-profit organisation (Ferkins & Shilbury, 2015). The behaviour of stakeholders is a key point of influence on organisational culture (Isopeskul, Shakina, & Georgieva, 2016) yet research drawing from the synergies of both theories has been lacking (von Meding et al., 2013).

As talent development requires a holistic understanding, this study will also draw from research that has attempted to identify the characteristics of effective talent development environments (cf. Martindale et al., 2005 Henrikson et al., 2010) while maintaining a bio-ecological analytical approach (cf. Bronfenbrenner, 1977).

## **3.4. Literature Review**

### **3.4.1. An ecological approach to analysing Talent Development**

#### **Environments**

Gagné (2009) viewed the talent development process as being influenced by two types of catalysts, intrapersonal and environmental. Intrapersonal catalysts include a variety of physical, psychological and behavioural attributes. The environmental catalysts include the influence of key individuals (e.g., parents, siblings, peers, coaches), provisions (e.g., facilities, pathways, provisions) and the wider environment (e.g., culture, family, society). Providing an optimal learning environment for player development was identified as a prominent factor in Mills and colleagues (2012) research on youth football development, with a focus on the culture and the interaction between the individual and the environment being a vital aspect of development. Henriksen (2010) noted that an integrated and coordinated environment was a key feature of successful athletic talent development environments, with various levels of the wider exosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) potentially taking responsibility for the coordination of the talent development system (i.e., federation, club management, school management).

### **3.4.2. Sport Governance**

Governance within a sporting environment is the process of granting power and managing and leading an organisation (O'Boyle, 2013). Therefore, governance is both administrative and political (King, 2017). Shilbury, Ferkins and Smythe (2013, p.349)

suggested that “to govern is to steer an organisation, and to make decisions that are consequential, strategic, and impactful, usually on behalf of others.” Governance can therefore, be about defining ends and controlling the means to achieve these ends (Kraatz & Block, 2008). Thus the notion of ‘sport governance’ is wider than a single organisation and has come to mean the governance of an organisation and also governance across a sport system (Shilbury et al., 2013) or the shift away from the government or direct control of a sport, towards its governance (Amara et al., 2005).

A myriad of characteristics of non-profit sporting organisations have been identified, which adds to the complexity of governing (Fishel, 2003; Watt, 2004). These include the dependence on volunteers for governance and delivery of services, complex structures accommodating many diverse stakeholders, tensions between paid and volunteer staff and the board, objectives that are difficult to quantify and potential domination by influential groups or individuals. The grassroots sports landscape comprises formally structured bodies which are governed and organised by national boards yet generally enacted predominantly through a network of local, informal clubs which are run by committees or individual people (Hoye et al., 2009; European Commission, 2011). Sport administrators may lack specific skills and competencies, thus often struggle to manage the increasing demands placed on sports federations for their effective management, which can lead to poor governance practices (Kartakoullis et al., 2015).

#### **3.4.2.1. Effective Sport Governance Principles**

Good governance is seen as being embedded within the context of the organisation's economic activities, and social relations both sitting in and with the wider society (Persson, 2011) and refers to the ethical standards of these relationships (Henry & Lee, 2004). Nanda (2006, p. 272) refers to good governance as that which combats "corruption, nepotism, bureaucracy and mismanagement", with good governance in practice imbuing the opposite of these terms (Persson, 2011). Governance is concerned with three key issues, how an organisation develops strategic goals and direction, how the board of an organisation monitors performance to achieve these goals and ensuring that the board acts in the best interests of the members (Australian Sports Commission, 2012).

An effective sporting organisation should ensure that key stakeholders are consulted and involved in the development of strategic plans, actively involved in achieving the outcomes of the plan, well-informed and actively participating at its general meetings and regularly provided with timely and accurate disclosures on all matters regarding the governance and performance of the organisation (Australian Sports Commission, 2012). A role of NGBs is to meet the heterogeneous needs and expectations of stakeholders (Winard et al., 2010) and to create solidarity between such units (Bayle & Robinson, 2007). Utilising the input and expertise of stakeholders, establishing representation and democratic standards for communications and formalising the role, responsibilities and objectives of stakeholders is critical for effective sport governance (EU Work Plan for Sport, 2013). Formalising these roles "promotes accountability and should assist in minimising the prospects of any party exceeding their powers, avoiding consultation on key decisions, duplicating resources and/or generating

tensions associated with unbalanced policy or decision making” (EU Work Plan for Sport, 2013, p.8).

#### **3.4.2.2. Football Governance**

The governance of football has been the subject of much academic debate over the past 10 years (Garcia & Welford, 2015) with studies focusing on both overarching international football governance (cf. Geeraert & Drieskens, 2015; Strezhneva, 2016) and context-specific research (cf. Hamil et al., 2010; Fitzpatrick, 2013; Liang, 2013). The traditional hierarchical model of football governance has been transformed. Historically sporting organisations retained a command and control, hierarchical approach to governance but due to external pressures, there has been a move towards governance being managed through a network of horizontal structures (King, 2017). With the vertical channels of power undermined, stakeholder power is growing through these complex forms of network governance (Strezhneva, 2016) where it is the role of the NGB to “create solidarity between the units which make up its sport system” (Bayle & Robinson, 2007, p.259).

Despite the organisational homogeneity of modern national football structures (Relvas et al., 2010; King, 2017), there are certain contextual factors that influence stakeholder relations within these settings for example culture and organisational structure (Senoux, 2008; Anagnostopoulos, 2011). Due to the increasing complexities of modern day football, negotiation and interaction between a multitude of members and organisations are needed to govern efficiently (Sørensen & Torfing, 2005; Hamil et al., 2010; Geeraert et al., 2012). The fundamental task of an NGB is to ensure that member organisations follow established rules and regulations (Chelladurai & Zintz, 2015); thus, the management of stakeholders is an essential part of football governance.

### **3.4.3. Football Stakeholders**

Lowther, Digennaro, Borgogni and Lowther (2016) included being mindful of external considerations, particularly the inclusivity of stakeholders, democracy and transparency as core governance principles in grassroots sports organisations. Stakeholders in modern day football organisations can include shareholders, players, leagues and federations, local authorities, support/member associations, supporters, local community, broadcasting companies, commercial, voluntary and public providers and EU regulatory authorities (Stevens & Watkins-Mathys, 2006; Senaux, 2008; Anagnostopoulos, 2011; Miragaia et al., 2014; King, 2017). Lack of time, patience and resources can limit the attention paid to these stakeholders by governing organisations (Cyert & March, 1992) thus a process of stakeholder salience identification can reconcile divergent interests of many stakeholders (Hill & Jones, 1992). Mitchell, Angle and Wood (1997) identified three attributes of stakeholders that are key to identifying this stakeholder salience; power, legitimacy and urgency. Legitimacy implies that the actions of an entity are appropriate within the socially constructed system. Urgency adds a layer of dynamism to understanding the relationship, being “the degree to which stakeholder claims call for immediate attention” (Mitchell et al., 1997, p.867), while power refers to the extent that a stakeholder can impose its will on the relationship. Power and legitimacy constructs are distinct yet can combine to create authority in a setting (Mitchel et al., 1997).

#### **3.4.3.1. Stakeholder theory**

The stakeholder concept was introduced by the Stanford Research Institute in 1963, with the intention of broadening the notion of shareholders being the only group that management needed to be responsive to (Freeman et al., 2010). The theory gained

momentum within academic and applied management spheres following the publication of Freeman's (1984, 1999) work and became arguably one of the most prominent business management theories to ever emerge from an ethical or philosophical viewpoint (Stieb, 2009). Advocates of stakeholder theory argue that organisations need to consider and take into account the range of individuals and groups affected by the work of the organisation (Stoney & Winstanley, 2001). Stakeholding can be seen as a matter of moral social conscience, where stakeholders are not seen as just a means to an end (Freeman, 1984) and thus should be incorporated into an organisation's practices and policies (Freeman, 1984; Stoney & Winstanley, 2001). Freeman (2002) prompts a rethink of shareholder-centric management principles when asking "for whose benefit and at whose expense should the firm be managed" (p. 39).

Confusion over; and varied practice within the field of the stakeholder concept has led to a multitude of interpretations, classifications and definitions (cf. Clarkson, 1995; Donaldson & Preston, 1995; Mitchell et al., 1997; Kaler, 2002; Philips, 2003; Senaux, 2008; Fassin, 2009). Freeman (1984, p.46) defined stakeholders as "any group of individuals who can affect or is affected by the achievements of the organisation's objectives." Contemporary stakeholder theory emphasises the importance of mutual enrichment and nurturing rather than control or domination, which requires the primary organisation (i.e., FAI) to internalise the unique perspectives of its stakeholders (i.e., SFAI) to facilitate and promote growth within the organisation (Buchholz & Rosenthal, 2005). Central tenets of the theory advocate redistributing benefits to stakeholders, redistributing key decision-making power to stakeholders and bearing a fiduciary relationship to stakeholders (Freeman, 2002). Cooperation and



communication are outlined as key actions within effective stakeholder management, with Dunham, Freeman and Leidtka (2006) suggesting that management;

*“..ought to interact with other communities that it affects or is affected by, seeking to understand their perspectives, listen to their preferences, and evaluate the impact of actions on them. Such interaction is best characterized as...cooperation...it ought to be in closer community with those upon whom it relies for support... It requires a more active pursuit. The firm’s interaction with these groups must be...collaboration.” (p.38).*

Stakeholding is also cited to be instrumental in increasing economic measures such as efficiency and profitability (Campbell, 1997; Esteve et al., 2011; Stoney & Winstanley, 2001; Kaserer & Moldenhauer, 2008). According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (1999) decision-makers should recognise that the interests of organisations are served by recognising the interests of stakeholders and their contribution to the long-term success of the corporation. Involving stakeholders in the governance process can also act as a “psychological contract that binds the individual to the organization” (Stoney & Winstanley, 2001, p.609) suggesting greater levels of commitment to the organisation and thus preventing undesirable and self-serving behaviour. There exists a dichotomy of focus between two streams of stakeholder literature, those that focus on the potential returns for the organisation through accounting for their stakeholders, known as instrumental stakeholder theory. Those who hold a more altruistic view over such a utilitarian one and see stakeholding as the ‘right thing to do’; follow a moral stakeholder approach (Berman et al., 1999; Jones et al., 2007).

While stakeholders are affected by the governing organisation, they consequently can also affect the organisation, a salient concept of reciprocity that has been lacking in stakeholder theory literature (Fassin, 2012). Despite having responsibilities within a network governance system, the obligations and duties of stakeholders are rarely

examined (Robins, 2005). Fassin (2012) labelled stakeholders who have a genuine and legitimate stake in an organisation and strive for mutual benefits as “*stakeowners*” (p.89). Three other categorisations of stakeholders are also presented, including *stakewatcher*, *stakekeeper* and *stakeseeker*, all with differing attributes related to legitimacy, power, loyalty, responsibility and reciprocity. Ferkins and Shilbury (2015) introduced this concept to sport governance literature, whilst stating the need for future research into stakeholder responsibility and reciprocity within the non-profit governance sector.

Opponents of the theory have criticised the approach suggesting that it adds complexity to management by making firms responsible to a larger group of interested parties (Sundaram & Inkpen, 2004) and that including the voice of stakeholders compromised firm results due to negotiation needed to deal with competing interests (Blattberg, 2004). Freeman and colleagues (2010) attempted to address these concerns by emphasising that this approach is “about creating as much value as possible for stakeholders, without resorting to trade-offs” (p. 28).

Despite being an important factor in non-profit football governance, stakeholder literature has mainly neglected ideas of power structures, abuse of power and power relationships (Fassin, 2012). Communication problems and power imbalances between the units of a network governance structure are some of the leading causes of conflict within sporting organisations (Slack & Parent, 2006).

#### **3.4.3.2. Stakeholder Power**

At policy level, grassroots sport organisations are required to enable a comprehensive range of groups to be involved decision-making processes (Lowther et al., 2016). The daily operations of any organisation involves power struggles which arise due to the

diversity of opinions, goals and ideas of the various stakeholders involved (Soares et al., 2010). Slack and Parent (2006, p.199) define power as the “ability to get someone to do something they would not have otherwise done”. Power has also been described as representative of social relations rather than an actor’s attributes and holds potential for influencing one or more other actors toward acting or changing in a certain direction (Emerson, 1962). Power is structural and arises from the relationships between two parties (cf. Mason & Slack, 2007; Walker & Hayton, 2017). NGBs are expected to meet a variety of expectations from an assortment of stakeholders, which tends to influence objectives and resource allocation (Winand et al., 2010). This discretion over the allocation of resources can create a level of dependency with other stakeholders which creates a major source of power for the resource awarding organisation (Ma, Rhee & Yang, 2013).

The concept of ‘salience’ was added by Mitchell and colleagues (1997) to refer to the degree of importance placed on each stakeholder based on an assessment of each stakeholder’s level of power, urgency and legitimacy. The attribute of power in a stakeholder has been found to be the main criterion to be considered in influencing an organisations decision-making (Harrison et al., 2010). Sotiriadou (2009) suggests that some stakeholders can gain their source of power from the control they hold over resources essential to the governing organisation. In a study of stakeholder salience, Miragaia, Ferreira and Carreira, (2014) found that the most prominent external stakeholder to a professional club was its member associations. This group were also classed as being ‘dangerous’, meaning they have the potential to harm the organisation through deploying their power.

Contextual elements such as structures and resources can influence power within organisations (Doherty, 1998; Hoye & Cuskelly, 2003). Within sport organisations, a

primary way for a stakeholder unit to acquire power is by its ability to acquire and control resources (i.e., money, people, and information). The dependence of organisations on resources held by stakeholders gives leverage and power to those stakeholders (Frooman, 1999). The power to implement and the external compliance with, national initiatives (e.g., national player development plan) has been cited as a potential issue within a federated governance system, as the sport governance system doesn't operate as a top-down system, meaning that lower level organisations do not always fully comply with directives and policies proposed at the national level (Hoye & Cuskelly, 2007).

#### **3.4.3.3. Stakeholder Communication**

With the Genesis report (2002) concluding that the FAI had poor and ineffective communication with stakeholders, it is crucial to assess what the outcomes of such ineffective relations are within sport governance networks. Representing stakeholders in decision-making, being accountable and responsive to stakeholders in terms of decisions taken are key recommendations for NGBs (UK Sport, 2004). The use of formal authority to resolve or indeed suppress situations of conflict is common (Slack & Parent, 2006). Unmanaged task and process conflict which can escalate, and trigger relationship conflict can develop from a lack of communication (Hamm-Kerwin, 2010). Communicating to stakeholders is key in initiating any organisational culture or operational change within organisations (Tyler et al., 2013). Due to the voluntary nature of organisations and the multiple levels involved, informal communication is often used which can lead to message confusion, trust issues and the message being negatively influenced (Danylchuk et al., 2015; Legg, Snelgrove, & Wood, 2016). When relying on the discretionary efforts of volunteers, a collaborative style is particularly relevant (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006). Communication problems and power

imbalances between the units of a network governance structure are some of the leading causes of conflict within sporting organisations (Slack & Parent, 2006).

#### **3.4.4. Network governance**

Network (also referred to as federated or systemic) governance structures can be defined as “a network of organisations which seek to allocate resources, and exercise control and co-ordination” (Shilbury et al., 2013, p.350). In relation to the organisation of football in Ireland this includes the FAI, SFAI, SFAI leagues, clubs and Junior football bodies (see Figure 5). The federated nature of sport systems may significantly impact on the overall governing role due to the governing body not having complete control over decision making processes at all levels. The ‘top-down’ system has given way to a complex system of inter-relationships between stakeholders, each looking to exert power and draw on alliances (Henry & Lee, 2004, p. 28). Network governance results in the erosion or diffusion of power from those who govern to the governed (Adams, 2014), moving from a top-down to a bottom up approach to governance.

Whilst facilitative regional relationships are a key aspect of organisational strategic capability (Ferkins & Shilbury, 2012), the impact of this system can lead to self-serving motives being advanced. The delegate system of representatives that usually comprise the board of a federated sport system can also be problematic in the sense that members may try to represent their local areas needs rather than a broader national view on the governance of the sport (Henry & Lee, 2004; Hoye & Cuskelly, 2007). Governance networks may not be equal and may entrench local power disparities between stakeholders (Marsh, 2008; Bingham, 2011). If certain actors in the network governance process have less resources, status or the capacity to participate on an

equal footing, collaboration can be prone to manipulation by the stronger actors (Ansell & Gash, 2007).

Henry and Lee (2004, p.29) suggest that the key implications of such a systemic structure of sport governance is that it can lead to the need for significant negotiation to achieve policy change, a lack of total control by a governing body, and if control is achieved it is often related to their ability to negotiate with stakeholders, meaning that “mutual adjustment” rather than “rational order planning and control” are key skills of the governing bodies. Whilst this federated system seeks to be a collaborative process it can often exacerbate patterns of historically derived interactions between actors (Shilbury et al., 2013), for example FAI and SFAI interactive patterns and dimensions.

Aligned to the notion of federalism of sport systems is ‘subsidiarity’. Subsidiarity refers to the most appropriate level of decision making within an organisation (Holt, 2009), and in the case of football governance that the highest most centralized level should only take actions if and insofar as a subordinate level cannot achieve the same goal in a better or equally sufficient way, believing in “federalism rather than centralism” (UEFA, 2005, p. 12). The principle of subsidiarity is being encouraged as a means to guide the future direction of the governance of football, at both domestic and European level (Holt, 2009). Many governing body structures in sport were developed in a different era and thus appear inadequate for many of the rigorous demands of modern-day sport (Katwala, 2000). With the increasing influence of FIFA and UEFA, football associations can find themselves in a position between governing and themselves being governed (Persson, 2011). The decision-making process surrounding the introduction of a National Football Plan, an under seventeen league, redistribution of development funds, a consistent approach to small sided games, pitch

size and non-competitive football across the 32 leagues in the federated system of the SFAI involved intensive negotiation between the FAI, SFAI and Junior organisations. The implications of a federated governance structure can be used as a lens through which to analyse the relationship between governance actors in schoolboy football which impacts on the talent development pathways experienced by youth players.

### **3.4.5. Culture**

Culture is defined as “a social system of shared symbols, meanings, perspectives, and social actions that are mutually negotiated by people in their relationships with others” (Stead, 2004, p. 392), or as “an internalized and shared schema or framework that is used by group (or subgroup) members as a refracted lens to ‘see’ reality, and in which both the individual and the collective experience the world” (Kagawa Singer et al., 2016, p.242). This framework shapes and is shaped by the institutions developed by its members to structure their world (Bronfenbrenner, 1997). Sport is a site that constructs, represents and provides unique insights into culture (Geertz, 1973). Athletes and practitioners are infused by their culture (Stambulova & Alfermann, 2009). Each sport culture is unique, based on an organisations history, identity and traditions (Coulter, Mallett, & Singer, 2016). Côté et al., (2007) acknowledged that the development pathway which an athlete selects depends not only on the sport but also the social and cultural context to which the athlete is exposed to, and ultimately influenced by.

Culture is a key manifestation in Bronfenbrenner’s macrosystem level analysis of development ecology (cf. Bronfenbrenner, 1974, 1977). An analysis of the culture of an athlete’s development environment and context is key to ensure that athletes are

provided a “culturally specific approach” to career assistance (Stambulova et al., 2009, p.406) as differences between countries are likely to reflect differences in youth development pathways and systems (Ford et al., 2012). Despite the influential and pervasive nature of the relationship, the cultural significance of sport continues to be underestimated (Meân & Halone, 2010) with the cultural influence in sport management remaining relatively unexplored (Girginov, 2010). To advance our understanding of athletic development, the specifics of the sport and environment should be explored (Gulbin, Weissensteiner, Oldenziel, & Gagné, 2013). Culture profoundly affects sport management, with the applicability of management theories potentially stopping at national borders (Girginov, 2010). Morden (1999) explained that “it is unrealistic to take an ethnocentric and universalistic view towards the principles and practice of management as they are applied in other countries and other cultures” (p. 20), thus emphasising the need for context-specific research.

#### **3.4.5.1. Organisational Culture**

There is general agreement in literature that organisational culture is complex and not well-defined (Davies & Mannion, 2013) with many typologies and classifications emerging (cf. Smircich, 1983; Barley et al., 1988; Schultz, 1995). Schein (1990) asserts that it is the integration of key assumptions into a cultural paradigm which guides new members and provides stability. Organisational culture encompasses the collective memories, the taken for granted values, expectations, and underlying assumptions present in any organisation (Cameron & Quinn, 2011). It is pervasive, influencing how an organisation deals with tasks, environments and operations (Schein, 2010). Coherent organisational culture and philosophies are a key feature amongst successful talent development environments in sport (Martindale et al., 2005;



Henriksen et al., 2013). The culture of each sporting organisation is unique and a unilateral acceptance of practices from another organisation without considering the unique specificity, insights and challenges associated with the relevant environment will fail to account for potential influences on the context (du Gay & Vikkelsø, 2012; Pankhurst & Collins, 2013). The sport organisation (FAI in this case) is the “system controller” in the talent development process and has responsibility for policy development within the sport (Pankhurst & Collins, 2013, p.91). This system of sport governance incorporates stakeholders (i.e., SFAI) and the effective management of stakeholders is greatly influenced by organisational culture (Wolsey & Whitrod-Brown, 2012). Paradoxically, conflicts of stakeholder interests can influence organisational culture (Isopeskul et al., 2016). Organisational culture can have an impact on economic performance measures (MacIntosh & Doherty, 2007), job satisfaction (Tsai, 2011) and organisational commitment (Casida & Pinto-Zipp, 2008). An organisational context and culture that supports the integration of stakeholders into a shared vision and belief for the future development and practices of the organisation is key (Gibson et al., 2000). Culture stabilises a group and determines how a group will deal with its basic tasks of internal integration and external survival and growth (Schein, 1990). Culture is also evolutionary, beginning with a leader who imposes his/her own values and assumptions on a group, if this group is successful then these assumptions are taken for granted, that culture will then define for later generations of members what behaviours are acceptable. If the group runs into adaptive difficulties these assumptions become invalid and thus a leader’s role is to step outside that culture and start an evolutionary change (Schein, 2010).

### **3.5. Study Rationale**

Mills and colleagues (2012, p.1603) suggest that research should identify “the drivers that interact to facilitate progression at key stages in the developmental pathway”. Key drivers in the development pathway for young Irish footballers include the sporting organisations involved. The actions of these organisations determine the availability and equity of resources, congruence of philosophical approaches, design of the pathway and the nature of communication and quality of interactions between these groups. This organisational culture exists as a prominent feature of a developing athletes’ exosystem, thus the functioning in respect of its networks of bodies should be explored. The goals of effective collaboration within such settings should be to maximise organisational performance, manage risk and to foster confidence and trust with the wider stakeholder community (Pedler, Burgoyne, & Boydell, 2010).

The SFAI and its affiliated leagues have been identified as the primary stakeholder in this analysis of youth talent development as there is a high dependency from the FAI on the SFAI in relation to providing league structures, providing competition structures and initial access to coaching resources from the SFAI. The SFAI meet the requirements of potentially salient stakeholders in relation to the power, urgency and legitimacy (Mitchell et al., 1997). Stakeholder theory emphasises the need for cooperation and collaboration with stakeholders by engaging in a mutually beneficial relationship which advocates redistributing benefits to stakeholders, redistributing key decision-making power to stakeholders and bearing a fiduciary relationship to stakeholders (Freeman, 2002). It is impossible to isolate organisations from their stakeholders; indeed, the multiple relationships must be enriched as these interconnections constitute the very existence of the organisation (Buchholz &

Rosenthal, 2005). The Genesis report outlined that organisational changes by the FAI were needed for coherent football governance, primarily related to communication with stakeholders, with Kelly (2017) identifying the media opinion that the FAI are “fighting against an ingrained culture involving a deep-seated ignorance and resistance” (p. 746). Schein (2010) believes that organisational culture begins with leaders who impose their own values and assumptions on a group and is sustained by actions and assumptions within the setting. Thus it is important to explore the insights into the governance and communication practices, values and actions of apex stakeholders within the developing athlete’s exosystem and these ‘distal processes’ (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) that directly impact on the structure of the development pathway and the journey of each athlete.

## **3.6. Methodology**

### **3.6.1. Research design**

This research followed a social constructivist approach which assumes that reality is constructed through interactions of phenomena related to an interplay between history and culture (Guba & Lincoln, 2004). Due to the exploratory nature of the approach, a single case, qualitative methodology was deemed most appropriate (Sekaran, 2003; Creswell, 2013) as it allowed the researcher to go beyond descriptions and attempt to gain an in-depth understanding of the complex relationships being explored (Anyan, 2013) in a context-specific setting (i.e., the Republic of Ireland) (Patton, 2002). Semi-structured interviews were selected as they are a commonly used method of collecting data in qualitative social research methods (Holstein & Gubrium, 2004). The openness of semi-structured interviews fits with the constructivist approach as it allows participants to share their lived experiences of the subject matter (Shaw & Hoerber, 2016).

### **3.6.2. Participants**

This study uses data gathered from semi-structured interviews from a range of actors within the football governance system in the Republic of Ireland. A sample of n=12 key stakeholders were chosen for this study, based on their position within strategic apex roles within various organisation involved in Irish youth football (Figure 5). Participants were selected using a purposive sampling strategy, this supports the use of smaller sample size numbers as it ensures richness of data in terms of the diversity

and characteristics of views that the sample represents (Patton, 1990; Ritchie et al., 2014). Potential participants were contacted via a recruitment and information letter (Appendix D) and those that agreed to participate completed a consent form (Appendix E).

If the selected participants possess a level of expertise within the cultural context, then small samples can be sufficient in generating reliable data sets (Romney, Batchelder, & Weller, 1986). Richness of the data was ensured by selecting appropriate participants with an in-depth knowledge of the topic area and embedded within the relevant cultural context. The researcher followed guidelines from Ritchie and colleagues (2014) in designing a purposive sample which included identifying the framework of variables to include and prioritising the selection criteria used. Criteria included holding a position on the identified governance rungs (Figure 5), with geographical diversity and age spread also being prioritised when selecting participants to contact.

Interviews were conducted with three members of the SFAI Executive Council, three schoolboy League Secretaries, one Junior football provincial Executive, one football executive from a leading DDSL club and one from another club outside of Dublin, two FAI strategic apex members and one FAI grassroots development officer (Table 6). Due to the exceptionally small pool of people that have been members of the SFAI executive council, anonymity guarantees were given to the three members from the council, therefore pseudonyms will be used throughout to protect their identify. Conversely, Singleton and Strait (1999) argue that complete anonymity is impossible to achieve in social science research. As historical and contextual factors and information are important in qualitative research, the researcher will attempt to

provide as much background information as possible whilst ensuring that micro-aggregation of data does not occur (Clark, 2006).

Table 6 Interviewee role and code

<b>Stakeholder organisation</b>	<b>Organisation role</b>	<b>Interviewee Role</b>	<b>Alphanumeric code</b>
<i>Football Association of Ireland (FAI)</i>	Governing body of football in the Republic of Ireland. Affiliated to UEFA.	Senior level employee with position at the interface of stakeholders	FAI1
		FAI employee	FAI2
		Regional development officer	FAI3
<i>Schoolboy Association of Ireland (SFAI)</i>	Governs and administers all football for under 17s in the Republic of Ireland. The FAI is its parent organisation.	Former General secretary of the SFAI, Past chairman of the SFAI, Executive council member	EC1  EC2

		Past chairman of the SFAI, Executive council member	EC3
<i>SFAI Leagues</i>	32 schoolboy leagues administering football in the 26 counties of the Republic of Ireland under the auspices of the SFAI but autonomous bodies.	Rural league secretary  Urban league secretary  DDSL league official	LS1  LS2  LS3
<i>Club</i>	Club official from within one of the SFAI leagues,	Director of Football in DDSL club  Club secretary from another schoolboy league	CS1  CS2
<i>Regional Junior Football Association</i>	Administers football over the age of 17 in one of the four provinces of Ireland.	General secretary	JF1

The following alphanumeric system was used to attribute respondents' quotations in the Results and Discussion section; 'FAI' 1-3 represent participants who work for the FAI, 'EC' 1-3 represent respondents from the SFAI Executive Council, 'LS' 1-3 represent respondents from League Secretaries, 'CS' represents club secretaries and 'JF' represents the Junior football regional secretary (Table 6).

### **3.6.3. Procedure**

Ethical approval was sought and granted by the Liverpool John Moores University ethics committee. Following the purposive sampling procedures, participants were contacted via email and provided with an overview of the study. In total, 20 apex position holders were contacted, eight did not reply to the initial email or provide any feedback on their lack of involvement. A pilot study was conducted to ascertain the appropriateness of the interview guide with a league secretary and club secretary prior to the finalisation of the interview guide. The interview guide was deductively developed using previously generated key research elements (Table 7). All interviews were conducted by the same researcher who was experienced in qualitative methodology, which standardised the interview process (Patton, 1990). These interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interviews ranged from 68 to 119 minutes in duration (M= 83 minutes). A clear paper-trail of the anonymization strategy was maintained, which consisted of original transcriptions, anonymity numbering systems and labelled codes being located separately (Clark, 2006).



Table 7 Interview guide

<p><b>Section 1 – Introduction</b> Study and interview purpose and importance. Participant ethical rights and confidentiality.</p> <p><b>Section 2 – Participant football background</b> Experience and current role within Irish youth football.</p> <p><b>Section 3 – Intra-organisational analysis</b> Aim: to examine the aims, philosophy and role of their organisation within the context of the Irish network governance system. Clarify governance structures and identify organisational culture and practices within each level (Bourke, 2007; Shilbury, Ferkins &amp; Smythe, 2013; Hoye &amp; Doherty, 2011; Mitchell et al., 1997; Schultz, 1995).</p> <p><b>Section 4 – Inter-organisational analysis</b> Aim: to examine relational issues with other organisations (e.g. requirements as stakeholders, communication channels, power balance, areas of incongruence) views of the role of other organisations, historical relationships and key contextual issues (Harrison &amp; Wicks, 2013; Henry &amp; Lee, 2004; Hoye &amp; Cuskelly, 2007; Slack &amp; Parent, 2006).</p> <p><b>Section 5 – National Player Development Plan</b> Aim: to explore stakeholder views on the establishment, content, acceptance and future development of the plan (Henriksen, Stambulova, &amp; Roessler, 2010; FAI, 2015; Martindale, Collins &amp; Daubney, 2005; Williams &amp; Reilly, 2000).</p> <p><b>Section 6 – End of interview</b> Clarification of any issues, appreciation for participation.</p>
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### 3.6.4. Data Analysis

Credibility depends more on the richness of the data and the analytical abilities of the research team than on sample size (Patton, 1990). The primary researcher is from Ireland and has played underage football in Ireland but didn't have pre-existing personal knowledge of the bodies included in this research. The wider research team had no experience of underage football within Ireland but had experienced underage football in a different country and added a wealth of qualitative research experience. Constructivism values multiple realities, thus to acquire valid and reliable

interpretations of such realities, multiple methods of examining data are required (Golafshani, 2003).

Reflexivity refers to a process of critically reflecting on the knowledge we produce and our role in producing that research (Braun & Clarke, 2013). A process of reflection and critical dialogue (Saldaña, 2011; Cornish et al., 2014) was engaged in regularly by the research team. The research team aided the reflexivity of the data analysis process by providing “triangular consensus” and/or general discussion regarding the reality being constructed, throughout the analysis procedure (Gould, Jackson, & Finch, 1993, p.137; Rennie, 2004; Hill et al., 2005) with any differences being resolved by in-depth discussion and negotiated consensus (Bradley et al., 2007). This helped to challenge the thematic categorisation of the data (Stake, 2006) and to enhance its validity by challenging each-others construction of knowledge (Patton, 2002; Cowan & Taylor, 2016).

Content analysis used both a deductive and inductive process, which saw the incorporation of contextual analysis after theoretical data had been collected and analysed. Immersion in the data and reviewing without coding is an important first step in a systematic approach to data analysis as it allows the researcher to identify emergent themes without losing the connections to context (Crabtree & Miller, 1999; Bradley et al., 2007). Using primary themes identified when devising the interview guide (Table 7) to form an organising framework for codes, the content analysis continued with a line-by-line review of the data, clustering quotes around identified uniformities. The author remained cautious of not manipulating data into these codes, instead using them as a starting point for the research to build on and benefit from previous insights (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2020). The use of this deductive logic is not unusual in qualitative research (Gibbs, 2008), especially in cases where the

researcher is aware of the concepts/frameworks related to the research question. Along with these conceptual codes, relationship codes (links among conceptual codes), and participant perspectives and characteristics code types (age, geographic location, paid/unpaid position) were also utilised (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Bradley et al., 2007; Miles et al., 2020) which facilitated analysis within and across participant roles (Ivankova et al., 2006) and allowed for greater insights and overall contextual analysis. Data which was not coded under this framework was identified and subsequently analysed to determine if they represented a new category (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) with the purpose of this being to identify if this inductive approach could derive new insights (Legg et al., 2016).

While individual participants remained anonymised, as much as possible, the context is made available for analysis to understand the networks and relationships at play (Clark, 2006). This was done by the author providing the reader with a background to football in Ireland, the current roles of the organisations involved in the governance of football, their historical engagements and interactions and significant events (i.e., Genesis report). Quotes are used to display results to emphasise and retain individual uniqueness (cf. Morrow & Smith, 1995).

### **3.7. Results and Discussion**

This study sought to examine the governance structures and behaviours of all bodies involved in talent development processes within the Republic of Ireland. Key objectives of this study was to (a) explore the relationships between the main stakeholders on the TD pathways (i.e., SFAI, FAI) concerning the historical and

current context of Irish football, (b) to identify structural and resource inequalities within Irish youth football and (c) to assess the ‘fit for purpose’ nature of the competition and performance structures within Irish youth football from the provider perspective.

To this end, key research questions were chosen to explore this relationship between the main stakeholders on the TD pathways (i.e., SFAI, FAI) with respect to the historical and current context of Irish football. These research questions included: Do tensions exist between stakeholders of football governance in the Republic of Ireland and if so, what is the basis for such tensions? Does the FAI display effective governance behaviours in relation to its primary stakeholders (SFAI, SFAI leagues and clubs, Junior FA), from the perspective of these stakeholders? Is the talent development structures adequate to appropriately develop youth footballers?

### **3.7.1. Objective (a) Exploring the relationship between stakeholders**

#### **3.7.1.1. Tensions between football governance stakeholders**

Histories of conflict and antagonism and minimal mutuality between bodies have been identified as adversely impacting on the governing of such networks (O’Boyle & Shilbury, 2016), as outlined by CS2 *“there are historical grudges and clashes, they affect everything other bodies try to do”*. This conflict was outlined by EC2 *“I think it’s a pity that there are people in schoolboy football who call the FAI ‘they’. When they should be saying ‘we’, not ‘they’ and ‘them’*”. Stemming from *“traditions”*, with the governing body *“being entrenched in 100-year-old systems”* (EC1), all participants within the youth administration stated that poor relations between the units of football

governance hampered strategic management and progression of the sport, yet the Junior FA claimed to have “*a good working relationship; they don't impede on our game and we don't impede on theirs*” (JF1). The power balance of the FAI and SFAI was summarised by a club secretary who welcomed the influence of the FAI on the governance of youth football;

*“The FAI have much more power; people are not as keen to take the FAI on because there's all sorts of sanctions that can be put up against them and there's no body in UEFA that's going to overrule the FAI. I just think that the SFAI is becoming just, an obstacle because people aren't prepared to take them on.” [CS1]*

Views on the FAI differed significantly across various sections of the SFAI structures, which is not unusual within governance research, with Inglis (1997) noting that different positions within an organisation can bring differing perceptions of the importance and performance of governing body board; “*I'd prefer that we break away from them [FAI] entirely, what do they do for us?*” (EC3), “*The FAI should be more proactive in their involvement in schoolboy football, they have the expertise, and the clout with UEFA to force change, I'd welcome that*” (LS3). LS5 demonstrated an individualistic perspective from that league, continuing that he “*“didn't know how tensions had developed”* between bodies;

*“Personally, I don't care who we get support from, whether it's the FAI or SFAI, whoever, I don't have any interest in these politics, old school- rows, let them get on with it they can sort it out.” [CS2]*

The variations of perceptions experienced was identified by FAI1:

*“The leagues want to do their own thing, not all of them, some of them do but if you were to talk to the coaches, the majority of the coaches would say 'we want to be with you'. But the administrators don't see that.” [FAI1]*

There have been several potentially latent preconditions to conflict between organisations identified within governance literature, for example leadership

behaviours, power struggles, group composition and diversity and poor communication (Jehn, Northcraft, & Neale 1999; Pelled, Eisenhardt, & Xin, 1999; Robbins, 1997). The primary causes for tensions felt by the various stakeholder groups were governance issues related to the leadership (strategic) apex of the NGB (governing actions, communication, perceptions of injustice) and resource issues (financial and human).

#### 3.7.1.1.1. *NGB leadership*

Leadership is an important contextual variable which has significant influence at all levels of the management process (Molan, Kelly, Arnold, & Matthews, 2018). From clubs and leagues a lot of the attention surrounding the FAI focused on its CEO, who is a “pivotal player” in developing board capability (Ferkins, Shilbury, & McDonald, 2009, p.271); “*When [the CEO] came on board first I thought he was doing a great job, he has done some marvellous things. Like everything else, he just got too powerful and we feel ignored*” (LS5), “[The CEO] *tries to be all things to all people in football*” (CS8). FAI2 mused that “*it’s a tough position, resources are limited and there’s so much to do, I’m not sure anyone sees that*”. The primary actor (i.e., CEO) often develops a level of “recreational pluralism” as he must maintain multiple types of relationships with a number of actors within the governance processes, developing multiple identities as a result (Shipilov et al., 2014, p.449). This position was highlighted by CS2 when he identified that the CEO “*tries to be friends with everybody, and I think maybe slowly but surely he’s finding out that he can’t be*”. The ability of the CEO to network is recognised as a key political skill in influencing tactics and moderating outcomes (Ferris et al., 2007). Ferkins, Shilbury and McDonald (2005) identified a tension between a CEO who should be focused on maximising commercial opportunities for the organisation balanced with the boards’ recognition

of remaining grounded in “community sensibilities” which reflect the requirements of the wider members (p.218). Perceptions of the CEO seemed to be subjective across the SFAI membership influenced by recent dealings, historical perceptions and personal impacts, these varying perceptions highlight the complexity of CEOs maintaining a positive image (Lock, Filo, Kunkel, & Skinner, 2013).

The difficulty for the FAI in maintaining a positive working relationship with the SFAI and its federation of leagues is that the various stakeholders “differ in the criteria they use to evaluate the effectiveness of an organisation” (Herman & Renz, 1997, p. 187). This is a key consideration in this case as there were different opinions by SFAI members on the FAI and its leadership, management and effectiveness and indeed relevance. What complicates these relationships further is that these views may change over time depending on interactions and experiences of the stakeholders with the organisation and its members. This was acknowledged as also being an issue within the SFAI by the Executive Council, “*The SFAI Executive committee faces all sorts of administrative, disciplinary and other issues in a season and while their decisions are deliberate the reaction depends entirely on the receiver and many react in a political way*” (EC2).

#### 3.7.1.1.2. *Board composition and political dominance*

The size of the decision-making cohort of a stakeholder group is inversely related to efficiency, effective communication and heterogeneity of views and this can lead to increased bargaining, time consuming communication to reach a consensus and a reduced quality of debate (Taylor & O’Sullivan, 2009; Grissom, 2010) with large group numbers being an outdated approach to decision-making in sport governance (Taylor & Sullivan, 2009). This was signalled by a League Secretary, “*There’s around 60 people on the council in the FAI and about the same with the SFAI, when can you*

*ever make a decision if you have 60 people?”* (LS2). While no ‘one size fits all’ in terms of the ideal board composition (Rodríguez-Fernández, 2015), Taylor and O’Sullivan (2009) suggest that NGB board size should be between five to twelve members. The structure of boards and committees can have a major impact on their abilities to govern effectively (Walters, Trenberth, & Tacon, 2010). The board composition of the SFAI (Figure 5) was criticised by the league secretaries and club secretaries. This related to the minimal number of Executive Council members that have served on the Committee due to past Chairman getting re-elected into various roles:

*“You have the top table of fellas that were involved in schoolboy football but they are now on this pedestal and can't be gotten rid of, can't shift them. It's only going to grow with a heap of dinosaurs built into it.” [LS1]*

The idea of boards being self-perpetuating is not a new one, with boards usually influencing future board members and its composition (Fama & Jensen, 1983). Five of the ten other board members of the FAI (along with the CEO) have served on the board since the CEO took the job on a full-time basis in 2005 (Cowzer, 2018). O’Regan and Oster (2005) found that those board members with a longer tenure are more generous in terms of financial and time inputs to their organisation, while Bairner outlines that this longevity can lead to an “institutionalised inertia” (2004, p.40). CS2 acknowledged this and demonstrated respect towards the older members of the board but sought progression;

*“A lot of them have given their lives to schoolboy football and you have to respect that. They were there when no-one else was there and they put in the hours and they were brilliant for their time but you have to have progress and embrace new ideas.” [CS2]*

With no formal organisational socialisation practices in operation within the SFAI, colleagues have the strongest informal cultural socialisation influence within an



organisation (Chao, 1988; Allen, 2006), and this relationship with insiders is the primary vehicle of socialisation (Reichers, 1987). The perpetuation of culture involves patterns of behaviours and habits which influence underlying beliefs and future actions (Duhigg, 2012) which can hinder or foster managerial goals. For effective practice within elite sport, inevitable pressures to be assimilated into negative organisational practices must be avoided (Nesti, 2010; Relvas et al., 2010). A delegate representative system is often a feature of the network system of governance. Most of the positions on the SFAI national council are filled adopting a bottom-up approach (O’Boyle & Hassan, 2016) where each league selects its own representative:

*“I don't own the league I'm only the pen pusher, it's the clubs that own the league but we're there to represent the clubs and my view is that if my clubs tell me to vote x,y and z that's the way I'll vote.”*  
[LS1]

Individual clubs were critical of how their own leagues were being governed and represented at the SFAI council level, *“I would argue that they are representing their own opinion as a cartel and not totally representative of the feelings of the clubs”* (CS1). Dissatisfaction exists not just from the leagues to the SFAI Executive Council but also from the Executive Council to the leagues themselves, with a principle focus on the DDSL:

*“The DDSL has about a half a dozen clubs where a member of each of those big clubs make up the board of directors and the DDSL don't care about schoolboy football, it's the half a dozen big clubs that poach all the prime players hoping that one of those become the little golden nugget that will turn out to be a Roy Keane. And it's all about money and it's not about players or football at all.”* [EC3]

The difficulty of these delegate-based board systems which often self-serve rather than taking a broader view on governance, is that members may try to represent their local areas needs rather than a broader national view on the governance of the sport (Henry & Lee, 2004; Hoye & Cuskelly, 2007), *“There's no doubt that there is a lot of politics*

*in Irish football, a lot of people looking after their green blazer brigade and looking after their own patch”* (LS2). This is important when it comes to agenda setting which is a highly charged political process. Princen and Rhinard (2006) outline that the manner in which policies are formulated and packaged has a strong bearing on eventual outcomes, which is why board composition and agenda setting power is highly charged and competitive. Independent members should be added to boards to allow for a broadening of the expertise of the group and to provide an independent voice to proceedings (Taylor & O’Sullivan, 2009).

#### *3.7.1.1.3. Financial Tensions*

The FAI fund the SFAI to cover administration costs and provides funds in grant format for its 32 leagues. The monetary value of these grants was seen as extremely low by the SFAI, with one league secretary referring to it as *“window dressing... we look after over half of all players playing football in this country and that’s all we receive”* (LS3). Along with concerns raised about the extent of the funding, league secretaries and executive council members also voiced concerns regarding the lack of accountability that the FAI maintain over this spending. Barney (2011) outlines that a goal for the governing organisation should be to create a positive ratio between tangible outcomes received and resources given (i.e., time, effort) by stakeholders. In football these can take many forms *“some people would do anything to put their bum on a plane and a free trip or a free dinner or a free drink”* (EC3). NGBs are expected to meet a variety of expectations from an assortment of stakeholders, which tends to influence objectives and resource allocation (Winand et al., 2010).

Funding withdrawal was used by the NGB as a potential threat over incongruent behaviour and actions, *“the FAI will say things like ‘we’ll take your funding’, my answer to that is let them”* (LS1), with some members believing that it reduced their

autonomy and undervalued the work of volunteers within underage football. Other members preferred to remain unpaid as they felt it gave them more autonomy versus paid colleagues:

*“[FAI senior staff member] has an old principle which is that he believes that if you pay someone to do a job they'll do it better than the volunteer. I personally don't believe that... I would say it's possibly because that would give the organisation control over us.” [EC2].*

The tension between autonomy and interdependence is a central tenet of power relations (Emerson, 1962). Usually this discretion over the allocation of resources can create a level of dependency with other stakeholders which creates a major source of power for the resource awarding organisation (Ma et al., 2013), in this case the FAI. A common observation across the network of stakeholders was that the FAI were struggling financially so the notion of financial dependency and the automatic power of the FAI is reduced within this case. This perception of the FAI has affected relations between the FAI and its network of affiliates; *“I sent back word saying that I wouldn't have anything to do with the FAI as they owe us money so we are now not participating in anything to do with them”* (LS1).

#### *3.7.1.1.4. Lack of Organisational Justice*

Organisational justice has been defined as perceptions of fairness and how this impacts on behaviour within organisations (Moorman, 1991) and has been linked to both organisational productivity (Heponiemi et al., 2007) and commitment (Cihangiroglu, 2011). Fairness was identified as a key driver of stakeholder perceptions regarding its external relationships (Harrison & Wicks, 2013) with stakeholders who feel strongly about people being accountable and fair expecting the same from organisations (Brummette & Zoch, 2016). Primary sources of a lack of justice perception within this study were related to the FAI taking *“our players”* (EC1) and developing unique

alliances with one of the 32 SFAI leagues. Donaldson and Preston (1995) define stakeholders as groups with legitimate interests participating in the organisation in order to obtain benefits, if those benefits are not financial then perhaps there is a greater resentment for the stripping of what is seen to be ‘assets’ (i.e., players and power dynamics).

Related to the incongruence regarding roles and responsibilities of the SFAI, some members of the SFAI felt that any attempt by the FAI to engage in talent development policy implementation related to players under 16 as “*interfering with our players*” (EC3). This differed from other SFAI members who welcomed even greater influence by the FAI onto policies related to player development; “*they [FAI] need to go in strong and instruct the leagues that they must take part [in relation to the proposed Player Development Plan]*” (CS2) The sport organisation (FAI) is the “system controller” in the talent development process and has responsibility for policy development within the sport (Pankhurst & Collins, 2013, p.91) yet an organisational context and culture that supports the integration of stakeholders into a shared vision and belief for the future development and practices of the organisation is key (Gibson et al., 2012).

The federated nature of sport systems may significantly impact on the overall governing role due to the governing body not having complete control over decision making processes at all levels, resulting in lower levels of legitimate power. Within the SFAI, there was discontent regarding the relationship between one of the 32 leagues (Dublin District Schoolboy League) and the FAI. Financial aid of €500,000 provided by the DDSL to the FAI in funding its National Training Centre in return for rental of the pitches for 15 years (Keville, 2019) prompted consternation amongst the Executive Council of the SFAI and the other schoolboy leagues regarding the nature

of the alliance between the FAI and the DDSL. The DDSL providing funding to the FAI has blurred the lines of traditional vertical relationships between these organisations. With the outcome being that a number of the other 31 leagues and members of the intermediary organisation (SFAI) have become uncomfortable with the power balance of the DDSL “*There is far too much dependence on schoolboy football in Dublin*” (JF1), which is consistent with Nierhoff and Moorman (1993) insight into perceptions of fairness influencing co-worker relationships. The schoolboy leagues question the ‘fairness’ of the dependency relationship. Money is a source of organisational power, and in this situation the parent body (FAI) is paradoxically relying on the sub-unit (DDSL) for financial aid which could complicate the power balance within the governance system. These interactions create social pressures for stakeholders to reciprocate with similar behaviour in subsequent matters, which perpetuates the cycle of incongruence (Mattingly & Greening, 2002). Greenberg and Baron (2000) emphasise that avoiding unequal treatment between groups, promoting unbiased decision-making and providing effective feedback can enhance organisational justice with an organisation.

### **3.7.1.2. Governance behaviours of the FAI**

Stakeholder theory emphasises the need for cooperation and collaboration with stakeholders and engaging in a mutually beneficial relationship which advocates redistributing benefits to stakeholders, redistributing key decision-making power to stakeholders and bearing a fiduciary relationship to stakeholders (Freeman, 2002). In applied management, the mechanisms of effective governance may be described as acting in the best interests of members and considering the ethical standards of these relationships, formalising roles and responsibilities, utilising stakeholder input,

developing effective communication and regularly providing them with accurate disclosures on all matters regarding the governance and performance of the organisation, (Henry & Lee, 2004; Australian Sports Commission, 2012; EU Work Plan for Sport, 2013). As the ‘system controller’ of football governance, perspectives on the FAI from within the SFAI and Junior football will be assessed on these key concepts.

#### 3.7.1.2.1. *Acting in the best interests of members*

Governance is concerned with how an organisation develops strategic goals and direction, how the board of an organisation monitors performance to achieve these goals and ensuring that the board acts in the best interests of the members (Australian Sports Commission, 2012). Perceptions of equity and feeling that concerns are addressed are key tensions in managing a network system (Provan & Kenis, 2007). As noted above, the delegate-based board system can cause problems due to perceptions of representing local or individual needs rather than a macro view on governance (Henry & Lee, 2004; Hoye & Cuskelly, 2007). This lack of independent oversight on the FAI was noted by EC1, “*There is no communication whatsoever. The FAI go off and do their own thing*”. Participants noted a culture of rumour regarding the future actions regarding the governance of schoolboy football by the FAI, “*It’s like the fox looking after the hen coup*” (LS3). The notion of organisational performance of an NGB is multi-dimensional, encompassing financial, social utility, economic, resource gathering and utilisation and sporting performance (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978; Bayle & Robinson, 2007; Winand et al., 2010). This presents a dilemma to the board of management within an NGB which must balance competing interests and maximise often scarce resources to a variety of output indicators. The dichotomy between the economic performance of the organisation and the ‘social good’ stakeholder voice was

outlined by LS1; *“Their focus is on money. That is the biggest problem, they don't want to sit down and talk to the grass-roots people.”*

#### 3.7.1.2.2. *Formalising roles and responsibilities*

Within the SFAI hierarchy there existed discrepancies over their actual role within football governance. Some members highlighted their administrative function, *“We oversee the leagues and the role of the league is of local governance and organising and supervising suitable competitions”* (EC2), whilst others identified a greater management and governing role and future aspirations for the body, *“Our overall goal is to control school boy football and run it and manage it. Someone has to manage it and we manage it well”* (EC1). The governing role of the SFAI Executive Council was dismissed by a League Secretary, describing it instead as a *“talk shop and a glorified cup committee”* (LS1). Responsibility over the governance of football was unclear throughout the exploratory discussions, *“we're the ones that run football, not the FAI”* (LS1) with the EC2 stating *“we are a direct affiliate of the FAI, it's the governing body. The FAI is God”*. Chelladurai and Zintz (2015) suggest that roles and responsibilities of each unit within a network governance context be reviewed to identify if restructuring or reorganisation of the individual units is required to reflect the functions of the apical NGB (in this case the FAI).

#### 3.7.1.2.3. *Effective communication*

Apex organisations should facilitate the democratic process within the network of stakeholder organisations and oversee productive interactions among these organisations (Freeman, 1999; Chelladurai & Zintz, 2015). A lack of effective communication was noted as being present both within the SFAI and its constituent members and between the SFAI and the FAI. The closed nature of questioning allowed

at the FAI AGM was highlighted by one League Secretary; *“No-one is allowed to put a question at an AGM of the FAI. If you have a question you must put it in writing to them and they will tell you whether you can ask the question or not”* (LS1). Participation of all stakeholders should be regarded as part of a democratic process, which offers open and frequent access for people to influence the political and strategic direction of the governance system (Lowther et al., 2016).

Communication is important as even if it initially doesn't solve problems it does provide the foundations for effective problem solving in the future (Brunsson, 1989), with Pelled and colleagues (1999) noting that inter-personal tensions are diminished when team members interact with each other and engage in task debates. Reflecting on his experience of one large scale meeting, FAI1 noted *“you'd want to have heard the abuse that I took, not only did I take a lot of criticism but there was things said at that meeting about the Board of Management of the FAI and its financial management”*. The fear often is that holding large scale collaborative arenas for discussion with stakeholders can release the perception of the governing organisation bowing to collaborative pressure and reducing its power perceptions (Pollitt & Hupe, 2011) with control over information being used as a form of power (Pettigrew, 1972). This alternate voice aversion often occurs when there are social advantages to be gained from holding the role (Joshi & Fast, 2013). The disconnect between 'them' and 'us' from the varying hierarchical levels of the football governance system was evident, *“they won't sit down and talk to us, the ones that know what's happening on the ground”* (LS2), this lack of empathy undermines the effectiveness of conflict and relationship management (Golman, 1998). These historical interactions snowball as they impact on future modes of communication, FAI3 *“the Board of Management of*



*the FAI are pretty much fed up of their shenanigans, this is the way it's going forward"* which creates deeper mistrust and ill feelings.

#### 3.7.1.2.4. *Accurate disclosures*

Ineffective communication can lead to message confusion and trust issues amongst levels of governing networks (Legg et al., 2016). This was highlighted as an existing issue both between SFAI levels of management (Executive Council and Leagues) and between the SFAI and the FAI; *"a lot of the floor of the SFAI wouldn't trust the Executive, wouldn't trust the top table"* (CS2). Regarding recent prominent interactions regarding the proposed implementation of a national player development plan by the FAI, a League Secretary dismissed the accuracy of FAI senior staff in transmitting the message;

*"We were at one meeting with [FAI official] and we were told a load of lies. They said they were given permission to bring in the ETP [development programme] at under 11, the SFAI said that they were not, that there was a meeting being held. That's the sort of politics that you have going on there." [EC1]*

#### 3.7.1.2.5. *Adoption of National Player Development Plan*

Changes within an organisation (i.e., talent development policy formation) will not be effective until they are compatible to the culture of the organisation as cultural incongruence will nullify any planned change (Mehta & Maheshwari, 2016). An example of recent formal and informal communication between the FAI and the SFAI centres on the Player Development Plan (PDP) (FAI, 2015b) which the FAI sought to develop in an attempt to harmonise the playing structures at underage level across Ireland (i.e., within the 32 leagues). Elements within the plan include a "player focused model based on enjoyment, reduced emphasis on winning, restructuring the player

model (i.e., roll-on substitutions, equal game time, no league tables up to under 12s) (FAI, 2015b). As examined earlier, involving stakeholders in the governance process can act as a “psychological contract that binds the individual to the organization” (Stoney & Winstanley, 2001, p.609) suggesting greater levels of commitment to the organisation and thus preventing undesirable and self-serving behaviour which is often a by-product of a network governance system. The FAI developed a technical committee which consisted of members from the FAI, Schools, SFAI and the National League to consult on a National Player Development Plan. Following the devising of the plan, when asked if this would go back to members for further consultation “*No I don't think there will be consultation on that, for the reason being that each of the affiliates; the schoolboys association, the schools are represented on the Board*” (FAI2). The FAI held several information meetings about this plan, with the manner it was discussed being described as “*very dictatorial*” (EC3). A FAI staff member who was involved in these sessions described being met with “*resistance.... mainly from the SFAI administrators*” (FAI1). Some leagues were in favour of the FAI plans but the network nature of governance led the usually autonomous leagues to suggest how the FAI should best communicate with them:

*“Not to make it compulsory or to turn around and say “this is how we would like to go”, sit down and have a discussion about it, try to get the leagues on board like that, talk to the leagues, and say “can you do 9v9?” and we'll say ‘look if we do that then it causes this problem.’” [LS2]*

This example of “mutual adjustment” rather than “rational order planning and control” (Henry & Lee, 2004, p.29), places the FAI in a difficult position as it attempts to force leagues to adhere to their new development plan. Leagues and Club Secretaries have said that only portions of the plan are appropriate in practice and some of the recommendations have not been currently adopted at grassroots level. With no

communication or guidance on how any infractions of the plan will be dealt with, or indeed by what organisation (FAI/SFAI), the power balance of the FAI is diminished from the perspective of stakeholders. Leagues which attempted to introduce similar proposals to SFAI AGMs welcomed the proposals and gave an insight how the FAI might progress:

*“The FAI are fed up of the messing going on between the SFAI and the schoolboy leagues so I think they may take a strong hand on this and instruct the leagues that they must take part or else say “we’ll run it ourselves.” [JF1]*

Prior to the FAI publishing their PDP, a league secretary brought a motion to the SFAI AGM to implement similar talent development practices across all leagues, “A league secretary got up and took the microphone ‘I think this is ludicrous, you can’t tell us what to do, you cannot tell every league in the country how to organise their leagues’ (JF1). Whilst this reluctance to engage in a process designed to “streamline and standardise youth player development across the country” (JF1) disappointed many League Secretaries, it was seen as a positive, autonomy-retaining action by some leagues who saw it as encroaching on “our players and our leagues” (LS3). Referring to the LOI under 17 league as part of the plan, EC1 commented;

*“It’s going to go ahead, but it won’t have SFAI support. It will have, I suppose a little bit of knocking there because if they want an under 17 league they should be playing under 17 players. Not trying to rape and poach the under 16 players from clubs who if you’ve a good player he could be the backbone of the team, take him out and that team goes fizz. If they want to do that they’ll be in trouble. There wasn’t enough thought put into that.” [EC1]*

A principle method of obtaining power is by obtaining and control resources (Parent & Slant, 2006). In this case, the resource is the league’s players. The SFAI seek to maintain power by retaining control of a valuable resource. Some leagues still fail to adopt measures which has been proposed by its two traditional hierarchical levels of

governance (SFAI and FAI). Football in Ireland is predominantly amateur in nature, characterised generally by club membership based within one's local area. Parochialism is a factor that negatively impacts the performance of many non-profit sport organisations (O'Boyle & Hassan, 2014) and often prevents a long-term coherent strategy being devised and implemented by sport governance structures (Shilbury & Ferkins, 2011). An unwillingness to engage in national, top-down initiatives is often a struggle within these network systems for the national governing body to negotiate (Hoye & Cuskelly, 2007) as other organisations seek to exert power and influence; *"The thing [football in Ireland] was just allowed to mushroom and it's very hard to get central control back. It's very hard to coordinate policy"* (EC1).

It appears that poor communication, a lack of clear channels of authority and decision-makers seem to hamper development, with the below statement demonstrating a cyclical effect of tension and poor communication within the governance of football nationally.

*"For political reasons our people [within the SFAI] didn't want the FAI involved with us [development of an elite coaching programme], so obviously they're going to say, 'what's good for you is good for us' and not involve us with the next development of plans."* [EC2]

### *Summary*

This analysis focused on the governance perceptions of primary stakeholders in schoolboy football (SFAI, FAI, SFAI leagues, clubs and Junior football) on their role within the development *exosystem* and their perceptions on the governance behaviours of the other organisations. Tensions exist within and across the system (both within the SFAI and outwardly to the FAI) based on leadership capabilities, financial tensions and a lack of perceived organisational justice. SFAI members encountered ineffective

stakeholder management practices which included non-formalised roles and responsibilities, ineffective communication, perceptions of not acting in the best interest of and inaccurate disclosures to, stakeholders which led to incongruence across the governance network.

Stakeholder, network and organisational culture theory were used to examine relationships within this non-profit, sporting governance structure. For a governing organisation to utilise the guiding principles of stakeholder theory for ethical purposes, economic efficiency or to develop psychological binds between the network of organisations involved in sport governance, it must consider the mechanisms required to overcome organisational inertia. The FAI and the SFAI need to assess current working relationships with each stakeholder group to develop congruence within the governance system, as the current state of incongruence, distrust and distain is unlikely to provide the platform for effective and coherent national talent development policy implementation.

## **3.7.2. Objective (b): To identify structural and resource inequalities within Irish youth football**

### **3.7.2.1. Introduction**

Appropriate infrastructure (e.g., facilities, resources, administration) is an important aspect of football management and organisation at national and regional level (Bourke, 2003). Within Study One, inequalities in relation to player selection and player development were identified. To fully understand the mechanisms behind these inequalities, key stakeholder insights on the equality of resources and the potential explanatory factors and implications were explored. The primary inequities identified by the respondents were financial, scouting networks, quality of coaching, standard of facilities and players (their numbers and quality).

### **3.7.2.2. Finance**

The FAI fund the SFAI to cover administration costs (approx. €20,000 per year) and also provides funds in grant format for its 32 leagues, with the breakdown of these grants dependant on the number of teams in each league (ranging from approximately €12,000 to the DDSL and €1,600 to smaller leagues). The monetary value of these grants was seen as being extremely low by the SFAI, with one league secretary referring to it as “*window dressing*” (CS2). Along with concerns raised about the extent of the funding, league secretaries and executive council members also voiced concerns regarding the lack of accountability that the FAI maintain over this spending. Inequalities also existed at Junior football level with JF1 noting the “*extreme variations between number of affiliates*” and thus subscriptions paid, between the associations. The FAI funded a secretary role within the organisation with a view to

phasing out its input after a period of time, but inequalities in resources between the four provinces has meant this couldn't happen. These financial difficulties have seen alliances develop within the network system of football governance perhaps due to the insights by Pfeffer (1982) that organisations tend to be particularly responsive to those stakeholders that provide them with resources. Alliance is defined as “any inter-firm cooperation that falls between the extremes of discrete, short-term contracts and the complete merger of two or more organisations” (Contractor & Lorange, 2002, p.4). Such alliances can take a number of forms (e.g., joint ventures, acquisitions), and are often created because one organisation lacks the ability, whether financially or organisationally to ‘go it alone’ (Dickson, Phelps & Waugh, 2010). Within the SFAI leagues, there was discontent regarding the relationship between one of the 32 leagues (DDSL) and the FAI. Financial aid provided was by the DDSL to the FAI in funding its National Training Centre (Abbotstown) which will be used by both the FAI and the DDSL, according to EC3 the FAI “*are broke, they have no money.*” This prompted consternation amongst the Executive Council of the SFAI, the other schoolboy leagues and clubs regarding the nature of the alliance between the FAI and the DDSL, “*the FAI had spoken so much about the development of pitches up there but they hadn't got the money to pay for it, so they got the money from the DDSL*” (LS1).

The availability of well-equipped facilities is essential to promote performance within the sport development system (Williams & Reilly, 2000), yet Ireland ranks quite poorly in terms of physical sporting infrastructure (Bourke, 2011). Madella, Bayle and Tome (2005) highlight that an NGB must be able to influence decisions concerning the construction of adequate facilities for the sport. Networks can be used to ‘fill in’ and operate in spaces which would otherwise be assumed by the traditional hierarchical organisation, but this work of networks may drain the initial organisation

of legitimacy and power (Rhodes, 2007). The balance of maintaining these varied and often contradictory perceptions of fairness within stakeholder entities with initiating organisation change is a challenge for National Associations. Inequalities between resources of leagues were also identified, with LS3 remarking on an experience at the Kennedy Cup:

*“Another league was amazed that we all had matching tracksuits! And that our kids got them for free without having to stand and pack bags in Tesco’s. And breakfast, ‘I said what do you get for your breakfast?’ ‘Ah we have a choice, we can have a mars bar and a bottle of Lucozade or we could have beans on toast’. Our kids get fruit and porridge only.” [LS3]*

### **3.7.2.3. Scouting networks**

Exposure to international team scouts and Irish underage national team coaches were identified as being unequal throughout the country, with scouts from DDSL clubs also being accused of attempting to ‘poach’ players to play in their league following such scouting, League secretaries outlined:

*“We lost nine of the Kennedy Cup players to go and play in the DDSL, plus two others who were outside the bounds of the 49K [kilometre] rule and even though it was brought to the attention, it was ignored as it was the DDSL.” [LS1]*

*“He [Head of Youth Development from a large DDSL club] spent three days in [county] last year after the Kennedy Cup, we lost 15/20 players from our Kennedy Cup team to Dublin clubs, it’s soul destroying.” [LS2]*

Talented players are “strategic resources” in obtaining a competitive advantage over rival teams (Radicchi & Mozzachiodi, 2016, p.30) thus their movement was a common source of complaint amongst the typically outward player-movement clubs (Study One). From an oft-cited poaching protagonist club in the DDSL, CS1 reflected on his club stating:



*“There’s more exposure to scouts [in the DDSL], there’s no doubt about that, this club on Saturday and Sunday morning is thronged with UK scouts.” [CS1]*

Perceptions on engagement by underage international scouts and managers to visit areas outside of the DDSL varied, with CS2 asserting *“I think we get a fair shot at the international set-up, because, the emerging talent model, you have your own league squad and then once the Kennedy Cup is over they go into the regional squads, so our players are visible”*, whereas LS2 and JF1 perceived an inequity of treatment outside of the DDSL:

*“Do you know that some of the underage international managers have people out watching every single Dublin game every weekend in the premier division? They don't do that anywhere else around the country so instead of now if a young lad goes for a trial [for Ireland] and he's competing against a lad in Dublin, the Dublin lad 'ah he's just after having a bad game' while the other lad is brutal, but if you were seeing him week in week out too you might think differently.” [LS2]*

*“I do blame the international managers for this [player movement to Dublin]. They're either busy or they're lazy. They don't go outside of Dublin to look at players.” [JF1]*

#### **3.7.2.4. Quality of leagues, coaching and facilities**

Ericsson, Krampe, and Tesch-Römer (1993) identified resources (e.g., access to quality coaches and training facilities) as being required to engage in deliberate practice for improving performance. Mills et al., (2012) identified access to quality coaching as a key environmental aspect of developing youth footballers, with seeking better coaching standards being cited as a motive for migration amongst that cohort (Elliott, 2014). Linked to scouting networks and player migration, CS1 cited that the reason players wanted to join his club was *“I do believe that this club have better coaches than the FAI, there’s no question about that. So therefore, our players will be*

*exposed to the best coaches.”* General coaching quality was identified as an issue within Irish youth football structures:

*“One of the main problems we have here is coaches. Kickstart 1 and 2 were introduced but it doesn’t make a coach out of you. It was a very good initiative, it took the fear out of the coaching part of it for daddies and mummies, but there was no analysis of how the person progressed after doing 1 and then doing 2 or thereafter.” [LS4]*

CS2 also identified coaching as a key developmental issue; *“facilities, climate, poor standard of coaching, competition with other sports; they’re the things that would hold them back. Poor coaching in clubs would be a lot of it, which would be a big problem.”*

LS2 identified the greater learning that happens with players from clubs with lesser resources when brought to the league training centres, due to previously just being exposed to *“daddy goes down to watch his son play and he becomes that manager”* during their earlier development phases. Coaching quality was influenced by club resources with LS1 outlining *“they [FAI] say your club must fund it, but some are struggling to pay league fees, pay refs, so where do they get to fund these courses?”*

The FAI counter this by stating that they provide free, regular coaching clinics around the country (FAI3). Player experience will vary from club to club, with LS5 reiterating the club’s responsibility:

*“The smaller clubs have to look after their players and coach them, they don’t have the same facilities as a larger club or depth of talent of coaches but they still have to make some sort of an effort to give them good football and a good experience.” [LS5]*

A variation of player quality and density nationally was identified by FAI1 *“I’ve seen player IDs come in from counties where only 20 players were identified, now surely we shouldn’t train another 40 players to make-up numbers.”* This process happens after the Kennedy Cup where players are generally aged 14. A lack of appreciation of the non-linear process of talent development and the vicissitudes of the journey which

can see many players labelled as elite during early developmental years yet not translate into senior success is demonstrated by this fatalistic approach to early talent identification (Abbott & Collins, 2004; Collins, MacNamara & McCarthy, 2016).

A reorganisation of the 32 leagues into a system consisting of 12 districts to allow stronger teams to compete against each other outside of their traditional leagues was suggested by FAI3. Reducing the number of leagues would advance the FAI argument that the current system of 32 leagues “*dilutes*” strong competition within schoolboy football whereas this system would provide “*20 meaningful games, that’s what we’re looking for, meaningful games*” (FAI1). Facilities vary across the country with FAI2 noting that due to the poor state of some facilities during winter months, some teams only played “*8 or 9 games between August and February.*”

#### **3.7.2.5. Player volume**

Previous studies have shown significant variations in the likelihood of becoming an elite athlete depending on the population size and density of that athlete’s place of birth and development (Côté et al., 2006; Côté et al., 2007; MacDonald et al., 2009; Rossing et al., 2016; Hancock et al., 2018). As seen in Study One, no national player registration system exists to categorically identify player volume within discrete geographical areas. Male, youth population figures per province were analysed and significant variations between catchment areas were identified (Table 4), with county figures ranging from Dublin accounting for 26.4% of the population to Leitrim with 0.65% of population. The DDSL is the largest schoolboy league in Ireland. Inequities in relation to population base was identified by an FAI2 “*the DDSL which is the biggest league in Europe, you could pick a squad to play in the Kennedy Cup, you could pick a second squad from there and they would be equally good.*” JF1 reflects

on the number of DDSL teams being entered for national competitions as being indicative of team and league strength and depth:

*“St. Kevins will have their 17 premier and 18 premier and that would be their best teams. The other 4 (teams) wouldn't be as good, they'd probably be real St. Kevins players, the locals. They are lads that came up through their underage system and they've reached this level now St. Kevins see that they're not really good enough but they'll bring lads from outside in for the 17 and 18 year olds premier team.” [JF1]*

LS2 downplayed that significance of Dublin-centric development suggesting that talent is present in the less dense areas *“The best players that have gone away to England are country lads, very few from Dublin. They developed later. At the senior international team there are as many country lads. The talent is out there.”* Developing in a high-density area resulted in less chance of achieving expertise in a study of male Portuguese volleyball players (Hancock et al., 2018). Being from a smaller, rural league was identified as a positive thing by FAI3 who suggested that:

*“It can have its advantages as it can be easier to organise, good for networking, get to know everyone, and get to know all the good players. It's very easy to identify talent in a small league because there are only a small number of good players.” [FAI3]*

### **3.7.2.6. Summary**

Talent development opportunities vary according to the relevant club and area in which a player is situated. Variations were noted in terms of finance, scouting networks quality of coaching and facilities and player volume. Variations were also identified between perceptions on resources equity between governance networks organisations. This variance in proximal processes interactions across the country will result in unequal development pathways for players and may also compound patterns of internal migration between leagues. Variations in resources (i.e., finance,

scouting networks, player volume) and perceptions of quality of provisions (i.e., coaching quality) may impede player pathway development and structure enhancement due to competing needs and opinions.

### **3.7.3. Objective (c): To assess the ‘fit for purpose’ nature of the competition and performance structures within Irish youth football from the provider perspective.**

Elliott (2014) identified concerns raised by Irish footballers regarding the structural inadequacies of the Irish domestic league as a viable talent development pathway, seeing its inadequacies as necessitating migration to progress their football development. As previously identified, characteristics of effective talent development environments include an emphasis on appropriate development, with a long-term focus which necessitates an integration of efforts (Martindale et al., 2007; Henrikson et al., 2010). Football structures and competitions (Figure 7) form a key part of the development microsystem for developing footballers. These include Kennedy Cup, Emerging Talent Programme, migration and League of Ireland underage leagues. Insights on these competitions, their appropriateness and relevance will be explored by key stakeholders.

#### **3.7.3.1. Kennedy Cup**

The Kennedy Cup is a national under 14 tournament, where the most ‘talented’ players are selected to represent their leagues (i.e., 32 teams representing the 32 leagues). The organisation of the Kennedy Cup is cited as being a primary function of the SFAI

(EC1), *“Organisational-wise I don't know how we can get it any slicker than it is. It doesn't need to be any better than it is. The football talent is out of our hands, that's for the coaches”, “That's our major tournament”* (EC2). The input of the FAI was welcomed and appreciated by an SFAI Executive member *“They [FAI] are very very good in terms of the provision of funding because they were the ones that arranged with Umbro to sponsor the Kennedy Cup”* (EC2).

The significance of the completion is lauded by the SFAI as being the starting point for talent identification for the Irish under 15 international team and the ETP. The ‘red ribbon’ element of the competition was also a point of friction between more established Committee members and newer league members when attempting to implement changes to league structures due to the prestige of being associated with the Kennedy Cup squad:

*“There were a few coups and we got rid of the old lads you know. It was gas, it took a lot of time it took a lot of nights, there were sometimes you'd feel like throwing our hat at it and there'd be obstacles put in your way. .... Ah one of them there for a few years and he had the Kennedy Cup team every year, 3 or 4 years in a row and he knew straight away that he was going to lose the Kennedy Cup team, that was his big thing.” [LS2]*

Team management are asked to highlight players that would be of sufficient quality for the ETP, *“the FAI had sent out a thing to all the Kennedy Cup squads please put down 18 players that you think will be good enough for the FAI emerging talent programme”* (LS3). Issues with the competition centred on age appropriateness, player experience, importance placed on the competition, short term view on development, variations in league standards and negative aspects related to scouting and ‘poaching’ of players. A ‘peaking for Kennedy Cup’ culture within youth football was noted (LS3), one SFAI official identified:

*“There are kids being told 'if you don't make the Kennedy Cup, you're finished.'. Kids are precocious, brilliant one year and they'll start to go down and vice versa, that's the way it is. You can't get professional adult players to be consistent so trying to get kids to do it in their most formative, puberty years is madness.” [EC1]*

The focus on the cup at such a crucial point in development was also identified by LS2:

*“One of the biggest problems we have is that we don't have anything after the Kennedy Cup, a young lad can come back from the Kennedy Cup and if he hasn't been selected on the ETP what is there for him? Nothing. That's where the GAA can get very strong because they have minor.” [LS2]*

A league secretary gave an insight into his league where they select their Kennedy Cup squad at age 11 and continue to reduce down the panel size until they have 20 for under 14. SFAI countered concerns regarding the developmental appropriateness of this age:

*“That is the right age because academies in England looking at players want to bring players over when they're 15. Now they can't sign them until they're 16, but they want the opportunity to bring them over to see how they go before they have to make any formal agreement and that's why in terms of the development it's a good age for the Kennedy-cup.” [EC2]*

The influence of scouts from UK academies was noted by all organisations, *“It's possibly a bit of a meat market in some ways”* (CS2), *“at the Kennedy Cup you see scouts from all over the place. They make their list, they bring lads across, if they're successful in their trials they are given scholarships”* (EC2).

Coupled with age appropriateness, there were also concerns raised regarding the developmental appropriateness of the tournament. LS2 outlined the coach pressure which leads to decisions which neglect long-term player development, *“at the level of the Kennedy Cup the biggest fear is that you are going to go down there and get hammered, nobody wants that. I suppose there is a pressure then to take the more*

*physical players” (LS2), “Ideally teams would have three or four players playing a year up, but the competitiveness of it means that’s very hard to do” (FAI3). One SFAI executive was blunt about the competitiveness focus of the tournament describing it as “just pure and brutal competition, no element of development as far as I’m concerned” (EC2).*

*“I spoke to a coach whose team got hammered, played lovely football, he said to me that if he was to ever do it again, he wouldn’t bring any kids born after April because lovely football gets you nowhere.” [JF1]*

Playing on the Kennedy Cup was being used as a carrot to keep players in the league (particularly those close to Dublin) and not migrating to DDSL teams, with reports of players being asked to sign forms to get onto Kennedy Cup panels saying that they wouldn’t then go and play in the DDSL. This was being used to counteract a possible ‘brawn drain’ (Bale, 1991) or a ‘feet drain’ (Elliott & Weedon, 2010) from their league. Antagonism was evident in the relationship between leagues who lost players to the DDSL being asked by the player/parent to come back and play within their old leagues’ Kennedy Cup team:

*“I’ve said [to a parent] ‘If he was staying within our league, (he was 11), I guarantee you he will be on our Kennedy Cup squad this year and next year because he’s good enough. Now you have destroyed him’. He’s going to Dublin, Dublin doesn’t even have their Kennedy Cup players playing in Dublin, they are travelling over playing all the top leagues in England and then they bring them back for the Kennedy Cup, if you want to do that to your son then by all means fire away but there is no way I’m going to have him training with us for the DDSL.” [LS1]*

Rumours of the FAI potentially disbanding the Kennedy Cup was met with “*over my dead body*” (LS2), with fears that disbanding this competition would have an impact on future engagement with the sport “*If we lose kids from the game, by reducing the number of players at the Kennedy Cup where do we get the coaches, referees,*



*administrators from for the game in the future?” (LS2). FAI officials outlined their opinions on the tournament “I don’t think the problem is the Kennedy Cup I think the problem is that it’s only the Kennedy Cup. And the way that it’s run, the kids playing 6 games over 5 days, that’s not good” (FAI1), “playing all the games in one go and then having nothing afterwards, they drop off.” (FAI3).*

### **3.7.3.2. Emerging Talent Programme**

As outlined in the Chapter One, the ETP is the primary development mechanism organised by the FAI within the Republic of Ireland. Opinions on its’ merits varied across stakeholders, *“the FAI would paint a lovely picture saying ‘oh we have so many kids in the ETP and so many of them ended up in national league’ but they ended up in that league before there was an ETP” (LS2), “it’s not worth a blind curse. It takes players in a 14, a player at 14 you’re not gonna be able to do a whole lot with them” (LS2), “The FAI laud the Emerging Talent Programme but have never made a forensic review of it so there is no proper accounting for the return in relation to the cost, the quality of coaching given and the ultimate benefit to the player” (EC2). EC2 continued by noting:*

*“The theory was excellent...the best players would be given a coaching programme that would enhance their game and make them suitable for International selection. Unfortunately, the arrival of Regional Development Officers caused, in many areas, friction with local leagues and now players train with Emerging Talent Programme on Mondays, their own clubs on Tuesdays and Inter-League teams on Wednesdays, thus getting three separate sets of information. Madness.” [EC2]*

FAI staff explained the restructuring of the ETP which will see the age dropped to 11 with a view to greater contact hours with players, *“we’ll have them in at a younger age which can only help their development and merging some age groups will mean we will have better quality of squads” (FAI3). The quality of coaching on the*

programme was raised by some stakeholders EC2 *“If you think of the Emerging Talent Programme as being elite, you should have coaches who are elite.”*

*“The FAI say ‘of course they’re good, they are A licence coaches’. Mainly they are LOI players, just because you played LOI doesn’t make you a good coach, particularly at schoolboy football. A lot of them are good, don’t get me wrong, but there is not enough of them.”*  
[LS2]

A variety of opinions on the ideal geographic location of the centres arose from the interviews, with the FAI citing the need for a regional spread to *“make sure no one is overlooked”* (FAI2) to CS1 who theorised that international squad selection was related to this spread of centres:

*“What they’re doing is they’ve got these centres of excellence around the country so they’ve got good players in them all, they’ve got two centres of excellence in Dublin and they’ve got good players in them but I would venture that better players are in the Dublin ones but to justify the existence of the one in Mayo, four or five fellas from that have be included in the next international squad.”* [CS1]

A lack of FAI Regional Development Officer (RDO) morale due to budget cuts, failure to coherently integrate with league development centres in some areas, systematic underfunding of the programme and conflicting High-Performance Directors plans were seen as having hampered the impact and effectiveness of the ETP (CS1; EC2).

Representatives from rural leagues identified the benefits of the ETP:

*“It’s a good model; it gives the elite player an outlet, it gives them a structure. It gives them access to good coaching, especially the players in the smaller clubs they can get extra coaching and play on a better team.”* [CS2]

JF1 identified that some clubs don’t permit their players to attend the ETP if selected, due to either perceptions of a lack of coaching quality or a fear of player poaching.

### 3.7.3.3. Player migration and the ‘double drain’ of youth players

An increasing number of youth-elite Irish football players are not playing football with their local club, instead selecting clubs that are seen as springboards to English clubs (Bourke, 2003). Study One identified clear internal migratory patterns from counties surrounding the ‘semi-periphery’ DDSL region. In 2001, Malone theorised that as many as 300 Irish youths (many from the DDSL) travel to England (the geographically and culturally closest ‘core’ footballing region) for club trials every year, with approximately 20 to 30 being offered a place at an academy. This demonstrates a ‘double drain’ of playing resources within the Irish development system. Primary motives for migrating were enhanced coaching and club facilities and increased visibility which are similar to motives identified by Teoldo et al., (2013). FAI2 rejected the primary motive of moving to the UK was to avail of enhanced coaching and opportunities, *“it’s the financial thing, if they are wanted, they will go away.”* CS2 noted that *“the dream is to go abroad, that’s where the money and fame is”* which echoed observations by previous research participants who saw a move to England as a dream (Bourke, 2003) or a lifelong ambition (Elliott, 2016). The impact of the increasing globalised nature of football in the UK and the narrowing of that avenue was noted by most of the participants, *“The biggest problem with our elite players is that they have to go to England to continue on a meaningful career and this is being afforded to fewer players than ever”* (EC2).

The spectacle of the Kennedy Cup is seen a primary way for other Irish clubs and international scouts to view players and approach parents to instigate such migratory patterns, *“at the end of every Kennedy Cup, it is like a mart. It’s an absolute disgrace the way Dublin and UK clubs are allowed to promise kids the moon”* (LS2). Other stakeholders question the legitimacy of the move to Dublin:

*“Why are they going to Dublin? Is it for the betterment of the kids or enrichment of the clubs? That's the emotion that hangs off all of this. Now we're into money, and once money comes in sport goes out.” [EC1]*

The negative side effects to migrating to the DDSL was outlined by LS1:

*“Training 2 nights a week, 2 nights travelling to Dublin, and he's playing on Saturday, if he got on the ETP that's another trip, if he got onto the Kennedy Cup that's another trip. Where does that young lad get the chance to do his homework, meet his friends or have a social life?” [LS1]*

Talented athletes often fail to make transitions effectively due overuse injuries, burn out or lack of the psychosocial skills and competencies that are necessary for development (Wiersma, 2000; Baker, 2003; Abbott & Collins, 2004). Specific psychological behaviours and effective coping skills are key to equip youth athletes with to help them to cope with transitions within youth sport (Abbott & Collins, 2004; MacNamara et al., 2010) with the environment and culture playing an important role on the process of learning these behaviours (Martindale et al., 2007; Henriksen, 2010; Henriksen et al., 2010). Frequent turnover of coaches has been identified as a negatively influencing factor on youth football development, along with the lack of opportunities to play and not enough time to develop (Mills et al., 2012). The movement of players may raise the question of how and when these psychological coping strategies are systematically instilled within the talent development pathway.

Culture has been identified as a key influence on talent development (Burgess & Naughton, 2010). CS2 identified a primary difference between GAA and football cultures within Ireland as it relates to player movement:

*“You're always gonna have a certain amount of movement. That's the rules of football. The rules of GAA are that you play with where you're from. It's a parish game and its tribal, and I can see why they do it I can see the attraction of it. Football is different, you can sign for who you want, and because the rules are like that you are going to have a certain amount of movement.” [CS2]*

### 3.7.3.4. League of Ireland under 15, under 17 and under 19

#### leagues

Opinions on the LOI underage leagues varied between stakeholders, with the majority of the sample welcoming the under 19 league and seeing it as a welcome addition to the talent development pathway (FAI3; FAI1; EC2; JF1). Concerns with the under 19 LOI league were primarily focused on the gap between under 19 and senior level football:

*“There still is a gap here, because the jump here from the national league u19 to playing, not so much in the first division but certainly in the Premier division, is too big. Once he goes out of u19's what happens to him then? If he stays with a top club and doesn't get into the team, he'll just be sitting on the bench or sitting in the stands.”*  
[FAI1]

FAI staff outlined how compliance with fielding underage teams (including under 19, under 17, under 15 and under 13 in 2019) would be compulsory for attaining a club license to compete in the LOI. The viability of LOI clubs to sustain multiple underage teams was a concern espoused by many stakeholders:

*“I estimate that if you were to have an under 17 LOI club down here [outside of Dublin] it would cost in the region of €30k minimum per year to run that. Who's going to pay for that? Some teams can't pay their wages 4 weeks into the season. Would those clubs put in an under 17s team? Where would they get the money?”* [LS2]

The financial concerns were echoed by FAI officials, but they raised the option of LOI clubs partnering with schoolboy clubs, with the schoolboy clubs providing the teams for the LOI club at under 13 and under 15:

*“That will be a big thing [funding], it's going to be up to the clubs, and this comes back to where there is a vision for strong clubs, strong leagues.... the option of league clubs becoming feeder clubs for the League of Ireland clubs”.* [FAI1]

The player development benefit of this was questioned by CS1, “*what benefit is a player getting? It would be the same as him playing for his usual club. Just in a different shirt. Same coaches, same hours. How do we know if it even works?*”

The plan to include an under 15 national league was generally a source of concern for stakeholders. Some focused on the cost implications, while some focused on the potential negative effects which included a probable focus on early specialisation, issues related to perceived competence, losing players to the GAA, narrowing the development pathway and opportunities, impact on a players’ education and social life and a geographic inequity in relation to the spread of teams represented.

#### **3.7.3.5. Summary**

Issues with elements of the development pathway centred on age appropriateness, player experience, importance placed on the competition, short term view on development, variations in league standards and negative aspects related to scouting and ‘poaching’ of players. The model shared above where a team is selected at under 11 for streaming into representational squads appears to be against best practice of talent development where having larger pools and allowing for integration and movement into the structures at all stages are deemed key. The advancement of the LOI underage leagues were broadly welcomed at under 19 and under 17, with concerns being more pronounced at the younger age groups.

### **3.7.4. Conclusion**

#### **3.7.4.1. Primary stakeholder relationships**

Research focused on culturally unique contexts in football remains limited (Mills et al., 2012). Following this analysis, the organisational culture within football governance in Ireland would appear to be fragmented, identified by low scores on dimensions of solidarity and sociability (Goffee & Jones, 1998). Also, a clear intra-organisational typology of positions and cultural units within the organisations emerged, namely, board level, decision-making levels and grass-roots. A variety of opinions exist within academia as to whose role it is to ensure effective organisational functioning. Schein (2004) insists that the executive (or board level group) must align the cultures of the operators (e.g., grass-roots clubs) and the engineers of development (e.g., SFAI) to ensure survival. Burgess and Naughton (2010) also emphasise that responsibility for implementing a holistic approach to talent development (i.e., a whole country approach) within a team sport should rest with the respective governing body. Conversely, Fassin (2012) states that stakeholder theory has neglected the reciprocal nature of the relationship between organisations and stakeholders. Senaux (2008) outlined that “a good system of governance should then be one where managers take into account the interests of the different stakeholder groups (and have reasons to do so)” (p. 6). Effective stakeholder governance combined with the notion of stakeholder accountability begs the question of who should drive improved stakeholder involvement with schoolboy football in Ireland. From a normative perspective, a dual responsibility exists from the FAI as the nexus, apical organisation to take the SFAI into account yet also, for the SFAI as a salient stakeholder in the governance process to give the FAI a reason to do so. If the SFAI consider themselves as true ‘stakeowners’ in the governance of football, then there exists responsibility on their

behalf to reciprocate responsibility, fairness and loyalty if that is the approach demonstrated by the FAI.

A landscape of democracy can be seen as a key background variable for good governance (Geeraert et al., 2013) and the participation of the stakeholder should be a democratic process, offering open and regularly occurring opportunities to influence the strategic direction of the governing organisation (Lowther et al., 2016). Stakeholder typologies should be examined within this football governance landscape and all those involved in the development of coherent schoolboy structures be categorised to identify stakeholder salience. Appropriate practical managerial strategies should then be adopted which would maximise effectiveness and minimise threats to governance (i.e., formalising roles and responsibilities, developing effective communication approaches, acting in the best interests of stakeholders and making accurate disclosures).

The traditional, pyramid model of football governance assumes a regulatory authoritative status dependant on an actor's position within that pyramid, which asserts a level of power over the lower levels and is concurrently governed and influenced by the upper levels. Structures of football in the Republic of Ireland demonstrate some of the challenges of multilevel, network governance to develop and instil a coherent approach to policy formation. Shilbury and Ferkins (2011, p.124) identify an increasing complexity to maintain relationships and develop strategic plans at each lower level in the system, that this "cultural distance" amplifies the difference between the 'top table' and the volunteer grassroots of the organisation. It should not be the role of the FAI to dictate all operational activities related to football within Ireland in isolation from this 'top table', but it should review its role in controlling and



coordinating the relationships and interdependence between affiliate members (Nishimura, 2004).

#### **3.7.4.2. Resource inequalities**

Bourke (2003) observed that youth development football infrastructure in the Republic of Ireland “is poorly endowed when compared with that in other countries” (p.402). Coaching infrastructure and player opportunities have been cited as explanatory factors for Ireland’s reduced impact at international level and senior European club level (Barrett, 2016; Ryan, 2017). This was seen in this analysis with issues raised in relation to scouting networks and the draw of larger DDSL clubs, quality of coaching and facilities and player volume and quality. Additionally, this study has identified a deeper issue of inequity in the resources that do exist within schoolboy football. This may make the betterment of schoolboy football an even more difficult task. An alternative approach was identified by Henriksen (2010) with those development environments reluctant to allow financial resources to be perceived as a barrier to effective development, instead focusing positively on other available resources (i.e., open collaboration, sharing databases, strength of volunteers, reframing poor resources as challenges to overcome and develop resilience). These examples could prove fruitful within Irish football but enhanced communication, trust and mutual alignment between bodies would be needed to progress in this manner.

#### **3.7.4.3. ‘Fit for purpose’ nature of pathways**

Utilising the terminology by Wallerstein (1974, 1979) as explored in Study One, migration was identified by key stakeholders in the governance of football as following patterns of players moving from semi-periphery clubs (usually from primary donor leagues geographically close to the DDSL) to periphery clubs in the DDSL in

the hopes of a further move to the core area (namely UK academies). Thus, a sequence of a ‘double drain’ is the primary pathway for the majority of players to reach the professional levels of the game (Figure 18).

Certain issues with the player development pathway were noted by participants from all organisations, some identifying external constraints (i.e., weather, culture, competing sports) as the main issue effecting development, while others maintained a more pragmatic approach citing governance incoherency, inequity of resources and inappropriateness of competition structures (i.e., Kennedy Cup, National underage leagues) as key concerns within youth development. Overall, the SFAI Executive Council are adamant that their function is administrative and organisational and not to develop players, yet they are wary of allowing the FAI to interact with players under the traditional remit of the SFAI (i.e., under the age of 16). A lack of coherency can be identified in the governing space of effective player development.

#### **3.7.4.4. Ecology of talent development**

From an ecological perspective, the inherent focus on ‘time’ is a key feature which separates Bronfenbrenner’s bio-ecological theory from other ecology theorists (cf. Gibson, 1979). The timeline of the development pathway has been explored by assessing various key transitional and progress points along the pathway (e.g., Kennedy Cup, ETP, LOI). This paints a holistic picture of the pathway rather than a snapshot of development. Also, by delving into historical relational issues between stakeholders, a deeper understanding of the Irish football culture and context can be examined. Historical developments (i.e., past relationships and antagonistic encounters) seem to continue to taint current working relationships between administrative and governing bodies, which will impact on talent development into the future as systems fail to coherently align due to this historical antagonism.

Bronfenbrenner (1977) viewed child development within the context of a system of relationships that form his or her environment and to foster future positive behaviours and change developmental trajectories one must identify and understand direct and indirect influences on development (Gabbard & Krebs, 2012). The influence of stakeholders within the microsystem, mesosystem and exosystem of developing footballers and the distal and proximal process that influence development (e.g., resources, histories of antagonism, culture) were explored in this study and continue to have a direct impact on the football environment experienced by footballers, parents, coaches and administrators in the Republic of Ireland.

### **3.7.5. Learning between Study One and Study Two**

Gagné (2003, 2011) reflected on the influence of environmental factors on the talent development process as being milieu (e.g., birthplace effect, socio-cultural factors), individuals (significant others who positively or negatively impact on the development process) and provisions which include all talent development services provided or experienced within the pathway. Study One analysed the birthplace effect, assessed a relative age effect which is perpetuated by key individuals within the pathway, and analysed the migration patterns of the pathway. Talent identification initiatives (i.e., ETP) must be considered alongside talent development process within the system to fully enhance the prospective success of such a system (Abbott et al., 2005). Study Two added to this qualitative examination by analysing the actions and motives of these key individuals and the resulting impact on provisions for youth footballers in Ireland. For example, a significant relative age effect was identified in Study One. The explanatory mechanisms behind such statistics were identified in Study Two, the

culture of ‘peaking for Kennedy Cup’ at under 14 was identified as being a determining factor to explain the emphasis placed on player physicality and maturation in youth football due to the desire for winning this ‘red ribbon’ competition for coaches and administrators. Additionally, the resistance of some stakeholders to engage in the FAIs Player Development Plan which would reduce the emphasis on winning and promote enhanced involvement by all youth players hinders the reduction of a RAE. Study One identified inequities in access to the ETP dependant on place of birth, these were explored in Study Two with a Dublin based stakeholder insisting that the increased opportunities given to boys in some rural locations were not warranted and unjustified. In Chapter Two, internal migratory patterns within elite youth Irish football were examined. These migratory decisions and patterns are framed within local contexts (Elliott, 2014) which are explored in Chapter Three. Player migration patterns identified in Chapter Two were explained by some stakeholders in football governance as being necessary for further development of that player (due to perceptions of better coaching, league and club structures) and for career-enhancement motives by being more easily spotted by international scouts while others viewed the migration route as being a self-serving, financially motivated action by some DDSL clubs.

Bronfenbrenner’s later works emphasise the ‘bio-ecological’ element of developmental psychology where a person’s perceptions, beliefs, abilities to interact, coping strategies will influence how they react to events in their life (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). The characteristics of the person function as both “an indirect producer and as a product of development” (Araújo & Davids, 2009, p.16). Thus, further exploration is needed as to how different athletes react to the inequities and pathway failings identified in Chapter Two and Chapter Three (e.g., double migration

patterns, emphasis on physical maturity, overlooked by scouts due to geographical location, resources of club). This will be explored in Chapter Four.

## Chapter Four: Study Three

### **A longitudinal examination of the dominant challenges faced by young Irish footballers.**

*Child development takes place through processes of progressively more complex interaction between an active child and the persons, objects, and symbols in its immediate environment. To be effective, the interaction must occur on a fairly regular basis over extended period of time.*

*(Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998, p. 996)*

#### **4.1. Introduction**

There is a dearth of literature documenting youth to senior transition programs in professional sport (Morris, Todd, & Oliver, 2015). More rigorous investigations of individual sociological factors that influence development (e.g., family, development context, socio-economic status) are necessary (Reeves et al., 2018), with Domingues and Goncalves (2014) suggesting that longitudinal studies are an important avenue to pursue with a view to extending insights into bio-ecological frameworks. A criticism often aimed at sport psychology academia is that it focuses on the individual and ignores the environment in which they exist (Eubank, Nesti, & Littlewood, 2017). Henriksen et al., (2010) suggested combining a holistic ecological approach with a life-span perspective by investigating the development and transition of individual athletes within a talent development environment and identifying how the environment develops over time to accommodate the needs of the athletes. Mills et al., (2012) assert that developing players must be able to cope with a wide range of

competitive and organisational stressors throughout the pathway, but these challenges should be periodised and progressive (Collins et al., 2016). A number of challenges embedded within various points of the Irish football talent development pathway were identified in Study One and Study Two. These included a selection emphasis on early-born players, a place of birth effect that tended to necessitate migration (depending on the geographical location of the player), incongruous structures and organisational practices and unequal resources (i.e., inconsistent developmental approaches, certain clubs' resources in the DDSL, player depth, access to scouting networks). As the interactions between the environment and the individual create the conditions for youth development (Mills et al., 2012), a lived experience perspective can be used to identify whether these challenges were sufficient enough to provide structured 'trauma', purposely implemented as part of the pathway (Collins & MacNamara, 2012) or if the challenge encountered was prohibitive to development.

Solely using a macro perspective to analyse player development (i.e., place of birth and migration patterns), can result in "the risk of forgetting the importance of the actions of individuals who, by their competencies and strategic choices, can influence positively the structures in which they are embedded and of which they are not merely passive actors" (Poli, 2010, p.495). A biographical approach is therefore considered as a key research area for developmental constructs like migration (Poli, 2010). Thus, to complement the macro pattern analysis on player migration in Study One, individual player perspectives and journeys will be merged with such data to provide a comprehensive analysis of both macro and micro networks to analyse the mechanisms and processes involved in player development within the Republic of Ireland. The participants in Study Three have all been part of the ETP programme and as such are part of the data set from Study One. The boys have also participated in the

Kennedy Cup, the Ireland under 15 national team, schoolboy leagues and league emerging talent programmes (Study Two). Due to the complex nature of the talent development pathways in the Republic of Ireland, its influence on the players and the relative complexities of the governance of each of these factors, a lived experience insight is needed to assess the appropriateness of talent development pathways within the Republic of Ireland to develop youth footballers.

## **4.2. Aim**

This study aims to explore the lived experiences and journeys of young footballers in Ireland and to examine the dominant challenges facing them following their entry on, and subsequent progress through, the talent development pathways in Ireland. This longitudinal approach, with Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 2005) bio-ecological model of human development adopted as a framework while drawing from talent development environment literature (Martindale et al., 2007; Henrikson et al., 2010), will provide a "contextually situated" perspective (Collins, MacNamara, & Cruikshank, 2019, p. 347) and provide a unique opportunity to examine talent development in this applied ecological setting.

### **4.2.1. Objectives:**

- To investigate and contextualise the transitional episodes experienced by individual athletes within the development pathway.
- To examine players' perceptions of the dominant challenges that impact career progression in Irish football.



- To assess key psychosocial influences on talent development within Irish youth football.
- To examine the developmental characteristics of the talent development pathway, relative to best practice research.

### **4.3. Theoretical framework**

A feature of longitudinal studies is that they “resist any easy assimilation to one theoretical framework” (McLeod, 2003, p. 202) but rather require analysis through multiple theoretical lenses. Indeed, there is “a need for multilevel study designs that incorporate individual-level influences, proximal social influences and influences within the broader environment in order to better understand physical activists' behaviour” (Salmon & Timperio, 2007, p.196). Calman and colleagues (2013) have also recommended that concepts such as time or change are encompassed into the theoretical perspective to remind researchers of the longitudinal nature of the study to move beyond descriptions at points but to explore the occurrence of change between those points. Additionally, the theoretical frameworks utilised in this study must also reflect the wide range of influences and developmental components over the selected period for the participants, as longitudinal studies require multiple theoretical lenses (McLeod, 2003). To reflect this need, this study will draw from such theoretical frameworks as bio-ecological models (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Henriksen, 2010) to incorporate the ‘proximal process’ of influence and interactions between the macro, meso and micro levels of functioning while remaining cognisant of the concepts of time and change. Research on talent development will also be used as a framework for

analysing the player journeys (cf. Bloom, 1985; Salmela, 1994; Stambulova, 1994; Côté, 1999; Wylleman & Lavalée, 2004).

## **4.4. Literature Review**

### **4.4.1. Stages of development**

Talent development is complex and non-linear (Abbott et al., 2005; Phillips, Davids, Renshaw, & Portus, 2010b) but research suggests that there are several general stages that athletes go through before becoming elite (Bloom, 1985; Salmela, 1994; Stambulova, 1994; Côté, 1999; Wylleman & Lavalée, 2004). Following Bloom's (1985) research on talent development, Côté and colleagues (cf. Côté, 1999; Côté & Hay, 2002) extended and related the development research to the sport context. Côté's Developmental Model of Sport Participation (1999) identified three stages of development: the sampling phase (6-12 years) where athletes will try a number of sports and there is deliberate play, specialising phase (13-15 years) where athletes become more specialised and begin to devote more time to their sport and investment/recreation phase (16 + years) where athletes become motivated to achieve success in sport and invest a vast amount of time in developing their skills.

Wylleman and Lavalée's (2004) developmental model of transitions faced by athletes comprised of the following four athletic stages: initiation, development, mastery and discontinuation. This included a life-span perspective relating to athletes' development in four domains (athletic, psychological, psychosocial, academic/vocational). This model has been used as a conceptual framework for research into transition experiences faced by various sports performers (Pummell et

al., 2008). The model consists of layers which outline transitions and stages, psychological development, academic and psychosocial development. The third layer represents the transitions and stages occurring in athletes' psychosocial development and denote the individuals who are perceived by athletes as being (most) significant during that particular transition or stage (e.g., parents, coach, peers, siblings). Each stage has a unique combination of psychosocial influencers, for example, families are reported to have the greatest influence on talent development during childhood and into later adolescence (Côté, 1999) whilst the coach (or teacher) appears to be the dominant influence as the athlete moves towards stages of mastery (van Rossum, 2001).

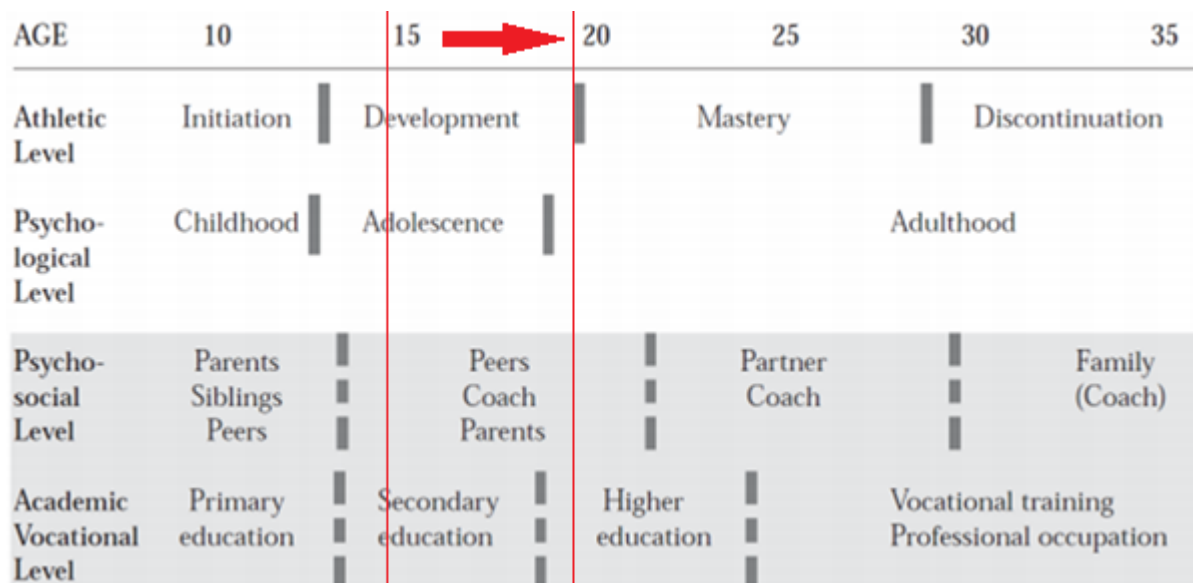


Figure 19 Developmental transitions faced by athletes on athletic, psychological, psychosocial and academic levels (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004)

Despite the common pyramidal model of talent development, Gulbin, Weissensteiner, Oldenziel and Gagné (2013, p.605) identified that “the common normative junior to senior competition transition is mostly characterised by complex oscillations featuring highly varied transitions.” Differences in sports systems, societal norms, cultural

traditions, sociological and organisational issues may influence the athlete's complex career development journey (Stambulova & Alfermann, 2009; Henriksen et al., 2010; Richardson, Relvas, & Littlewood, 2013). Exploring the lived experiences of the players' potentially non-linear and varied talent development pathway should identify discrete and idiosyncratic stages between this transition from novice to elite or from development to mastery (Côté & Hay, 2002; Abbott et al., 2005; Vaeyens et al., 2008). The cohort in this longitudinal study will progress from development to mastery (Figure 19), of which there is little known about this transition within this unique cultural context.

#### **4.4.2. Transitions and critical moments**

Utilising insights from Lewin (1951), the youth phase is a particularly sensitive period where the individuals' life space opens up like a cell continuously splitting and changing its structure (McConville, 2003). Transitions within youth sport are indicative of such life space development (e.g., progressing through the elite developmental pathways, migration, new peer reference groups and educational environments). Schlossberg (1981, p.5) defined a transition as "an event or non-event that results in a change in assumptions about oneself and the world and thus requires a corresponding change in one's behaviour and relationships." Stambulova (2003) suggested that a transition is the athletes' ability to cope with specific demands which pose a conflict between "what the athlete is" and "what he or she wants or ought to be" (p.99). Within transition literature, transitions are classed as normative which are predictable and anticipated (or on-time / planned) (e.g., move up to next representative age-grade), non-normative transitions, in contrast, are unpredictable (or off-

time/unplanned) (e.g., career-ending injury) (Schlossberg, 1984; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). Schlossberg's (1981) model of Human Adaption to Transition is one of the most prominent models used to analyse the transition process. This model considers three factors relative to each transition; the characteristics of the individual experiencing the transition, the individual's perception of this transition and the characteristics of the pre and post-transition environments. Stambulova (1994) identified prevalent transitions within sport as being the onset of sports specialisation, the transition to intensive training in this sport, the transition to high achievement in adult sports, the transition from amateur to professional sport, the transition from peak performance to the end of the sports career and the end of the sports career. As transitions are multifaceted, they should be viewed holistically and analysed across athletic, psychological, psychosocial and academic dimensions (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004).

Within-career transitions often involve "a set of specific demands related to practice, competition, communication, and lifestyle that athletes have to cope with in order to continue successfully in sport" (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007, p. 713). Athletic progression from youth to senior level include specific phases which can include an anticipation phase (e.g., expectation of the transition), an encounter phase (e.g. the initial training sessions with the first team) and a process of adaptation (e.g. becoming a part of first-team training) (Jones et al., 2014). Consequently, each of these phases may involve dynamic and complex sociocultural barriers and may place distinct expectations and demands on all stakeholders (players and management) (Røynesdal, Toering, & Gustafsson, 2018). The increased demand, pressure and expectations which often accompanies a move or transition from junior to senior sport is often

associated with greater levels of stress, reduced performance and burnout (Bruner, Munroe-Chandler, & Spink, 2008; Pummell, et al., 2008).

Critical moments have been described as those moments where we confront anxiety which is associated with an important change in our identity, can be positive or negative and based on personal, professional or vocational situations (Nesti & Littlewood, 2011; Nesti et al., 2012). These moments evoke an emotional response dependant on the subjective lived experience of the individual and are dependent on timing (in relation to both personal and contextual circumstances). As these moments can impact on the “motivation, confidence, stress, and anxiety levels experienced by an individual” (Nesti et al., 2012, p.26) it is important to investigate the lived experience of individuals within developmental contexts to apply learnings on common stressors or opportunities for growth and / or where support interventions are required.

#### **4.4.3. Support during transitions**

Challenges identified by coaches for an athlete experiencing a transition includes the management of free-time, increased physical intensity and earning respect from senior athletes and coaches (Finn & McKenna, 2010; Jones, Mahoney, & Gucciardi, 2014). Bruner and colleagues (2008) found that athletes making the transition from youth to senior ice hockey were affected by their previous ice hockey experiences and the level of sport they had played at. Within ecological literature, O’Toole, Hayes and MhicMhathuna (2014) used the Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) to analyse transitions within education, identifying person, process and context related impacts on the transition from primary to

secondary education. They found that strong connections in the mesosystems between parents, teachers and children were key to providing the foundation for academic, social and emotional well-being, underlying the importance of social support during transitions.

Due to an increasing series of demands placed on the athlete faced with a transition from junior to senior football, including an increased standard of sport, changing of environment type from development environment to success-driven cultures and experiencing diminished social status and greater physical and mental demands, a period of adaptation is required for athletes to be successful (Richardson et al., 2012; Morris et al., 2015). To aid this adaptation, athletes should be aware of the transition process complexity and accompanying heightened stress levels, aware of their own physical and mental attributes and the role they will play within their new team and have access to high-quality social support (Morris et al., 2015). Familiarity with the transition process may make subsequent transition experiences more manageable for players (Morris et al., 2015). Stakeholders within sport transitions suggest that athletes need to have access to a range of people, for example, coaches, fellow players, friends, sport scientists, to provide the various types of support required (Morris, Tod & Oliver, 2016). Parents, coaches and sport psychology consultants can increase athletes awareness of forthcoming demands and educate athletes about the strategies to cope with them (Stambulova et al., 2009). External pressures from social environment (e.g., family, friends, teammates, coaches) can make a transition more difficult (Pummell et al., 2008), paradoxically these individuals are often seen as sources of support during the talent development pathway, including emotional, informational, tangible and esteem support (Bruner et al., 2008; Pummell et al., 2008).

#### **4.4.4. Sport specialisation**

Sport specialization has been defined as “intense year-round training in a single sport with the exclusion of other sports” (Jayanthi et al., 2013, p.252) with current youth athletes specialising earlier and to a greater degree than ever (Smith, 2015; Bell et al., 2016; Buckley et al., 2017). Youth athletes will usually transition from sampling to specialising in a sport at approximately age 12-15 (MacPhail et al., 2003). Côté and colleagues (2009) noted that children around the age of 13 should have the opportunity to either choose to specialise in one sport or to continue recreationally in multiple sports. Côté and colleagues (2009) also noted that by the age of 16; children will have developed the physical, cognitive, social, emotional and motor skills needed to invest in specialised training in one sport. Commitment to sports may depend on the satisfaction gained from participation, which can include feeling ‘bound in’ by a desire to repeat enjoyable experiences, to use skills and to maintain social relationships (Roberts & Brodie, 1992). Hornig, Aust and Gullich (2016) reported that many of the German national football team cohort engaged in greater proportions of playing activities, also differing from amateurs in having engaged in more sports in adolescence and specialised later. In a study of ETP players, Doyle, Finnegan and McArdle (2013) found that 66% of players engaged in the ETP were also playing another sport, with Gaelic football being the most prominent sport. When the age ranges were further analysed, 76% of the junior ETP group (aged 14) and 53% of the senior group (aged 17) participated in other sports, showing an increased rate of specialisation between the junior and senior groups. This study will follow participants through the process of specialising in their chosen football code, identifying the key decision-making influences and psychosocial factors involved.



## 4.5. Study Rationale

Development is mediated through a host of influences, such as training, support, parental investment and societal values (Holt & Morley, 2004; Bailey & Morley, 2006). In terms of ecological dynamics, it has been argued that sports performance involves a deliberate adaptation to the constraints imposed by a specific context in performing a specific task (Araújo & Davids, 2009). Therefore, athletes and their context represent two dynamic subsystems that are interconnected, and which interact on both mechanical and informational levels (Almeida et al., 2013; Serra-Olivares et al., 2015). As a core function of the quest for high performance, researchers need to understand the link between the individuals and influential factors, which can be social, biological and psychological in the development pathway and a comprehensive approach to studying sport expertise should consider the person, task, the environment and the complex interplay of these components (Hackfort, 1986; Serra-Olivares et al., 2016; Bennett et al., 2018). As experience is central to learning (Dowling et al., 2015), one way to investigate these components is by narrating micro-experiences (Bruner, 1990), within the context of the macro organisational and societal environment; giving players a voice in the context of their social and football developmental environment.

Mekos and Clubb (1997) assert that “the course of development is probabilistic rather than deterministic. In other words, there is a considerable amount of plasticity in development, resulting in multiple pathways to the same outcome and multiple outcomes resulting from similar processes” (p.140). Players also need to negotiate the transitions encountered during his or her sporting career as every participant follows a unique and non-linear pathway (Phillips et al., 2010b). The transition from youth to elite level in sport is complex and dynamic developmental phase (Hollings et al., 2014;

Jones et al., 2014) which may last anywhere from one to four years (Stambulova et al., 2009) and is characterised by individualised, non-linear pathways (Gulbin, Weissensteiner, Oldenziel, & Gagné, 2013). This longitudinal study tracks players from the end of their specialising phase, and into investment stages (Côté, 1999, 2007). The transitions being captured across this age range (14-18) include the onset of sports specialisation, the transition to intensive training in football, the transition from amateur to professional sport, and potentially the end of the sports career (Stambulova, 1994). Due to the multifaceted nature of transitions, a longitudinal analysis such as this can allow for these transitions through the development pathway to be viewed from athletic, psychological, psychosocial and academic dimensions (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004).

A key constraint on performance development for youth footballers aged 15-23, is the relationship between the athlete and their specific context, an area which needs further investigation, particularly by studies which are longitudinal in nature (Serra-Olivares et al., 2016). Migratory journeys are complex and are typically beset with numerous events and challenges thus there is a need to explore this journey and to extend our contextual understanding of such pathways (Nesti & Littlewood, 2011; Richardson et al., 2012). Indeed, researchers have been encouraged to create culturally specific frameworks of the relevant context and culture rather than relying on internationally recognised (typically North American) theoretical frameworks when studying transitions (Stambulova et al., 2009; Girginov, 2010). Gledhill, Harwood and Forsdyke (2017) also suggest extending the range of talent development environments analysed within football literature. These, migratory journeys, transitions and development pathways within the culturally specific context of Irish football have been neglected by academic research, yet an understanding of the lived experience of

players within this context is key to fully understanding the complexities, characteristics and micro-level challenges of the football environment.

## **4.6. Methodology**

### **4.6.1. Longitudinal research design**

Curran and Bauer (2011) outline that longitudinal data simultaneously contains information about both between-person and within-person differences. Both types of analyses can have important implications for theory, as it is rare for the social and emotional development of high ability persons to be studied together qualitatively and longitudinally (Peterson, 2014). Côté, Ericsson and Law (2005) suggest that studying longitudinal changes can improve the understanding of how various activities can contribute to the development of expertise at various stages of sporting development. Researchers have advocated for a more detailed, longitudinal assessment of the athletic development process to provide a more informed understanding of athletic development (Vaeyens et al., 2008; Elferink-Gemser et al., 2011). Within the football research environment, Gledhill, Harwood and Forsdyke (2017) suggest that well-controlled longitudinal, prospective studies may enhance the developmental understanding of the factors that influence talent development and address concerns over recall bias and error. Domingues and Gonçalves (2013, p.50) also conclude that further longitudinal work needs to be completed in the area of “examining specialization environments, in order to obtain a clearer picture of the developmental outcomes and experiences at various stages and ages of development.”

A longitudinal approach was chosen for this study to provide an informed understanding of the football landscape, illuminating challenges and complexities over a development-span timescale. Using longitudinal research, temporal changes across lives can be identified and how people interpret and react to these changes can be explored (Hermanowicz, 2013). Certain developmental constructs can be transient, for example, career and migratory aspirations (Carling & Schewel, 2018) thus a longitudinal approach can provide nuanced insights into the formation of these concepts (e.g. aspirations) and the subsequent growth or decline in relevance or importance of such concepts to the developing individual. McLeod (2003) noted that regular engagement via a longitudinal study approach ensures that researchers can see both continuities and change in participants over an extended period of time. These changes and the lived experience of this change over an appropriate period of time is a crucial dimension of the bio-ecological theory and Process-Person-Context-Time (PCT) (Bronfenbrenner, 2001; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). When utilising longitudinal research to study such change, “findings can establish the processes by which this experience is created and illuminates the causes and consequences of change” (Calman, Brunton, & Molassiotis, 2013, p.1) thus providing an “archive of perspectives from different periods of time and vantage-points, one that provides a rich and comparative basis for understanding patterns of continuity and change in identity” (McLeod, 2003, p.202). Qualitative, longitudinal studies can be particularly useful for understanding how pathways are constituted and negotiated, for the study of transitions, for understanding how changes result following experiences and can also be useful for understanding the impact of changing circumstances on lives (Holland, Thomson, & Henderson, 2006), which makes the method particularly useful for this investigation. These studies can also aid the evaluation of specific programmes

aimed at achieving certain outcomes by “filling in the gaps between what policies are intended to do and how people experience them” (Holland, Thomson, & Henderson, 2006, p. 19) which could be vital in analysing the organisational structures of Irish football and assessing the impact of the FAI’s talent development programmes and league structures (e.g. Emerging Talent Programme, Kennedy Cup) in developing successful adult footballers.

#### **4.6.2. Participants**

Five football players were recruited from the Republic of Ireland under 15 development squad. Access to the players was granted by the ETP National Coordinator (Appendix C). The author developed a participant recruitment letter and information sheet that was sent to the parents of players selected onto the squad via the ETP co-ordinator who acted as the gate-keeper (Appendix F). This letter included the contact details of the author. Contact was then initiated by the parents and consent was obtained from the parents and players (Appendix G). As comparisons across contexts are an important variable in ecological research (Benson & Buehler, 2012), utilising a multi-context model was a key consideration for this study; thus, the need for a wide geographical spread was identified. Telephone contact was initially made with the boy’s parents as they are the additional ‘gate-keepers’ for the study, where the importance of the study to enhance the structures of football development pathways in Ireland was outlined. This contact enabled parents to ask questions about the study and clarify requirements. Several techniques were then employed to develop and maintain rapport with the participants themselves. This included a personalised initial interview utilising the graphed results of their visually depicted timeline

questionnaire (Appendix H) and having each subsequent letter personally addressed to the participant. Participants and their parents were encouraged to call or email the primary researcher if their circumstances changed.

### **4.6.3. Data Collection**

Merriam (1998) outlined extensive guidance for data collection within case-study methodologies, which included assistance on effective questioning, beginning the interview, managing the interaction between the interviewee and the respondent and recording and evaluating interview data. Each player was interviewed a total of five times, each participant also completed a timeline questionnaire at the beginning of the study, and completed four end of year review questionnaires, over a four-year period. This study utilised a combination of data collection methods, including face to face interviews and self-completion questionnaires (cf. Boys et al., 2003). The initial interview adopted a semi-structured approach to allow for rapport gathering with each participant. This initial interview guide (Appendix I) incorporated a visual depiction of the timeline produced for each player to allow the participant to talk about his ‘map’ of development to that point (age 14) (Sparkes & Smith, 2014).

When designing an ongoing interview schedule, defining moments identified by previous interviews or critical moments from the literature may be more useful to structure interview schedules around rather than set defined time points as these points often lead to change (Calman et al., 2013). Thus, it was established that the timescale for interviews would be flexible over a month-long period each summer to reflect current situations (i.e., post international training camps, competitions, school transitions). Making bi-annual contact allowed some distance to develop from earlier

events and recollections, which was significant in generating more measured reflections (McLeod, 2003). Thus, each of the participants completed an ‘end of year’ review questionnaire each December (Appendix J) and a semi-structured interview during the summer of each year of the study. Table 8 provides an overview of each point of contact with the participants during the duration of the study.

<i>Type of Contact</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Age &amp; context of the study participants</i>
<u><i>Year 1:</i></u> <b>Initial questionnaire and timeline</b>	Winter (Appendix H; I)	Age 14/15. [Club, ETP, league centres, Ireland under 15]
<b>Interview series</b>	Summer	Age 15. [Club, ETP, league centres]
<b>End of year review questionnaire</b>	December (Appendix J)	
<u><i>Year 2:</i></u> <b>Interview series</b>	Summer	Age 16. [New Club. LOI under 17s. Minor GAA. UK migration]
<b>End of year review questionnaire</b>	December	
<u><i>Year 3:</i></u> <b>Interview series</b>	Summer	Age 17. [LOI, minor GAA, UK]
<b>End of year review questionnaire</b>	December	

<i>Year 4:</i>	Summer	Age 18. [LOI, minor GAA, UK]
<b>Interview series</b>		
<b>End of year review questionnaire &amp; final interview</b>	December	

*Table 8 Schedule of contact for the longitudinal study*

A dictaphone was used to record each interview and all interviews were transcribed verbatim. The average length of the interviews was 41 minutes. Following each interview, ‘reflective and reflexive notes’ were made, being conscious of language tone, inclination, word emphasis, pauses - the ‘how’ words were delivered rather than just the ‘what’ was said (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Notes were also made on areas to explore further or to revisit in subsequent interviews. Data from the interviews informed some of the topic guide for subsequent interviews (Carduff, Murray, & Kendall, 2015). Prior to each subsequent interview, each participant’s notes were re-read to prepare for the upcoming interview. The longitudinal approach differs from a one-off qualitative interview in relation to the retrospective nature of the recall. Retrospective recall was aided by reflection and change over the time period by reflecting on previous interview topics and content (Calman et al., 2013). Using a reflexive approach, certain ‘critical moments’ were revisited from preceding interviews to aid the understanding of the dynamic process of how the participants make sense of their lives and the future impact of these moments (Plumridge & Thomson, 2003). The ‘end of year review questionnaire’ data was also utilised in subsequent interview preparation to explore in greater detail (i.e., goals set versus



goals attained, psychosocial influences during the year, levels of stress and fun experienced).

#### **4.6.3.1. Length of study**

There are no definitive guidelines on the ideal length of a longitudinal study (Calman et al., 2013). The length of longitudinal studies can be defined by time (Stebbing, Taylor & Spray, 2015) or between “waves” of change (Vogl et al., 2018, p.178) and should include at least two data collection points to examine change (Saldaña, 2003). Any study of developmental processes should include observations across as large a portion as possible of the period in which rapid change in competence levels occurs (Siegler & Crowley, 1991), thus a longitudinal study across the ages of 14 to 18 was chosen as the appropriate methodology for this study as it spans key developmental stages such as adolescence, development, mastery (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004) and/or moving from specialising into investment or into a recreational phase (Côté & Hay, 2002).

#### **4.6.3.2. Timeline methodology**

Constructing timelines is a method of organising rich visual narrative data (Patterson, Markey & Somers, 2012). Timelines are usually constructed by chronologically highlighting events in a person’s life history (Mazzetti & Blenkinsopp, 2012; Patterson et al., 2012). Berends (2011) utilised the tool to combine the life histories of a group of individuals to aid the identification of patterns and sequences. A timeline methodological approach can be used to give structure to proceeding interviews (Chell, 2004; Mazzetti & Blenkinsopp, 2012). Mazzetti and Blenkinsopp (2012, p. 658) surmised that a visual method “facilitated participants’ sense-making, by enabling them to identify gaps, and consider the impact of career transitions, life

events, peer and family pressures, and organizational change.” Timelines can also provide context for the interview process and enhance the quality of the information obtained (Harper, 2002; Gramling & Carr, 2004; Berends, 2011) and can be used to divide an individual’s experiences to date into identifiable temporal sections (cf. MacNamara et al., 2010; Howells & Fletcher, 2015). The use of timelines allows research participants to regress more readily to previous events where the clarification of sequence allows the participant a clear sense of the timing of relevant events and how these events affected later events (Mazzetti & Blenkinsopp, 2012). Due to the possible dangers of over-simplification of narrative data, timelines are most effective when used in conjunction with interviews (Patterson et al., 2012). Providing contextual information and prompts to interview subjects may help in the process of information recollection from long-term memory (Ericsson & Simon, 1980; Schulkind et al., 2012).

Consistent with the knowledge of timelines as a useful information recollection tool, timelines were utilised in this study as a ‘priming effect’ prior to and during the interview to increase the likelihood of accurate information retrieval (Mace & Clevinger, 2013). The participants were emailed out a sheet of questions prior to their first interview (see Appendix H) to complete and return to the researcher. This was then used to develop a timeline (via Microsoft Excel) for each player which outlined their history of playing football and key football-related experiences to date. This preliminary method was used to guide and aid the initial interview process. The data was also combined to identify patterns in relation to talent development in Irish football as a sequential framework of chronological events, akin to a composite sequence analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This pattern recognition served to influence the design of the results chapter by age/stage segments. The data was then

verified by a parent to assess the convergent validity with the athletes recalled information (Côté et al., 2005).

#### **4.6.4. Data Analysis**

Case study methodology has been characterised by varying and sometimes opposing approaches to research methodologies and epistemological commitments (Yazan, 2015). Merriam (1998, p.6) maintains that “the key philosophical assumption upon which all types of qualitative research are based is the view that reality is constructed by individuals interacting with their social worlds.” This approach is more closely aligned to this particular research, in comparison to the more positivist leanings of Yin (2002). Unlike more descriptive or positivist approaches (Yin, 2011), a social constructivist approach was maintained which placed more emphasis on inductive exploration (Eisenhardt, 1989) and holistic analysis (Flyvbjerg, 2006). This holistic feature of small-N research, allows for greater levels of data analysis as “ideas and evidence may be linked in many different ways” (Ragin, 1992, p. 225) which aided the discovery of meaning and understanding of participant experiences in this context (Stake, 1995). Merriam (1998, p.178) defined data analysis as “the process of making sense out of the data. And making sense out of data involves consolidating, reducing, and interpreting what people have said and what the researcher has seen and read – it is the process of making meaning.”

As only limited theoretical knowledge existed concerning this particular sporting context, an inductive research strategy that allowed the theory to emerge from the data was viewed as a valuable starting point in this case-study research (Siggelkow, 2007). Four key principles are associated with social science analysis and these were utilised

here as a guideline throughout each analytic step (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This included attending to all the evidence, investigating all plausible rival explanations, addressing the most significant aspect of the case study and demonstrating a familiarity with the prevailing thinking and discourse about the case study topic. The validation of case-study data varies significantly depending on which primary strategy one followed (cf. Stake, 1995; Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2002), which manifests from differing philosophical viewpoints. To enhance data validation, the author followed Merriam's (1998) strategies to enhance internal validity (e.g. triangulation, long-term observation, peer examination, reliability (e.g. disclosure of researcher insider/outsider status) and external validity (e.g. use of thick description, multi-site designs).

Data was entered into the computer package NVivo to assist with data handling. Over the data collection period of four years, key themes were identified within each interview (intra-textually) and between interviews (inter-textually) (Podlog & Ecklund, 2006) using the constant comparative method of analysis (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994) which involved comparing the cases yearly, at various time points (i.e., age 14-16, age 17-19) and at the completion of the longitudinal study. Quotes (units of meaning) were given theme labels and placed into provisional categories. For example, units such as XYZ were placed into theme label 'A'. New theme labels were created if there were no similar units of meaning. Theme labels were then organised into provisional categories (e.g., A & B into C), the name of which being designed intuitively to reflect the content. Inter-textual analysis was conducted across all the longitudinal study participant interviews to obtain an illustration of the overall salient themes. For example, responses coded under the provisional category X, from all of the participant interviews were grouped together to identify common sets. Nvivo

assisted with this process by making it easier to view similarly labelled data from across all cases at the same time. Throughout the four years, the category headings were continually reflected upon to ensure that they continued to reflect the footballer's experiences.

Case study data was collected and analysed simultaneously, allowing for an emerging and interactive research design (Merriam, 1998). When tentative conclusions were drawn regarding aspects of development (e.g., the role of other sports, key psychosocial influences) the analysis proceeded to examine if there were replicable relationships across the other case studies. This allowed the research to be analysed holistically to identify common features of the development pathway and to identify key issues and differences across contexts. Following this analysis, plausible rival interpretations could be explored throughout the 'reflective stop-offs' offered at the end of each chronological stage in the Findings and Discussion section.

#### **4.6.5. Case Study Presentation**

Once the rigorous analysis of data had occurred, the process turned towards crafting the narrative and finding the most appropriate method to re-tell the stories. Rather than solely presenting interview data, utilising stories adds context to each lived experience. Analysing micro-stories about individual experiences whilst also providing insights into macro societal relations (Dowling, 2012; Dowling et al., 2015) suited the bio-ecological framework for this study. Indeed, Stride and colleagues (2016) posit that stories can provide "an effective means of reflecting how decisions made at a societal and/or organisational level can play out at the micro-level, influencing individual daily lived social realities" (p.39). This enabled the researcher the flexibility to gain comprehensive and in-depth insights into a number of issues

which can span a number of disciplines (Harrison, Birks, Franklin, & Mills, 2017). A case-study approach (combined with a story-telling approach) was deemed to be the most effective method for displaying the wealth and breadth of data produced during the duration of this study as this method allows for the integration of formal, statistical and narrative methods into a single study (George & Bennett, 2005). A multiple case study approach was chosen because “a multiple or collective case study will allow the researcher to analyse within each setting and across settings” (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p.550). This form of analysis allowed the researcher to conduct an in-depth analysis of the issue of development, within this particular context of Irish football with a view to understanding the lived experience perspective of players (Merriam, 2009).

#### **4.6.5.1. Defining the case**

Bounding the case is key to focus, frame and manage data collection and analysis (Harrison et al., 2017). Developing research questions or objectives is recommended to aid the framing of such cases (Merriam, 2009). Thus each case was structured to provide an insight into investigating and contextualising the transitions and lived experience of individual athletes within the development pathway, examining players’ perceptions of the dominant challenges that impact career progression in Irish football, assessing key psychosocial influences on talent development within Irish youth football and examining the developmental characteristics of the talent development pathway, relative to best practice research. Each longitudinal case was thus ‘bound’ by time (14-18), activity (football) and a system of connections (i.e., situated in SFAI league structures, being part of the FAI development pathway) (Harrison et al., 2017; Merriam, 1998).

#### **4.6.5.2. Representation of cases**

The initial data collection saw five players being studied for four years. With concerns about the coherent reproduction of this vast amount of data and confidentiality issues, it was deemed unrealistic to present five full case studies. Subsequently, three composite cases were created in order to represent the journey of the five players. The three composite stories were produced from constructing a composite sequence analysis (cf. Gledhill & Harwood, 2014) to gain a sequential understanding of the players' general developmental experiences. As there were common milestones across all five journeys (i.e., entry into football, playing within SFAI and FAI structures, representing Ireland under 15s); differences in geography, social support and influence and culture were used to inform the selection of the specific elements of the composite cases (e.g., with the focus in Study Two being on the DDSL, it was relevant to show different geographical relationships with that league, one based in the league, one just outside the DDSL (with close ties) and a final narrative showing the difficulty of travel and culture when one is from 'outside' this particular developmental area).

These cases are presented across a chronological timeline, outlining three journeys and lived experiences through development to their developing mastery phase (Richardson et al., 2013). It was identified after the initial data collection point that there was a vast array of psychosocial attributes and constructs that players reflected on and alluded to. Gaining an in-depth understanding of these individual characteristics through singular vignettes (e.g., the formation of identity) was seen as being beyond the scope of this chapter as it would not provide the level of contextual analysis needed. As the overall aim of the study was to examine the dominant challenges faced by young Irish footballers following their entry on, and subsequent progress through, the talent development pathways in Ireland, the cases aimed to focus

on the key developmental structures, transitions, challenges and supports that the players faced while also getting an insight into the characteristics of this talent development environment (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Martindale et al., 2007; Henrikson et al., 2010).

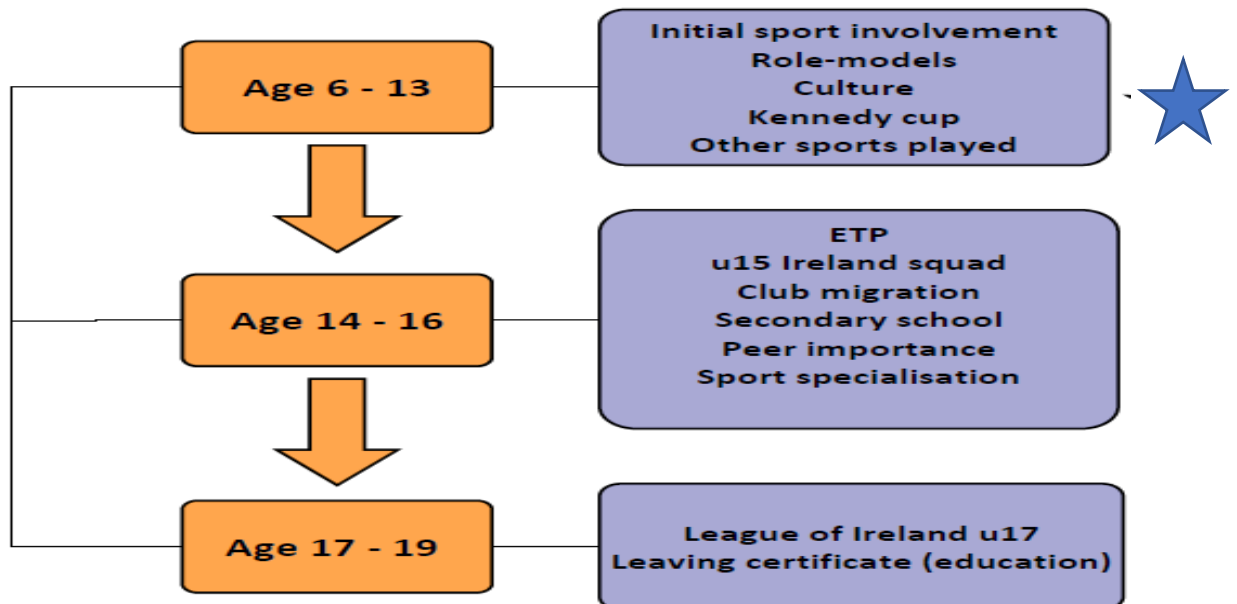
## **4.7. Findings and Discussion**

Below are three case studies, presented in three age-range phases (age 6-13, age 14-16, age 17-19). The aim of this method of presentation is to adequately analyse each key development phase of Irish football. Following each phase, there will be a reflective stop-off where the author explores the key moments / incidents and findings from the three cases presented.

Each of the (composite) players (Adam, Harry and Nathan) (pseudonyms) had at least one shared point on their developmental pathway, having been selected to represent the same Republic of Ireland international under 15s squad. It was at this point that the research journey with them began. The cases describe the divergent journeys to get to that point and then their individual journeys post that under 15s squad. As a holistic approach to studying development is advocated (Wylleman, Lavalée, & Alfermann, 1999), these phases will identify challenges not solely in football but in other domains of their personal development (e.g., academic, psychosocial) whilst also drawing attention to distinguishing characteristics of their meso and macro environments (e.g., cultural influences, stakeholder relationships).



## 4.8. Phase one: Age 6-13 (Playing origins to Kennedy Cup)



### 4.8.1. Adam's story:

Irrespective of the football code, Adam grew up with a ball in hand, fetching balls back for his father as he watched his father and his uncles excel in Gaelic football (GAA); a sport his family was immersed in, *my Dad loves GAA, that's the main reason that I play it and I have such a big interest in it.* The year they won the County title ignited his passion for the sport, and he embraced the sense of community comradery, which included Adam's father and uncles, *they tell me they were all great [Gaelic] footballers... I have a cousin on the county team, the senior team now... it's in our family, the [Gaelic] football.*

Adam is the only son in the family (with a sister, seven years his junior). His father coached him on Gaelic football teams from the age of seven. In a rural community, where people held multiple roles to ensure its survival, sport was no different. Regular

embarrassing losses by the football club saw it reach out to the villages' best young athletes for reinforcement. From late addition to shining light, Adam was the player that they wouldn't play without. There were once grumblings with local fixture secretaries and club officials when Ballyfin FC refused to play a cup semi-final because Adam was carrying a slight injury. *"If Adam's not available, we're not playing, postpone the game!"* exclaimed a club administrator according to Adam's father. That's how it was for Adam; a boy in demand.

Adam didn't play organised football until he was 11; more than four years later than the majority of his peers. Within a year, he was recruited into the Schoolboy League Centre. Adam is a January born player, immediately pigeonholed into a bustling centre half position. Early success came quickly and easily to Adam, he found his feet quickly, helped by his best friend across the road who was drafted in too. Reports of him picking up the ball at centre-half and skipping and dribbling the full length of the pitch before rippling the opposition net were common-place. A luxury he wouldn't be afforded by the time he got to the ETP and DDSL; his schoolboy league coach warned, *"you won't get away with that up there, you'll need to do things quicker, there will be better players than you up there, you won't get out of trouble so easily."* At the age of 12, Adam got a sense of the difference in the standard of the schoolboy leagues during an SFAI national cup fixture against a Dublin club when they *were only beaten 4-0, it was a fantastic result.* With ease he combined playing both football codes, engaging in structured training or games on average four nights per week in his early teens.

*"I see myself playing in the Premier League. I go to bed and you'd imagine it every night without fail. It's a dream. Unfortunately, you won't get it handed to you, you have to work hard and that's basically what I want to do."* [Adam]

His father acted as his self-professed *biggest fan and biggest critic*, talking regularly about Adam's natural talent yet emphasising anecdotes of rejection and failure. TV shows on football selection and rejection, and progression statistics, met with an air of indifference as quick progression seemed to bring with it an almost tangible sense of the possibilities that lay ahead for Adam.

### **Age 13/14 - Kennedy Cup – version one and two**

After only a few games for Ballyfin FC, Adam was selected for the Kennedy Cup. An injury to a squad member opened up a spot on the squad, a month before the start of this prestigious tournament. Being one of the smallest leagues in Ireland (a county that only has six teams in the entire under 15 division and five teams at under 16) his rise to prominence with Ballyfin FC and the Schoolboy League Centre didn't go unnoticed. His striking physicality, enthusiasm to learn the game and being championed by his father, meant that despite only playing the game for just over a year, Adam was drafted into the squad. After performing well in the tournament preparation games the official League report written by his coach, professed great delight to have Adam on board, "*Adam has fitted right in and looks like he has been here forever. This will be a big week for Adam.*" Selection to the Kennedy Cup squad was a personal goal achieved for Adam and he worked hard to secure a starting berth:

*"It was great to get selected, it was my aim for the start of the year and when I got into it [The Kennedy Cup squad] and made the panel eventually I didn't stop and I kept going and kept pushing myself."  
[Adam]*

Selection to the squad was seen as a tangible reward for a young footballer with no external expectations, who through his father's lens exhibited exceptional performances in friendly games that secured him a place. Playing at the Kennedy Cup, a year below one's age-group is rare and this was particularly confidence boosting for

Adam. The team were to eventually finish the tournament in 21<sup>st</sup> out of the 32 Schoolboy Leagues, the tournament won by the DDSL. No surprise there as they had won it for 32 out of the 42 years it has been running but, “*Adam Murray had a great week*” [official League report].

At 13 Adam was still eligible for another Kennedy Cup. This time he was able to experience the full build-up to his 2<sup>nd</sup> Kennedy experience. This time he was more of a linchpin in the team and the team was subsequently built around him; expectations were high and the pressure was intense. This year they had a new coach, a tough coach, a different dynamic than Adam had become accustomed. This coach was tougher than his father, which was no mean feat. He always wanted more. His demands were not tinted with unconditional love nor admiration; he was an authoritative and demanding figure and his expectations of Adam were high.

This Kennedy Cup experience would turn out to be a week of mixed emotions. There were highs when he scored and beat their local county rivals on Monday evening. The official League report gave Adam a special mention, “*he was just immense.*” Then there were the lows of his weakest performance on Tuesday morning. He had never felt as physically tired, his legs felt drained, and he was emotionally shattered. He’d trained exceptionally hard throughout the year. He felt that he should be prepared for this, but the pain in his muscles was like he’d never felt before. He couldn’t envisage himself playing another game that evening. He hurt from the morning, but he was determined to give a good performance. He came out fighting, scored and won, even calling to the bench to relax as tensions mounted. His league finished the week in 6<sup>th</sup> position out of 32 Schoolboy leagues. It was their best-ever finish in the tournament. Adam, the bustling Ballyfin centre-mid, was the top scorer in the tournament with five goals. His, and his team’s performance would see 11 of them being selected for the

ETP centre which was to incorporate 3 Schoolboy leagues. This very year Adam also won a Leinster GAA title with his school. When asked to list his achievements, the school GAA victory came first.

#### **4.8.2 Nathan's story:**

Nathan was six when a schoolteacher and part-time coach at a local football club (in the Dublin District Schoolboy League), Liberty FC, suggested that he and his older brother Patrick (then aged eight) should join the club. Liberty FC was set up in the 1970s to provide football to the children based around its inner-city environs. The hundreds of players who have represented Ireland at all levels (from under 15 to Senior) are extolled through stories, framed signed jerseys mounted in the halls and via social media platforms as proximal role-models for hard-work and effort, as are the tales of 'footballing almos'ts' characterised by the opposite behavioural traits. The seven-former full senior Irish international players who developed at the club take pride of place at the top of this almost palpable football progression pathway for boys. History books, trophy cabinets and international caps are seen as reflective of the quality experience and guidance at this progressive academy-style football club which is, according to the club itself, one of the "*elite schoolboy clubs in the country.*" Self-termed 'academy training' starts from age four, where players are introduced to nutrition, hydration, plyometrics and occasionally sin-bins as ill-discipline punishment during their 2-hour session on weekends with qualified coaches. An informal connection with local schools saw numerous kids being funnelled to this Saturday morning football programme in Liberty FC, a role which is typically filled by the GAA in other communities outside of inner-city Dublin. Former Liberty FC

players, now playing professionally in the UK are regular visitors to the 4-7-year olds' weekend academy. A family ethos remains a strong part of the club culture, despite the 'lure' of the club that now sees it attracting players from outside of its original boundary (primarily due to this publicised progression pathway).

Nathan's earliest memories of those Saturday mornings were getting thrown out of training by two influential coaches for messing around, men he remains close to today. The words of one coach becoming his most precious piece of advice gained to date *he'd always say, "don't dwell on mistakes, don't drop my head, let it go and move on."* He credits one of these coaches, also his former schoolteacher, as being the most influential coach along his development pathway for his approachable nature and the role he played in cultivating his love of football. Nathan notes that despite the changing and upgrading of club facilities and coaches throughout his time at the club, a strong family ethos remained, providing a community hub for the local inner-city environs; a club with a distinctive playing style and approach to the game.

*"I just liked it there. Everyone knew everybody. We never actually won any trophies, but it was all about me enjoying my football"*  
[Nathan].

Nathan played with school friends and his older brother during those early years. He credits 'playing up' a few years as being facilitative to his development. Nathan was also quick to point to the achievements of his brother in football when talking about his own progression. Nathan's mother rarely ever missed a match, only when her two sons began playing on the same day for different teams did she have to alternate between them. She was a source of immense emotional, informational and also tangible support in providing transport to matches for her sons.

*“I can’t emphasise enough how important she [my Mum] is in my life and my football. I never really had my dad so it has always been just us.” [Nathan]*

Anne raised Nathan and his siblings alone since he was a baby. The traditional roles played by both parents in a two-parent family, played here by one. Nathan, his mother, older brother, younger sister and grandfather in a two-bedroom flat. Despite not having a background in football, once her sons became immersed in the club, Anne followed; setting up a fundraising committee and becoming an active member of the club. The club environs became an extension of their home. *Living in the flats made being a footballer tougher than somewhere else*, the club provided a sense of ‘place’ with strong male role-models for Nathan. Nathan spent the majority of his time between school and the football club.

Liberty FC is a prominent club within the DDSL and as such would have scouts in attendance at its underage games (particularly at those against fellow large DDSL clubs). Nathan became noticed by the network of scouts (representing UK professional clubs). From this process, Nathan began engaging in trials at UK clubs from the age of 12. Over a two-year process, he would go on trial with 11 different Premier League, Championship and Scottish clubs. This often-involved multiple trips to each club and consumed most of his school holidays.

### **Age 13 - Kennedy Cup**

The selection process for a place on the Dublin District Schoolboy League (DDSL) team for the Kennedy Cup squad is a hotly contested and rigorous one. This is the largest Schoolboy league in Europe and has been the most successful league at the Kennedy Cup since its inception. Nathan got selected for the squad and captained the highly esteemed team to victory in the tournament. It was at this tournament where he’d meet and leave an impression on a future League of Ireland club manager who’d

come back and sign him when he turned 18. The tournament saw the DDSL produce a tournament goal difference record *probably one of my favourite tournaments that I've been at. Everyone wanted us to lose.* There was a palpable sense of 31 schoolboy leagues versus one league. Nathan's prestigious yet controversial league were on the receiving end of spectator venom, including having a player spat on when taking a corner kick *because we always win it, and nobody wants us to win.* This 'them v us' mentality would present itself repeatedly throughout Nathan's time playing club and league football. As captain, Nathan felt elation but also relief that his DDSL squad could extend the extensive winning record in a competition that felt greater worth than just an u14 tournament:

*"When you go down the country for a game, the support would be mad, all the country, the parish would get together, they'd be cheering the local team on, just to beat the Dubs."* [Nathan]

#### **4.8.3. Harry's story:**

Harry grew up in a town with a long-established history of 'foreign' games like rugby (including the presence of a famous rugby school nearby) and soccer. The contradictory anti-establishment sense in the area also meant a long tradition of Gaelic games in the town. As a keen sportsman, Harry played all three football codes during various parts of his development years, beginning organised sport with Clara under 8s GAA team, and joining Clara United football club and Clara rugby club at under 9s.

Harry hailed from a family of five children; two older brothers and an older sister, then came Harry, the youngest boy, to be followed by a younger sister. At under 10 Harry left his local club and followed in the footsteps of his older brother, Conor, 11 years his senior to join DDSL side, Oxley town. He was travelling 45 minutes to an hour



away into Dublin city for, initially, seven a side football. Oxley town is an ambitious club, with a history of producing successful senior Irish internationals. The club has flirted with senior LOI status in the past and previously engaged in a sponsorship deal with a UK club which gave initial access to talented youth and naming rights on the DDSL club for the UK team. Conor had played with the club throughout his development period. He was still in contact with coaches in the club and had told them about Harry. With positive memories of his own footballing education there, Conor was a prominent influence behind the move. Along with the family's experience of the DDSL; seeing the regularity of scouts at every home game and exposure to the international coaches were other motives behind the move at under 10. At that age, not many Clara based boys made the journey to the DDSL, they would follow at later ages, under 15 and under 16.

*“There’s scouts at the Oxley town matches every game and international coaches watching the game looking for players. There wouldn’t be that down in Clara. There was better coaching as well”  
[Harry]*

Although Harry was a striker throughout his formative years, being a regular top scorer for the club, an Oxley town coach who would remain a key personality in Harry's development, identified the ferocious tackling and heading skills as the potential for a centre-back and converted Harry to that position at under 11. *Respect, fun, good communicator*; all adjectives that were used by Harry to describe the character and manner of this coach. This coach cultivated a team spirit that Harry often referred back to, epitomised by a teammate and close friend of Harry's called Naz. Naz was famed for his pre-match dressing-room dances, ensuring that everyone played with a smile on their face. This coach made Harry captain of the under 14s, despite him being the youngest player on the team. This episode of trust, sparked by Harry beginning to have verbal disagreements with referees and his coach, had resonated with Harry. A role he

took seriously and a position he has sought to hold for each subsequent squad, becoming attached to the armband as a physical manifestation of responsibility, struggling to play to the same intensity when he doesn't have the armband on. This coach and Harry's brother Conor would talk regularly about training ideas and tactics, with Conor often suggesting tactics to this coach mid-match.

Conor had also played centre-back with Oxley town, also being switched there from another position; "*he knew that's what I did when I was up in Dublin*" [Conor]. Conor went to Dublin to play with Oxley town when he was 14; he felt that this was already too late and negatively impacted his ability to progress within the sport. Conor's skills and shortcomings would act as a fixed external reference point throughout Harry's development. This position switch crystallised Harry's idea of a footballing role-model, who was a current Irish centre-back and former Oxley town player, who had a similar playing style to Harry. This role-model would provide continual abstract motivation to Harry throughout his development. Harry's dad, a delivery driver, was getting up at 4.30am to go to work, and then was gone to Dublin with Harry for 2 or 3 evenings per week and a game at weekends. This sacrifice made by his father to drive Harry to Dublin often 4 times a week is regularly cited as providing the motivation for Harry to succeed in football, to be able to repay his father *by wearing the green jersey* (of Ireland). The importance of Irish culture to the family and representing 'Irishness' epitomised by the goal espoused of playing for Ireland.

### **Age 13 - Kennedy Cup**

Harry and his family remain bitter at the thoughts of a political game at play surrounding his chance to play on a Kennedy Cup team. Harry wasn't eligible for his home county Cup squad as he now played in the DDSL and accusations were abound of him not getting called into the final DDSL squad (he was on the reserve list) because

those spots were secured by those playing with the more prominent clubs in the league which often supplied coaches to the DDSL Kennedy Cup team; “*if he was with (a prominent DDSL team named) he would’ve been on it*” [Mother]. Harry’s father argued that he should come back to Clara Utd to play for that year, so he would be eligible to secure a place on his home county Kennedy Cup squad due to the significance of the tournament. Conor retorted that leaving Oxley town for the year would be detrimental to Harry’s overall development. The suggestion also was that within his home county, each player on the Kennedy Cup squad had to sign a contract to say that he would not transfer to a DDSL club the following year. The tournament holds such a valued place in underage Irish football culture that it remained a regret for Harry not having been able to participate primarily due to his club of choice.

#### **4.8.4. Reflective stop-off: Age 6-13 (Playing origins to Kennedy Cup)**

*The aim of this phase was to gain an insight into the initial lived experiences of the football development pathway within Irish football, to identify the dominant challenges, developmental characteristics and key early psychosocial influences experienced by boys from different contexts. This phase typified an initiation stage (Bloom, 1985; Côté, 1999) where young athletes are introduced to organised sports and during which are identified as talented athletes,*

*Adam and Harry experienced a typical early multi-sport participation, with their involvement in GAA being a cultural, shared local experience. Early exposure to football for all three players was initiated by a male figure of authority (father, older brother or teacher). The gulf in resources of clubs and leagues at this introductory*

*junction appeared vastly different in terms of playing numbers, facilities and coaching standards. A reduced playing pool for Adam's league resulted in two participation opportunities for Adam at the Kennedy Cup. This tournament was seen as a pivotal step for each of the boys in their development pathway while also providing an insight into aspects of the footballing culture countrywide (i.e., Nathan identifying a sense of 'them v us' in relation to schoolboy leagues, Harry's mother blaming the 'politics' of selection decisions).*

#### **4.8.4.1. Psychosocial influences on participation**

Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998, p.996) refer to the interactions between the individual and the immediate environment as “primary engines of development”, reflected in the processes component of their bio-ecological theory. One of these processes included family culture, which principally determines an individual's propensity to play sport (Birchwood et al., 2008). As children, individuals acquire deeply rooted predispositions, which is shaped by their social context and culture and transmitted via socialisation in the family (Birchwood et al., 2008). The impact of family and the culture of Gaelic games in their communities was pervasive in Adam and Harry's choice to engage in both football codes through these early development years. Nathan's exposure to GAA was limited as there is minimal GAA participation in Dublin's inner-city, with an absence of GAA development officers in many inner-city schools.

Parents have a key role to play in the development of youth footballers, through initial socialisation and the continuing contribution to their psychosocial development (Brustad, 1996). Previous youth football studies have also identified the vital role that fathers can play in relation to providing both tangible and informational support (cf. Holt & Dunn, 2004; Gledhill & Harwood, 2014). Adam had the most pervasive

parental role-model for shaping his sporting experiences (Fredricks & Eccles, 2004) at this early stage, with his father assuming a coaching role across multiple teams and indeed across sports. Being the parent of an elite youth footballer is associated with socialisation into the football culture, enhanced parental identity and increased parental responsibility (Clarke & Harwood, 2014). Football is often a shared experience, which shaped the dynamic of their relationship and held a significant function in a parent-child dyad (Dorsch et al., 2015; Clarke et al., 2016). This shared experience can often see parents struggling to balance time with other children in the family (Harwood et al., 2010). Harry was travelling significant distances to his club, which placed a strain on his father physically and on the family dynamic; this saw his older brother take on the traditional role-model form in a footballing sense, providing emotional and informational support. Despite dominant masculine norms within football generally being reflected with the father's knowledge being accepted and considered authoritative over the mother's (Coakley, 2006; Clarke et al., 2016), Nathan's mother assumed a vital support role in his early development phase as she became embedded in the club herself. When reflecting on his time at Liberty FC, Nathan cited the 'family feel' of the club as being the reason why he didn't leave there to join one of the other successful underage clubs in the DDSL, perhaps attempting to surround himself with a sense of stability and continuity that he lacked at home. Family values, bonds, relationships or "alternative family environments" have been identified as important in successful athletic development (Lundy, Allan, Cowburn, & Côté, 2019, p.91). The prominent role of the football club for Nathan was perhaps also heightened due to the lack of outdoor space in the flat where he lived, which necessitated him spending more time at the club utilising a resource unavailable to

him at home (i.e., outdoor space), although communal play on the streets was also identified as being a key arena for football ‘play’ for him.

Consistent with Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998) bio-ecological systems theory, in addition to parents shaping the children’s environment and outcomes concerning sport participation and socialisation, children also elicit different responses from their parents as a result of intrapersonal characteristics such as perceived competencies (Kochanska, 1993). Parent-child influences are bi-directional, with parents more likely to provide high levels of support if their children displayed high levels of perceived athletic competence (Davison, Downs, & Birch, 2006; Weiss et al., 2012). This may account for the continued engagement of Adam’s father and Harry’s brother in their development after both boys showed promise in football within their early development pathways which resulted in continued resource investment into the athletes (i.e., money, time).

#### **4.8.4.2. Sibling relationships**

The sibling relationship is one of the most persistent and longest lasting across one’s life span (Conger & Kramer, 2010). The sibling relationship can be seen as “a natural laboratory for young children to learn about their world” (Howe & Recchia, 2014, p.155). Siblings can positively support the development of youth athletes, are important sources of instructional support and can be seen as role-models for work ethic (Côté, 1999). Harry’s initial journey was heavily influenced by his older brother’s experiences. Harry followed his brother’s path; he experienced an early internal migration when moving to the DDSL, he played for the same club and similarly switched positions from striker to centre half. Older siblings have been shown to exert authority and influence over younger siblings by providing them with influential assistance (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985; Davis & Meyer, 2008; Lundy et

al., 2019) and have the potential to positively influence younger siblings in their development trajectory (Hopwood et al., 2015). Gaps of more than three years between siblings tend to generate feelings of affection within the sibling bond (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985). The closer age gap between Nathan and his brother, Patrick, in a somewhat turbulent household, appeared to act as a source of emotional support during childhood and early adolescence. The brother's provided encouragement for each other, they defended each-other in times of need and displayed pride in each other's achievements (Bloom, 1985; Davis & Meyer, 2008). This was particularly evident when Nathan repeatedly referred to the progress his brother was making in his LOI club. With the familial comparison of sport success in Adams' wider family (father and uncles), the close age gap between Nathan and his brother (also excelling in youth football during this initial phase) and the continual comparison to Harry's brother, perhaps these young athletes were initially motivated by a social comparison to one's sibling and wider family which appears to have prompted an increase in workload and dedication to the sport (Davis & Meyer, 2008). Having more siblings increases the likelihood of getting involved in sports in the first place and is related to being engaged for a longer time in a particular sport or physical activity (Barnett, 2008). These 'backyard' games were evident for Harry and Nathan who often spent a significant period of time playing informally with their older brothers. This is one of the reasons posited for why elite athletes are more likely to be later-born children, while non-elite were more likely to be firstborn (Hopwood et al., 2012).

#### **4.8.4.3. Appropriateness of the development pathway**

Development contexts (e.g., environments containing aspiring youth footballers) have 'developmentally instigative' characteristics, that with interaction to the developing individual's characteristics serve to impede or facilitate development

(Bronfenbrenner, 1993). The quality of “proximal processes” (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994, p.568), which as explained in Chapter One, are the connections between aspects of the individual (e.g., gender, social class) and aspects of the context (e.g., culture) on development; is provided initially by family environments (e.g., activities engaged in and encouraged by parents, toys given for the child to engage in and also responding to cues and initiatives provided by children). At some point to further skill learning and development, knowledge and materials are needed from outside the home. If the environmental context (e.g., availability of local clubs, quality of coaches, play characteristics of the local environment) in which the family are situated contain these resources then it is placed at an advantage, in contrast, families in disadvantaged environments may not yield the same level of return for their proximal processes (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994; Williams & Reilly, 2000; Hancock et al., 2017). For processes to operate successfully they also need stability, that to be effective the proximal processes driving development “must occur on a fairly regular basis over extended periods of time” (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994, p.576) with the disruptive effect of unstable, inconsistent and unpredictable environments. Feelings of stress generated by such disruptive environments can undermine psychological development. In analysing the proximal development processes experienced in the early stages of development by the three footballers, Adam experienced a sport-rich environment, albeit with reduced comparative footballing resources (i.e., number of players, teams, coaches). Nathan was able to avail of a traditionally successful schoolboy league club as a development process in his locality. This provided him with an opportunity which would perhaps not have been available if travel was necessary due to his family circumstances (one parent family with a younger sibling). Harry felt the need to travel to a different club in a different country to further his



development from an early age, to seek out more optimal development processes after his brother identified and reflected that the development opportunities were not of a good enough standard in his local area.

#### **4.8.4.4. The Kennedy Cup**

The Kennedy Cup was the most prominent tournament experienced by the boys at this age (13 years old). As outlined in Chapter One and Three, the Kennedy Cup is often referred to as a “meat market” for Dublin based clubs and scouts of UK clubs (O’Sullivan, 2015b). This week of competition is used as a mechanism for FAI staff to identify talent for progression onto the Emerging Talent Programme squads and the under 15 Irish development squad (FAI, 2013b) and thus can place immense expectation and pressure on players and league coaches. It was apparent that access to the tournament was not equal across the cases. Adam was selected onto the squad a year young and competed at two Kennedy Cups due to the minimal numbers in his schoolboy league. Harry’s perception was that his internal club migration had negatively influenced his selection chances. Nathan experienced the disharmony of schoolboy leagues and the sense of ‘us versus them’ in relation to the DDSL during his Kennedy Cup tournament experience. The prestigious nature of the tournament was evident through the above cases. For example, Harry’s father suggesting that he should move back to his home club for the preceding year to attempt to secure a place, and anecdotes of leagues forcing players to sign contracts stating that they wouldn’t leave the league the following year due to the fear of player poaching at the tournament. The developmental appropriateness of using an under 14 tournament as the primary scouting window for underage football raises questions of the appropriateness and accuracy of such identification. Such subjective ‘coaches’ eye’ talent identification procedures often take for granted that current performance

automatically represents a player's ultimate level of ability (Baker, Schorer & Wattie, 2018).

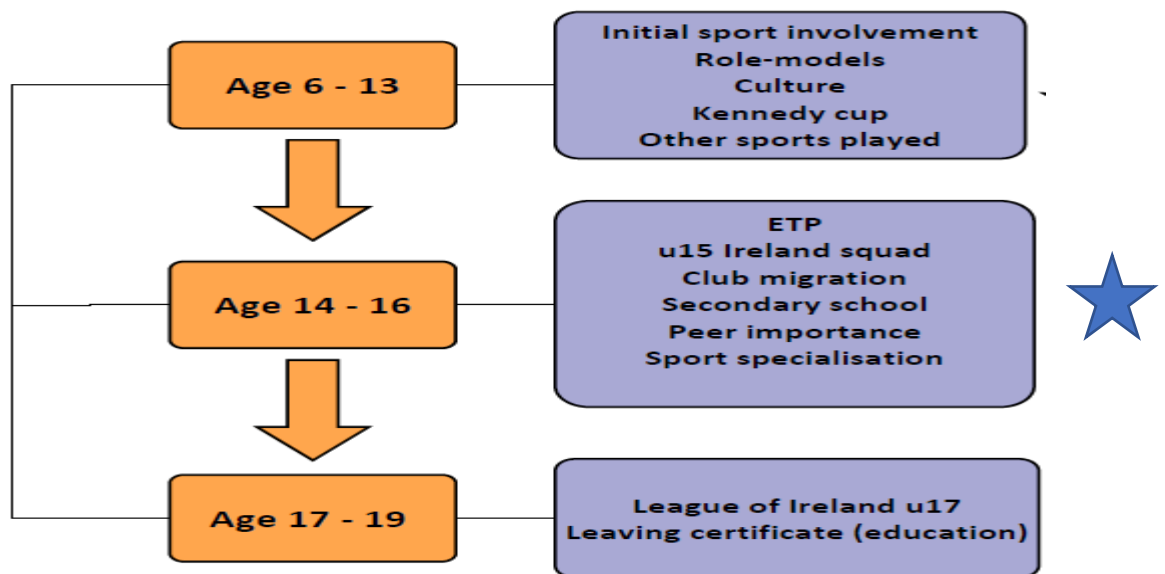
#### **4.8.4.5. Football development**

Attempts have been made to analyse the ages of football entry for elite, sub-elite and recreational players (Helsen et al., 1998; Ward et al., 2007; Ford et al., 2012). The average age for an elite footballer to begin involvement in football was five, supervised training at seven and started academy training at 12 (Ford et al., 2012). Interestingly, the initial engagement in organised football varied significantly between the cases, with Adam being an outlier from the typical age of youth footballers (Adam aged eleven, Nathan aged six, Harry aged eight). Côté, Baker and Abernathy (2007) suggest that entry to sport happens at approximately age six, with youth footballers in Ireland beginning to play football on average between the ages of seven to nine years of age (Doyle et al., 2013).

A continuous debate within development literature centres on the relationship between early specialisation and diversification (cf. Baker, Cobley, & Fraser-Thomas, 2009). With researchers citing a positive relationship between the amount of practice and level of achievement, thus the advantage of early domain-specific engagement (cf. Ericsson et al., 1993). Contrary to this proposition, participating in a diverse range of activities during development phases have been cited as providing a motor or cognitive basis for the learning of future sport-specific skills (Côté, Lidor, & Hackfort, 2009). A later engagement with football, the continuation of other sports and a primary emphasis on fun typifies an early diversification pathway (Côté, Baker, & Abernathy, 2007) for two of the above cases, most notably Adam. Nathan was the only boy not to play another sport during these formative years. At this stage in his development, football offered Adam a confidence boost, an additional avenue to develop his

perceived competence. As perceived competence between the ages of 7-12 years increasingly relies on the use of coach performance feedback and peer comparison (Weiss et al., 2008), this form of social comparison may have been a key contributor to Adam's (positive) self-appraisal of his own ability.

#### 4.9. Phase two: Age 14-16 (ETP to club migrations)



##### 4.9.1. Adam

###### 4.9.1.1. Age 14: ETP and Ireland under 15s

Post Kennedy Cup, Adam was selected for the ETP on Monday evenings. Adam was aware that he was neglecting his studies, but he felt that academia could wait. The family struggled with this extra time commitment driving to and from the ETP mid-week (one hour away from their house).

*“Somebody would have to finish early on the Monday to get him home so he could get straight into his homework instead of getting in at 20 to 5 on the bus, she'd (Adams's mother) collect him at 4 o'clock so he'd get in the extra half an hour.” [Father]*

Adam's initial thoughts were that involvement with the ETP had improved his game. These sessions had more of an emphasis on positional and tactical development versus the Schoolboy league and club which were more technique focused. The ETP had given Adam more exposure to underage international scouts and DDSL club managers. On later reflection, it would be something he'd be happy to put aside, to gain an extra night of recovery back in a demanding schedule. With the overlap of the GAA and his football schedules, Adam was training or playing five nights per week. His father was away with Adam on each of those nights, causing tensions within the home. Aside from familial stress, his father had concerns about Adam's increasing sporting commitment. Adam is so critical to Ballyfin FC, *"that they can't afford to go without him...there's no break (from football) so it's very tough at the moment. He can't carry on like this; he physically can't; he'll burn himself out"* [Father].

Through ETP visibility, Adam secured a trial for the under 15s Irish squad and was selected for a friendly game. Adam could recall the specific date that he played for Ireland under 15s. He felt that this was a very different playing experience, with an increased sense of professionalism and expectancy. The quality of his team-mates meant *he could go in any direction and give the ball*. Normally for Ballyfin, Adam played the *messer in the team, chatty and bubbly*. Here, Adam struggled to play through the occasion, *I just couldn't take it all in, it was the pride of putting on an Ireland jersey, even when you're doing the warm-up in the training gear, it was class*. Adam came on at half-time, he was satisfied with his performance despite the nerves that he experienced.

Although he made that provisional under 15s squad, he underwent another set of trials for an under 15 international tournament later that summer, building for the under 16s Irish squad. Adam, his father, even the League chairman felt the trial went well *"you're*

*definitely in; they have to pick you.*” They didn’t pick him. Adam didn’t make the squad but was philosophical about the rejection. This was the first time he’d experienced rejection within his development. A generic letter sent out by the FAI stating general facets of the game to work on stung as much as the rejection.

#### **4.9.1.2. Age 15: Decision-time – Rossmore Rovers under 16**

Despite Adam’s fondest football memories being of his times with Ballyfin FC, *they’re my local club and all my friends played*, there was a lack of immediate progression opportunities with the club. Low numbers and quality of opposition teams in the league with league administrators primarily focused on the Kennedy Cup at under 14, left him feeling that entering the under 15s and under 16s leagues were anti-climax. So, with no motivation to stay in his league for under 15s and under 16s, decisions on a move to the DDSL lingered. He felt that a move to Dublin would provide him with the opportunity to improve and to have greater visibility to ‘foreign’ scouts. Adam’s father told him every day that he’d *“step onto any team in the country, in any position, even goalkeeper if he wanted.”* Rossmore Rovers (based in the DDSL) were building a squad for the new LOI under 17s to come in next year, so they used this carrot to attract him. Three nights a week and an almost three-hour round trip to Dublin ensued following the move to Rossmore Rovers. Playing locally had allowed Adam to combine both football codes. The move to Dublin could potentially impact on his involvement with the GAA. This wouldn’t be a problem at this point as both sports run on different seasons with only a two-month overlap.

At Rossmore Rovers, Adam was coached by a manager with a penchant for *lads from down the country* as he felt that there was greater potential for further development in them. Even as a 15-year-old, Adam noted that the stature of the DDSL players was greater. But what the *country boys* might lack in physicality, their experience of

playing GAA had made them more aggressive in their style of play, noting a distinct sense of increased physicality in the GAA versus soccer playing styles. From his new experience of integrating with Dublin players, he identified that most boys in Dublin didn't have any experience playing GAA.

This time of transition would fit relatively well in relation to education as he was ironically entering transition year (year four of Secondary Level), which is a one-year optional school year offering broad life skill development, with minimal homework. Education, though verbally encouraged by his parents, often got caught in the crossfire of playing football; *Dad will tell me to study but he won't hold me back from a match so I think he's partially to blame as well* (for the minimal emphasis on education). His Junior Cert results came back, *it went OK* was the coy, qualified reaction, citing football and laziness as reasons for not putting a lot of effort towards the exams. This would in time impact on the subjects he could select for his Leaving Cert.

*“Where I'm from there would not be any players around that has even gone up as far as Ireland, and you have people saying to you 'oh you're going to make it' because it's just uncommon to them. Saying you're going to play Premier League.” [Adam]*

Despite experiencing two unsuccessful Ireland trials that year. Adam reflected on his first year in the DDSL with general positivity.

*“Overall it was a great year. Finished 4<sup>th</sup> in the league, played regularly, I felt that I was quicker on the ball and I was quicker to do things and I could see things better. Training was quicker. More intense with better players around you.” [Adam]*

#### 4.9.1.3. Age 16: under 17s and beyond?

Six of the players from the under 16 squad made the panel for the under 17 LOI team.

Contrary to the selection policies of the original under 16s coach, the under 17s coach didn't hold the same philosophy of developing talent from outside of Dublin.

*“He got rid of a lot of the country lads and brought in some more Dubs [Dublin natives]. It's hard to get used to, when you build a relationship with your teammates, an understanding, then you have to adjust to another crowd of players.” [Adam]*

For the cross-over period of still being involved in GAA club championship and training with the under 17s, Adam was training or playing for six nights a week.

*“Monday County panel [GAA] and then Tuesday I'm with Rossmore Rovers, Wednesday I could be with the club [GAA] and Thursday I'm with Rossmore Rovers again and then Friday I could have a match or minor training for my club [GAA], and a match with Rossmore Rovers at the weekend.” [Adam]*

Adam felt the enjoyment stripped from the game during this short season with the under 17s (this year had been a shortened season from September to December to facilitate the change from winter football to calendar year football scheduling). The change in personnel, increasing time spent travelling and an increased sense of seriousness reduced his motivation for playing football. Adam didn't put himself forward for international trials this year, citing a focus on getting established with Rossmore Rovers and preventing burnout due to continuing to play GAA.

## **4.9.2. Nathan**

### **4.9.2.1. Age 14: ETP, UK decisions and Ireland under 15s**

Nathan's performance for the DDSL at the Kennedy Cup earned him a place on the Dublin ETP. His attitude towards these sessions varied. Negatives included not being overly enthused due to the exposed nature of the pitch to prevailing weather conditions and performing strength and conditioning exercises on wet grass at the edge of a pitch. To other times where he enjoyed training with a technically better standard of players while also getting an insight into the set plays, tactical patterns and shape required by the underage international team, as his ETP coach was the Ireland under 15s assistant manager. Following a successful Kennedy Cup tournament and being involved in the ETP, Nathan along with two Liberty FC teammates, made their debut for Ireland under 15s in two defeats against Holland. He treasures the proud memories of leading out the team, holding the pennant, shaking hands and standing for the anthem, although he will allude to the perm hairstyle he sported for the game tainting his photographic memories of the experience!

Following an extensive trial process with 11 professional UK clubs, Nathan signed with Ashton Athletic, an English Championship club, aged 14. Nathan had the opportunity to sign for more prestigious clubs (i.e. established Premier League clubs) who were offering greater financial incentives, but he chose a Championship club. This decision was based on a combination of reasons including; the presence of other Irish footballers at both academy and senior level at the club, the espousing of a 'family' culture, his initial experience with the coaches, perceptions of 'playing the right way' and an apparent direct route to the first team as opposed to embarking onto a more congested Premier League academy.



*“It’s more about me being happy, not about money, that wouldn’t motivate me. Just being happy and playing football is what I’m looking for.” [Nathan]*

Nathan’s mother visited Ashton Athletic six times prior to Nathan signing the contract, to talk to academy staff and to visit potential lodging accommodation. Searching for a club which would perpetuate the same values of family ethos and loyalty that Nathan experienced at Liberty FC was a key decision-making factor for Nathan and his mother when choosing who he’d sign for. A continual procession of scouts and agents targeted Nathan while he was at Liberty FC, but these were initially screened by the club. Anne met with over ten agents before deciding on the one which she felt was the best fit for Nathan. This agent (named Brendan) was an Irish, former professional footballer, who offered Nathan advice on a number of topics such as dealing with homesickness and injury prevention. He also promised Nathan that he would be a regular visitor over to the UK due to his links with a larger agency there. He signed a four-year deal (one-year scholarship and three-year professional deal, the last year being optional by both parties) with the agreement that he wouldn’t actually go to the UK until the following summer when he was 15 and a half (to allow him to finish his Junior Certificate).

*“I couldn’t believe it when I actually signed, it took me a moment or two to actually write my name and the feeling didn’t sink in until a couple of days afterwards; it’s a huge opportunity that every kid wants so I’m going to make the most of it. I’ve never dreamed of being an architect or anything, just a footballer.” [Nathan]*

This year Nathan regularly travelled over to Ashton Athletic before his move could be officially announced, flying out Thursday, training Friday, playing Saturday before coming home to play with Liberty FC on Sunday.

#### 4.9.2.2. Age 15: Liberty FC and Ireland under 16

Building on his captaincy experience with Liberty FC and the DDSL, Nathan was then chosen to captain the Irish under 16 squad in an invitational tournament in the West of Ireland. The summer had been spent engaging in friendly matches across Europe to prepare for the tournament. The squad now included four Liberty FC players. Ireland played six games in four days and won the tournament, with Nathan playing in every game and scoring his first two international goals. Anne playing every part the proud mother, was draped in her large tricolour flag with her face also painted in green, white and gold. As the Ireland under 16 squad is a development team, Nathan was keen to make the breakthrough for the under 17s in competitive European football the following year. A short break beckoned for Nathan before his last season with Liberty FC began.

Moving clubs to seek underage success has become a feature of schoolboy football in the DDSL but it wasn't something that Nathan was keen to do, despite being approached by other clubs. He had experienced player movement into Liberty FC, *as you get older, they start coming in from all over Ireland*. This was most prominent at under 15, due to it being the age range where players would be scouted for a formal move to a UK club at age 16. Scouts were a regular side-line feature at his under 15 league games. Nathan's commitment to one club was not without its apparent sacrifices, despite his success with Schoolboy League squads and gaining international recognition, Nathan had yet to win anything with Liberty FC. He hoped that his final season would bring some trophies to add to the expansive one in the clubhouse.

Naz was a name that was to loom large as Nathan closed out his underage playing career with Liberty FC. A game which he had anticipated staying with him for the rest of his life as it was to be his final game with his beloved club, and it would indeed

change the course of his future motivations. Perhaps sensing some nerves about the upcoming game, Naz a teammate and close friend of Nathans', put on one of his by then well-renowned 'Naz special' songs on the speakers in the dressing-room, Naz got into the middle of the boys and treated the boys to some of his dance moves which he was famous for among the various underage teams that he had played for in the DDSL. *He made the dressing room a better place. Everyone went onto the pitch smiling.* Thirty minutes into the game, Naz collapsed and died on the pitch. Teammates, parents, coaches and officials witnessed the arrival of paramedics to the scene, attempts to revive Naz on the pitch followed and he was taken away and pronounced dead in hospital. Nathan and his teammates played a central role in the Christian celebration of life ceremony that followed in the local community centre, including saying readings and carrying the coffin. The club still mark his birthday on their social media platforms. Anne had booked a family holiday away to America to celebrate Nathan's impending move to the UK. She felt the physical removal of Nathan from the area also allowed him to better process Naz's death, utilising the skills acquired during club sponsored counselling sessions.

Nathan's final season didn't end with the elusive silverware he had hoped for, but this extended community was the reward for Nathan at Liberty FC along with numerous 'player of the year' awards from the club. Liberty FC produced an emotional 'thank you for the memories' slide show video featuring photos of Nathan and his teammate Alan, who had signed terms with another Championship club, in action for Liberty FC since the age of four. Nathan continued to travel over to Ashton Athletic regularly as the club sought to engage him and Anne with some level of pre-transition preparation. He was now familiar with the club facilities; accommodation was selected and the expectations of becoming a scholar there were articulated.

## *Life in the UK*

The communal area of the inner-city flat complex where Nathan lived with his family was the location for Nathan's going away party. A marquee, pizzas and a DJ (music being Nathan's other love) would mark the occasion, surrounded by his family, friends and club members from Liberty FC. As had become almost ritualistic for Nathan ahead of a big event, he got up early the next day and went to get his hair cut. Perhaps the act of getting his hair cut after the party showed the focus for him was on the move and not the farewell event with his peers. An early evening flight time across to the UK, allowed for a few hours of tea drinking and chatting with family in the airport. An emotional airport embrace with his mother followed, the woman he described as *supermum* and being *the most important person* in his life. Anne was wounded after Nathan said he didn't want her to go over to England with him on this occasion. Nathan left her and proceeded to walk through security where it hit him that he was moving away from home at 15 *all I wanted to do was move*. A wave of nervousness and excitement flooded Nathan as he walked up the aeroplane steps. Packed with him were fond memories of his playing days.

*"I'll miss Libo [Liberty FC] a huge amount. I'll miss walking into the ground on a Wednesday night and chatting to people. I'll always be a 'Libo lad' at heart."* [Nathan]

He began his new life in the UK. Self-belief, maturity and the avoidance of homesickness were the key mantras that Nathan urged himself to abide by as he prepared to settle into his new home. Staying in digs accommodation in a rural location would symbolise this immense change in his life, a world away from the inner-city flat complex. Living in a large house with a Jacuzzi, games room and spare room for his family to stay when they visit. After five weeks at Ashton Athletic, Anne went to visit him, taking all her patience and self-discipline to even leave it that long. She was

delighted with the change she saw in “*her boy*”, in terms of work rate and enthusiasm. As Nathan didn’t turn 16 until a few months after his move, he trained ‘unofficially’ with the club before officially registering for the following year. After six weeks, the realisation that he couldn’t go home spontaneously hit Nathan, having to be back in *work* at the training ground on Monday but it was softened by having flights booked for Dublin the following week. Ashton Athletic accommodated this culture shock and facilitated Nathan to fly home when needed and provided flights for his family to come to the UK.

After seven weeks at the club, Nathan was back home in Dublin to collect his Junior Certificate results and to see his brother off to his Debs (formal student ball) to celebrate finishing his secondary education and embarking onto third level education, a visual reminder of the different paths that the boys were now embarked on. His brother had progressed up to under 19 level in the LOI but failed to make the step up to senior football (no under 21 league operates in Ireland), so he had to look elsewhere for a career, being *more into the books* than Nathan was.

Settling in during the course of the season was difficult, Nathan reported higher perceived levels of physical and mental stress combined with lower levels of enjoyment of the footballing experience for this year compared to his previous year with Liberty FC. Training consumed his mental and physical energy, and Nathan rarely went out after training. Nathan missed his family and close network of friends. The other Irish players at the club helped to facilitate his settling in, as did the bond he was able to generate with the landlady of the digs accommodation but the adaptation to his new environment remained a challenge.

#### **4.9.2.3. Age 16: Ireland under 17s and Ashton Athletic**

This year saw Nathan's most serious injury to date. Mid-way through the first half of a game, Nathan dived in with a sliding tackle to make a last gasp recovery, in this action Nathan got kneed in the side; which resulted in *bruised ribs and some serious internal damage*. He recovered in time and played for the Ireland under 17s squad in the European championship Elite round qualifiers. After winning the first two elite round games, they faced a must-win game with the host country. After drawing 2-2 in a game where they needed 3 points, Nathan held his nerve to score a penalty in the shootout which would ultimately see Ireland under 17s lose 3-2 on penalties, resulting in elimination from the tournament.

Triple daily fitness sessions during pre-season readied Nathan to the seriousness facing him during the next season with Ashton Athletic. Nathan progressed to play with both the Ashton Athletic under 18 and under 23 teams during this season. Despite choosing Ashton Athletic for their education links and positive educational outcomes, training with the under 23s impacted negatively on his educational ambitions as there were more regular training sessions during the day. Visibility from first-team management was a key hope from his under 23 team exposure, as he cited young players from other UK clubs who made the step up to senior football were being given the chance.

For the first time in Nathan's development, he chose someone other than his mother as having the biggest influence on him that year. This was his agent Brendan, officially titled as an advisor and now a family friend. Brendan was credited with keeping him level-headed and focused, Nathan drew from his agent's experience of moving over to a professional UK club as a teenager which helped him to negotiate his own acculturation. Early on, this was a more enjoyable footballing year for Nathan,

having met most of the goals set for himself *scoring eight goals for Ashton Athletic, making his debut for the under 18s and training with the under 23s.*

Towards the end of the year at Ashton Athletic, Nathan struggled with an increasingly defensive style of football that he felt didn't suit him and he experienced low confidence levels which came with the inconsistency of team selection. Nathan who had been training regularly with the under 23s as a first-year scholar and had played nine games for the under 23s, was now spending more time with the under 18s, playing 15 times for them. *You can get on with everyone but you can't speak to everyone about how you're feeling.* He was able to confide in the under 23s coach who would come to the digs and spend time sharing his experiences of moving abroad at a young age. Nathan formally signed his professional contract when he turned 17.

### **4.9.3. Harry**

#### **4.9.3.1. Age 14: ETP and Oxley town to Waterfront Celts**

Following his move from his local club to the DDSL at u10, Harry continued to have a positive experience at Oxley town, captaining the club throughout his time there and winning overall 'Club Player of the Year' aged 14. Harry's goals were to become a regular in the Irish squad and to sign for an English club. Harry's brother Conor, felt that Harry deserved a chance of a trial in the UK, feeling that less comparable players in the league had gone to the UK, through trials which were systematically organised by their clubs. Stories abound of a set number of players going over to the UK per year from large Irish clubs with particular arrangements, regardless of the individual

player's quality and potential. This was not something that Oxley town had arranged for Harry.

Despite winning the league the previous season, Harry's influential coach was sacked from Oxley town due to getting too outspoken on the side-line. Following the loss of their figure-head coach, the team lost a number of players to other DDSL clubs, including Harry's *best friend throughout my four years at the club* Naz, who had joined Liberty FC (where he was to link up with Nathan). Harry was involved with the ETP for one night a week during this period. This provided quality coaching that Harry felt was lacking from Oxley town during the period of the coach changeover. Conor felt that the ETP expedited Harry's tactical and technical development and would've been valuable at an earlier stage. Overall, Conor began to identify a change in Harry. He was playing poorly and not progressing at the rate Conor felt he should be. This was influenced by his knees beginning to turn in during an intense growth spurt which caused him immense discomfort. An example of this change was that Harry retreated from being a player who had been confident to run at players from centre back and be the club's penalty taker; to now refusing to take one. After a few months, Harry recovered from this period of low confidence and instability. He was now taller, stronger and had experienced success by commanding the mid-field and scoring goals in school teams during this period which allowed his confidence to recover which had been negatively impacted by the loss of his influential coach and physical instability. This confidence rebuilding was boosted when a professional UK clubs' senior manager spotted him during an underage friendly and noted his outstanding potential. Harry's physical presence and footballing ability saw the Oxley town appointed UK scout note his age as being 16, when Harry was only 14, demonstrating his relative physical maturity.



Harry completed his Junior Certificate exams in June. He was relatively content with his Junior Cert results, suggesting that football involvement and the associated commute may have slightly negatively impacted on the outcome. His parents were unperturbed, reminding him that the Leaving Certificate was the key educational milestone that he would have to focus on in three years' time.

Only two of his original under 10s teammates remained at Oxley town at age 14, all replaced by victors in a ruthless trial system held at the beginning of each year. Poaching and approaching players was a common occurrence as experienced by Harry from the other prominent clubs in the DDSL, including promises of new boots upon signing, guaranteed trials with UK clubs, suggestions of an underage Ireland cap and emails to Conor outlining what the approaching club could provide Harry in relation to his footballing development.

Combined with the trial system, Harry explained that parents would regularly move their children around clubs that they felt would win the DDSL league the following year. Harry recalled a former teammate from the west of Ireland, who played with five top DDSL clubs during his early adolescence to mid-teens, flaunting the 79-kilometre rule each time. This player was commonly referred to as being one of the most technically proficient players in that age range. Due to the distance between his home and the various DDSL clubs, (almost a 4-hour drive one-way), this former teammate didn't train with his DDSL clubs, instead just arriving at the weekend to play. This created friction between the teammate and the rest of the squad. This player's father was instrumental in these moves, he never let him settle, his aggressive personality on the side-line prompting fellow parents to discuss buying him a tee-shirt captioned '*pass the ball to my son*'.

Restricted by the practicalities of his father's commute from work to Dublin and attracted by the potential pathway to senior LOI football, Harry chose to transfer to Waterfront Celts. His former coach at Oxley town was involved in Celts and spoke to him about joining them. There were wider family benefits of a reduced commute of 25 minutes instead of the often-hour-long trip, but this was now to be made an extra evening of the week due to the increased professional nature of the academy style club. In August, following a summer spent with his large group of friends, he played his first game for Celts under 16 team. Harry was made team captain for the year.

#### **4.9.3.2. Age 15: Ireland under 16 and Celts under 17s (short season)**

Harry chose to do Transition year after his Junior Cert, to allow him to focus on football primarily for the year. Harry was able to combine both football codes, as the GAA season runs predominantly during the summer Harry was able to continue playing Gaelic football with Clara during the summer off-season with Celts. From the under 16 Celts squad, Harry was one of only three players who progressed to the Celts under 17 team for the inaugural national under 17 league (short season). This saw Harry train an average of six hours per week. Celts did very well in the league that first season, with centre-back Harry continuing his impressive scoring record.

Following a series of impressive performances for Celts, Harry secured his 1<sup>st</sup> international cap that year, playing a friendly for the Rep. of Ireland under 16s and he hoped to secure a place in the European Championship under 17 squad the following year. Harry felt that this international representation went some way towards repaying his father for his long evenings on the road to Dublin, whilst also recognising the key influence of his mother being a positive role-model for the family during this period. During a training camp prior to travelling with the Irish squad to play in an invitational tournament abroad, Harry sprained his ankle *Horrible, couldn't believe it.* He was

involved with other Ireland training camps that year specifically for Irish-based players (separate trials for ‘home-based’ and UK based players are a feature of underage international squads) but despite feeling initially confident, *I’m one of the best left, because most of the good ones that were on the team last year have gone over to clubs in England* he failed to cement a place, after having *missed my opportunity*.

During his game for Ireland, Harry was spotted by the Head of Academy of an English League One team, Banshan Utd (formerly in the Premier League). Harry travelled to the UK club for a one-week trial, with another Irish youth footballer and left with the promise of another trial in October. Harry’s feeling on the prospective development pathways unlocked by this visit to the UK was one of confusion. Conversations flowing between *be mad not to try it*, backed up by Conor’s insistence that he would have to go if the League One club offered him a deal, to thoughts of staying in the LOI with Celts, allowing him to potentially play senior professional football whilst being able to continue his education. Possibly as a defensive mechanism to deflect the prospect of not fulfilling the next anticipated step in his football journey, so heavily invested in by himself and others, Harry recounts stories of how tough other found life as footballers in the UK.

*“My mate is over there. He said he loves it when he’s playing football, but then he said he’s not going to lie, it’s really tough.”*  
[Harry]

The English club didn’t follow up on their interest with Harry. Next season would see the first clash of GAA and football which had traditionally run on opposing calendar schedules. Prompted by his family, Harry decided to reduce his playing time with Clara GAA club, he stayed in contact with the club, remaining available if they really needed him but feeling fitter and less injury prone now that he was down to one sport.

#### 4.9.3.3. Age 16: Celts LOI under 17s (regular season)

Harry played as the first-choice centre-half in the squad, starting most of their matches early in the season. He felt like he was continuing to improve as a footballer across several development aspects. He reflects on his time at Oxley town as providing the ideal base for his subsequent move to Celts, as it meant he knew most of the players that would now be his teammates at Celts due to playing against them regularly in the DDSL and playing with some of them on the Dublin ETP. The transition to playing with Celts would not have been as smooth he felt, if had he been coming straight up from Clara Utd to play LOI under 17 level. Added to the social aspect, he feels he would already have been too far behind technically, tactically and physically to have made the step up.

The end of this year was difficult for Harry and he notes minimal progression with Celts over the second half of the season due to missing games due to injury and being dropped because of missing a training session. Harry would occasionally miss a session due to his father not being available to drive him up. Clara GAA continued to ask Harry to line out for their minor squad, he was now often back with them for two nights per week. The County GAA management asked him to consider taking the year away from Celts and devote himself to GAA for the year, Harry refused. At the end of the year Harry reflected on this decision, he mused that he could have *balanced them both*. Two sports that he feels equally drawn to, but soccer was his immediate priority due to the increased professionalism that he'd experienced with Celts and *the chances that you get out of football.. It's different to what you get out of Gaelic*.

Harry was asked to attend trials for the under 17 Ireland squad for the European Championships. Shortly before the final squad announcement in September, the Irish-based trialists underwent a series of trials. Harry didn't make the final squad. Of the

squad of 18 players, 10 were home-based players, 1 out of the 10 home-based players was from a club outside Dublin. This year also saw Harry go on trial with a mid-table Championship team in England, a visit coordinated by an Irish-based scout. Compared to his experience with Banshan Utd, this was a visit Harry was not keen to repeat due to poor logistical and hospitality arrangements.

#### **4.9.4. Reflective stop-off: Age 14-16**

*It was at this point in the life stories where the interviews switched from solely reflective data gathering to real-life immersive situational experiences. Things were changing for the boys almost on a weekly basis, for example in terms of club offers, feelings on different moves, motivations, sporting priorities; which it made it a fascinating yet challenging space as a researcher to accurately reflect their 'current' thoughts and issues. Insights into the objectives of Study Three were explored during this phase (i.e., contextualising the transitional episodes experienced by individual athletes within the development pathway, examining players' perceptions of the dominant challenges that impact career progression in Irish football and examining the developmental characteristics of the talent development pathway).*

*This phase typified a 'development' stage (Bloom, 1985; Côté, 1999; Richardson et al., 2013) which saw the footballers becoming more dedicated to their sport and where the amount of training and level of specialization increased. Club migration was a common feature for all of the players. Each of the boys progressed through a decision-making situation regarding where their future development in football resided, predominantly based on their desire to play football at a higher level.*

#### **4.9.4.1. Development pathway (Club /ETP/ under 15s Republic of Ireland)**

All of the boys were involved in the ETP during this phase. Their experiences had similarities; all of the boys felt that the experience with the ETP had enhanced their tactical awareness and gave them extra exposure to underage international managers and scouts. They also reflected on their ETP experience with suggestions on how the programme could be improved to be of maximal benefit. Suggestions included, improved strength and conditioning resources, on at a different day/time and being brought in at an earlier age. Inequities in relation to this international management exposure were exemplified by the coach of one ETP centre who was also an underage international coach, thus potentially advantaging those players over those from other centres, in their view. Knowledge of a players' previous performance is important when constructing squads (Pérez-Toledano et al., 2019), thus the underage international managers coaching within an ETP centre may aid the visibility of those players when it comes to squad selections. Within this period of development, the DDSL was seen as the epicentre of football development in Ireland. This was supported by the prominence of DDSL-based players on the under 17s Ireland squad (1 out of the 10 Irish-based players being from a club outside Dublin). Dublin players make up the significant majority of places on all underage Irish international teams (Connaughton, 2019).

Vincent and Glamser (2006) proposed that when youth players are selected for elite sport participation (e.g., ETP, underage international squads), they are socialized into the appropriate techniques, skills and attitudes for later success by accomplished coaches. Selection onto national youth teams could potentially give players a motivational boost and playing advantage ahead of non-selected players of the same

age band (Harter, 1978). Sæther (2015) alternatively theorised that early-selected players are at an increased risk of dropout if they fail to get reselected at a later stage, suggesting that they may not possess the requisite skills needed to become an elite footballer. Following his initial selection to the Republic of Ireland squad at under 15, Adam then experienced two unsuccessful Ireland trials and then decided not to attend another trial that year. On reflection, it is not certain whether this opportunity to attend again actually existed or perhaps this verbalisation acted as a form of ego defence to guard against further rejection or impression management.

#### **4.9.4.2. Club migration (DDSL – UK)**

Humans differ in their ability to adapt to change; to one person a geographical move can mean a loss of identity or feelings of support while others may see it as an opportunity (Schlossberg, 1981). Institutional support can be key to facilitating transitions (Schlossberg, 1981). In this instance, the boys appeared to receive no formal or structured institutional support from any of the stakeholders involved in the development process (i.e., FAI, SFAI, DDSL, club administration). In Nathan's case, Anne underwent an extensive process herself to choose a suitable agent to help Nathan to navigate the professional signing process, utilising a "temporary alliance with an authoritative figure" (Weiss, 1973, p.321) to provide support and guidance when navigating her son's transition. Trust has been identified as an important factor in the relationship between a player, a player's family and their agent (Demazière & Jouvenet, 2013; Kelly & Chatziefstathiou, 2018). Agents often offer a broad range of services to both solidify lasting loyalty and to potentially diversify their sources of revenue (Masteralexis, 2019). Brendan (Nathan's agent) offered injury prevention advice, insight into his journey of becoming a professional athlete, psychological

support, personal attention and demonstrated the international links from his agency in an effort to secure the rising young footballing talent.

Coupled with adapting to transitions, some of the boys were faced with a seemingly perpetual state of flux, waiting for the results of their UK professional club trials, which resulted in a series of ‘delayed non-events’ (Schlossberg, 1981). The resultant realisation that the expected transition did not occur (i.e., securing a move to a UK club) “alters the way they see themselves and might alter the way they behave” (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995, p.29).

Clubs operate in particular ways because it is part of the club’s identity (Richardson, et al., 2013). According to Domingues and Gonçalves (2013) “the professional-oriented club differs heavily from the social club as the up mobility with a clear notion of sport career transmits positive feelings of superiority, sense of belonging and responsibility in demonstrating ability and effort in competition” (p.47). For Adam and Nathan, the move from a social club (i.e., Ballyfin FC and Liberty FC) to a more professional orientated club may have led to challenges in dealing with this increased professionalism (characterised by increased training loads, a greater sense of expectation and seriousness, and joining cohorts of players who were more accustomed / adapted to such pressures). Nathan was helped by the fact that the academy phase in the UK is generally a highly supportive and process orientated environment (Richardson et al., 2013). Harry’s journey saw lesser transitional stress, with his first development transition coming at under 10 where the expectations weren’t significantly different between Clara and Oxley town, and then again at under 16, to an environment that he was already familiar with (i.e., the DDSL).



Group affiliation is a key coping strategy for successful adaptation to a transition (Dimsdale, 1974; Kelly, 2014). On deciding which club to choose in the UK, the presence of other Irish footballers was a key consideration for Nathan. Social ties and recruitment networks can generate the power of the ‘Irish connection’ (McGarrigle, 1990; McGovern, 2000) and can act as an influential demonstration effect for Irish footballing migrants. The visibility of other Irish footballers having made the first team provides encouragement to new recruits and the presence of other Irish players allows newer players to settle in more readily to their new surroundings (McGovern, 2000). For Adam, a large cohort of boys from ‘down the country’, with potentially similar developmental and cultural characteristics to him (i.e., experience in GAA, migrating to DDSL, moving from a shallower talent pool to a much larger one) was also a factor in him choosing his DDSL team. Culture and heritage have been at least as important as economic considerations in the decision-making process for football migrants (Taylor, 2007; Elliott, 2014).

#### **4.9.4.3. Sport specialisation**

Hornig, Aust and Güllich (2016) reported that many of the German national football team players engaged in greater proportions of non-organised leisure football activities during their development pathway, also differing from amateurs in having engaged in more hours of other sports in adolescence and specialising in football later (average of 16 years). Côté and colleagues (2009) noted that children around the age of 13 should have the opportunity to either choose to specialise in one sport or to continue recreationally in multiple sports. Commitment to sports may depend on the satisfaction gained from participation, which can include feeling ‘bound in’ by a desire to repeat enjoyable experiences, to use skills and to maintain social relationships (Roberts & Brodie, 1992). This maintenance of social relationships is especially evident as Adam

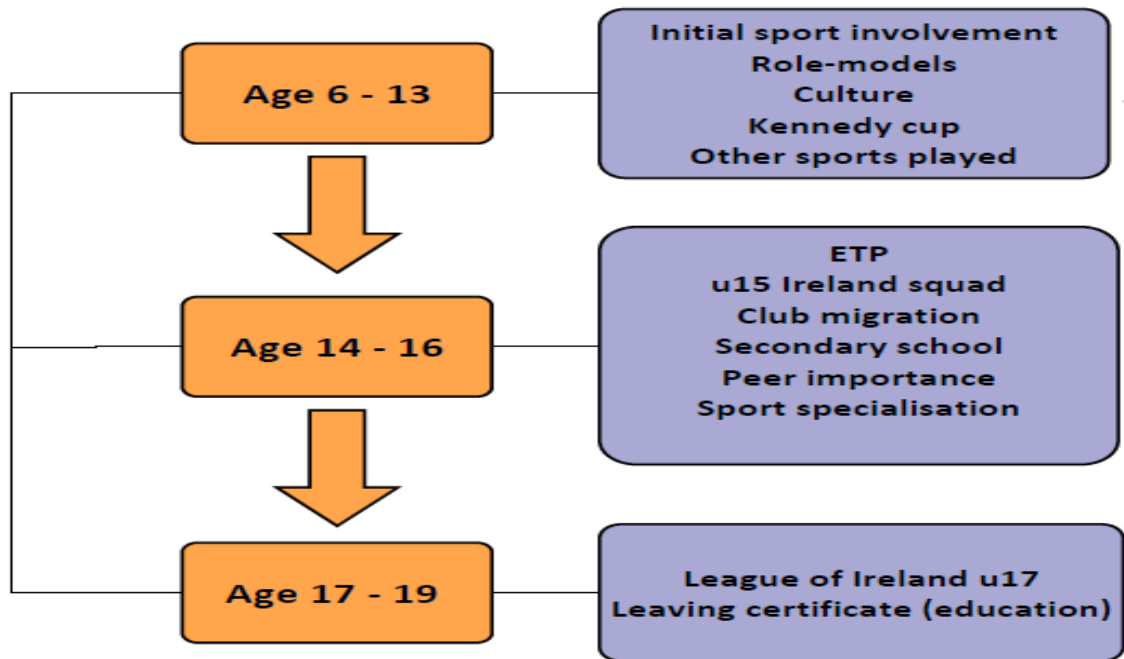
and Harry continued their involvement with their local GAA clubs. Individuals are members of multiple cultures and may 'code switch' with the importance and content of their value systems dependent upon the context and referent groups (Singer et al., 2016). The difference in the culture of both sports was evidenced again with both boys reflecting on the high turn-over rate in youth football due to the trial process, club-hopping and poaching that was common practice. This differs significantly from the GAA which is organised on a parochial basis, thus resulting in minimal turnover of players.

A lack of specialisation potentially benefitted Harry by providing him with an avenue to regain confidence during a dip in football motivation. Adam commented on the extra degree of 'toughness' that coming from a GAA background provided him with when playing in the football environment. Avoidance of 'intra-sport specialisation' (Henrikson, 2010) for Harry (in this case, also continuing to play with his school football team) also provided an opportunity to regain confidence and enjoyment of the sport in a less pressurised environment. This was not something that was available to Nathan, as he was engaged in an academy of a professional club from a relatively young age, thus limiting his exposure to other sports and indeed other forms of football play. Conversely, with focusing on one sport from an early age, Nathan displayed less potential burnout markers during his early development years, with perceived stress being the most trustworthy predictor of burnout (DeFrancisco et al., 2016). This was evidenced in the lack of physiological and psychological stress from the pull between teams/age-groups and football codes while playing his football in a settled environment.

In this research, maintaining a balanced perspective between preventing burnout from overtraining, yet allowing the players to retain some agency over their development

choices (i.e., by sustaining involvement in school teams and other sports) was important to successful development. Early specialisation, little or no involvement in other sports, an early start-age for training and competition and high-intensity specific practice in the respective domain sport all favoured early adolescent success, yet those factors are not necessarily as consistent with adult success (Güllich & Emrich, 2014). Instead of an hour-counting approach or suggesting that an early or late specialisation route to reaching domain expertise is preferable, Güllich and Emrich (2014) suggested that performers must manage to end up in their individual discipline of ‘best fit’, to balance the costs of their time consumption in sport successfully with time demands and interests outside of sport and to improve individual performance while continuously balancing physiological, mechanical and psychological strain with their individual stress-tolerability.

#### 4.10. Phase three: Age 17-19 (Drop-out and professional contracts)



##### 4.10.1. Adam

###### 4.10.1.1. Age 17– Selection time

Faced with training three nights a week with minor county GAA and three nights with Rossmore Rovers, Adam’s time to decide between both football codes arrived.

*“I was playing more GAA and I never really got a break, the only evening I had to myself was Friday evening and I was fairly exhausted.” [Adam]*

Adam was also well into his Leaving Certificate year; the Leaving Certificate occurs at the end of students’ final year in secondary education, which culminates in state examinations in six subjects. The results of these exams form the basis of a points system which act as a gatekeeper for entry into 3<sup>rd</sup> level (higher) education. Adam felt that the only positive aspect of school was that it allowed him to play football with his

friends at break-time. However, he maintained that his additional educational demands didn't play a part in his specialisation decision-making. Adam choose not to return to Rossmore Rovers for the first long season of the National LOI under 17s. His parents were an informational source when deciding which sport to specialise in, giving their opinions on both sports:

*“The pros of GAA is that you are playing it all your life, with your friends and you're representing the village you come from, the County you live in. The cons are that you can't get as much out of the GAA as you can out of soccer. You can make a living out of soccer, but you have no real connection to Rossmore Rovers. And it [soccer] was hard going. The travelling up and down Ireland is hard.” [Adam]*

Adam's historical family connection and physical and emotional presence of GAA in his life appeared to be a decisive factor; *when you are growing up you are aware of that [a family history of playing GAA] and maybe that made my decision [to choose GAA] a bit easier as well. I want to follow in the footsteps of my uncles or cousins or my father even [Adam].*

A dream unrealised or distracted by the lure of the potentially lucrative rewards of football. Adam continues to miss the purely primal aspect of playing football; *I just miss playing the game, playing football.* The shift to serious LOI football in Dublin was a world away from the central role he had always played throughout his early development, the sense of love for the sport he had at Ballyfin was lost:

*“I used to love football in my earlier playing years, then they switched all the management and there was no real life to it and not having the craic with the lads outside of it, it just, it was just a bad atmosphere.” [Adam]*

#### 4.10.1.2. Age 18 – Local GAA lure

Adam didn't miss the travelling, the transient nature of teammates, the constant changing of coaches and the class distinction between Dublin and country players that he had experienced in his exposure to elite level underage football. He suggested that he would have stayed playing if there was a higher quality team closer which would've helped to negate some of these factors. The county-based GAA structures meanwhile, allowed Adam to play to the highest level from his home county. He was able to remain a part of a club process that contained his friends and his extended family, perhaps unwilling to sacrifice this to pursue a footballing career further. Playing GAA also afforded him personal validation as he was referred to as "*an ace forward*" in the local newspapers. GAA also offered an emotional draw unlike football:

*"I just always had a passion for it [GAA]. I love it every time I step on the field it's like I'm in a different world like I'm in my world. You don't think of anything else that's happening outside it's just what's on the field that matters. I love to play [GAA]." [Adam]*

Adam recently adorned the front of the local paper after winning 'Player of the Month' after helping to guide his county to an under 21s GAA provincial title. Progression up through the county GAA ranks to senior is now his central sporting goal. His younger sister also continues the family tradition of representing their county in GAA, with her father's involvement as a coach. Adam completed his Leaving Certificate and despite not particularly focusing on education he decided to complete an entry-level National Diploma in Sport and Recreation in a local 3<sup>rd</sup> level institute.

## 4.10.2. Nathan

### 4.10.2.1. Age 17: Life in a UK academy

Monday: Train, lunch, gym, core work, analysis, home, Netflix, PlayStation; a sample of the daily pattern that Nathan was settled into at Ashton Athletic. Having now been at Ashton Athletic for two years, Nathan was still enjoying his football *it's getting a bit more serious now but I'm enjoying it to be honest, the new challenges it brings.* One of these new challenges was the influx of talent to the academy following the sale of the club to wealthy foreign investors. What was a club chosen due to its relatively clear pathway to the first team, now embodied a bottleneck of newly arrived under 21 players. The previous year had seen squad numbers of 16 with the under 18s and 16 with the under 23s, this year there was 25 and 23 respectively in each squad. This meant that despite playing for the under 23s last year, Nathan was back with the under 18s this year:

*"Last year, I would've looked at it and thought 'Jesus you've got a chance here', I think 6 boys made their debut last year. But now the push is just 'get to the Premier League' and now the new first-team coach doesn't come to the under 18 or under 23 games."* [Nathan]

Despite this apparent setback, Nathan was boosted by having a new coach in the under 18s who brought experience and kudos of being an ex-first team manager in the Football League, he also brought new levels of tactical awareness to the group while making it an enjoyable experience. Despite playing less game this year (he played 12 times for the under 18s), this re-awakening of game enjoyment and confidence helped to overcome the cognitive dissonance between stepping back from his goal of playing senior football and yet being in, what appeared to be, a more appropriate developmental environment.

During a break early in the season, Nathan returned to Liberty FC to visit and assist with the Saturday morning academy, in which his young cousin now played. The photo opportunity of another home-grown “Libo lad” now in the UK was proudly displayed on the Liberty FC social media channels. Nathan progressed to play with the Ireland under 19s, after being selected to play in an invitational tournament with them. Despite making an auspicious start by getting sent off in his first game, Nathan still was selected to play in the Elite qualifying phase for the European Championships the following month. After two promising wins, this too was to end in disappointment as the side exited following a 2-0 loss. In total, Nathan missed one solitary game for Ireland across his age-groups from under 15 to under 19, being referred to in media commentary as being one of the most omnipresent underage players for Ireland ever.

#### **4.10.2.2. Age 18- Ashton Athletic (AA) u 18s - Brentwich United – AA u23s– Lellurgan Utd**

Ashton Athletic attained their desired promotion to the Premier League which resulted in even greater player investment. Nathan sat down with the Ashton Athletic academy management to discuss loan moves to further his development. This was suggested to him by his influential under 18 coach. Despite the club’s initial preference being for a lower or non-league football club in the UK, Nathan suggested a move to the LOI. He saw this as being a better move at this point in his development pathway. When Brentwich Utd showed an interest in him (spearheaded by the coach who had spotted him at the Kennedy Cup five years previously), Nathan felt he could get senior playing experience at Brentwich Utd (LOI top division club). Being back in Dublin gave him the opportunity to see his friends and family regularly, and the novelty of being able to break out into a game of ‘headers and volleys’ in the flats on a Monday evening.



Nathan was a regular starter for Brentwich Utd, starting 19 out of 22 games, although not in his usual position throughout his loan spell. Five minutes before the start of a game early in the season, Nathan was with the other substitutes when an injury befell a player who was named in the starting 11. Nathan had to prepare to start with five minutes to go before kick-off, within three minutes of the start of the match Nathan scored his first senior goal. Despite it being a turbulent season at the club which saw them getting relegated, this was a special achievement for Nathan during his time at Brentwich Utd. When he scored Nathan blessed himself, *for Naz*, always in his thoughts *a gesture for him*.

Playing in front of spectators, the tempo and physicality of the game and experiencing the change from a developmental focus to a win-focused experience were the primary advantages to his loan period at Brentwich Utd. However, during this time he experienced an exceptionally turbulent six-month period, which included players not being paid for three months, limited squad depth, managerial and club ownership change early in the season and one which ultimately resulted in relegation from the top league. Being played out of position and experiencing an expanded run of losses in his first taste of the professional game wilted Nathan's confidence during the period.

When his loan deal was finished with Brentwich Utd, Nathan travelled to America with his family (again), a serial fan of adrenaline junkie rollercoasters. Following this short break, Nathan returned to the UK to begin pre-season with Ashton Athletic with the goal of getting back into the under 23s for the final year of his contract. Nathan continued to be visited by his family, and also by his new girlfriend from Dublin. At the end of August, Ashton Athletic announced that Nathan would be joining Lellurgan Utd until January (6<sup>th</sup> tier of English football). The club had taken five academy players from Ashton Athletic the season before and had well-established

communication networks. Described as a “*tidy little mid-fielder*” by his new coach, “*he’s now familiar with men’s football and this is a critical phase in his development*” [coach]. Nathan was enthused by getting some more senior football after his experience in the LOI. Nathan returned to Ashton Athletic in early October having not featured for Lellurgan Utd, struggling with the isolated and uncertain nature of the lower league loan system. Lellurgan Utd signed another mid-fielder and felt that Nathan’s chances would be limited:

*“It was not where I wanted to be and I’m sure they didn’t want me either.” [Nathan]*

Nathan returned to play one game for the Ashton Athletic under 23s. Early in the New Year, a pinned tweet of him signing his professional contract with Ashton Athletic (back in 2015) which had taken pride of place on his social media for four years was removed, as was any mention of Ashton Athletic from his short biography on social media. Nathan signed with Rossmore Rovers soon after (LOI runs in a calendar year format), ready to begin the new season in the LOI second tier. This decision was predominantly influenced by his ability to be based back in Dublin and perversely for enhanced career motives. Alan, the teammate who left for the UK from Liberty FC at the same time as Nathan and featured in the ‘thank you for the memories’ compilation, also returned to the LOI, having spent three years with a Premier League club. He had joined a club in the 3<sup>rd</sup> tier of English football on a two-year deal which was cancelled by mutual consent after six months. Nathan witnessed many Irish players playing in the lower UK tiers, unnoticed by international management and an absence of general recognition or perceptions of progress; but he felt that things were starting to change in the Irish leagues. A former ‘Libo lad’ who had visited the club to present Nathan with his ‘Player of the Year’ award before he left to join Ashton Athletic, had also recently returned from the UK to join a LOI club. Here, the former ‘Libo lad’ played

European football and eventually secured a move to a second tier UK club and he also gained a senior International cap; another one to be mounted and framed in the hallowed club halls of Liberty FC, where new faces adorn their social media with tales of overseas trial success. Nathan's underage international jersey and captains' pennant is also mounted on the walls, indicative of a 'job well done' by his underage club for getting him to that point in his development, perhaps without a thought about future preparations needed in order to turn that into a senior jersey.

### **4.10.3. Harry**

#### **4.10.3.1. Age 17: Celts under 19s**

Progressing from a difficult season with the under 17s team (through injury and being dropped when his father's work schedule meant that he missed some training sessions) to being the youngest member of the under 19 panel was a difficult transition for Harry. He had considered his future at the club following the end of the previous season. The Celts under 19 coach and the Head of Academy met with Harry and his father and convinced him to stay with the club:

*"I didn't really know if I wanted to [return to the club] after last year but they said that they really wanted me to come back as I have great potential and he [the coach] told my dad to not let me go and play county GAA." [Harry]*

This decision was made to stay with Celts. This decision was made in part due to the reality that this was the closest senior LOI club available. The club offered a familiarity that Harry liked whilst still maintained the possibility of a pathway to senior football. The under 19 team was closer to the senior team environment, so training was more physically and technically intense, consisting of Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday,

Friday, with a game at the weekend all while attending school full-time. Nonetheless, Harry was enjoying the challenge of the under 19 panel, which had seen a lot of new faces joining the squad. Harry's father was becoming increasingly exhausted with the toll of 4 am starts to drive a lorry and the late evening finishes post-Harry's training sessions. Harry's brother, who had just turned 19, had recently earned his driving licence so he took on some of the driving duties from their father.

The sense of expectancy and pressure was palpable now at the under 19 stage. Harry was exposed to more first-team player and management interactions at training sessions and matches. There were continual interactions between the under 19 panel and the senior squad, with players often being asked to go between squads within the same week. Harry felt that this aided his development by providing behavioural role-modelling and environment exposure. Harry made his first senior competitive appearance for Celts in a provincial Senior Cup tie in February. Being a competition that Celts management were happy to use as a development game for their younger players, the game resulted in defeat against a junior league club team who had billed this game as the "*biggest in the club's history.*"

Following a Europa league qualifier mid-week, Celts played against an English Premier League team in a UK pre-season friendly, the opposition boasted four current senior Republic of Ireland players. Celts made a raft of changes and one of those included Harry getting called up and playing the 2<sup>nd</sup> half. Harry also got to play 30 minutes for Celts versus the reigning Scottish champions during a pre-season friendly in July. With that match being televised live, this had particular resonance for Harry. With friends and family watching him on TV, being called up to the squad, playing for Celts against quality international opposition and playing well, Harry's confidence soared *it makes you want it more, it was such a great feeling.*

Following the game against the English Premier League team, Harry's manager received an email outlining that Harry and two teammates were invited to an Ireland under 19 assessment day. Harry attended and was happy with his performance. He was selected to attend a training camp, but history was to repeat itself and three days before the camp was due to begin, Harry injured the same ankle that saw him missing his chance of an extended period with the Ireland under 16 squad.

Having not joined in with Clara GAA for the league season earlier in the year, Harry was allowed to re-join the squad when the Championship began. Celts implemented a '48-hour rule', where players signed to their underage squads could not engage in another team or sport within 48 hours of training or playing for Celts. Adam kept his participation in the GAA a secret from the Celts' management team. For the previous two seasons, Clara had suffered heartbreak at minor stage, being beaten in the two consecutive county finals. In October, Clara finally won the county minor championship. With 10 minutes to go in a tight and tense encounter, Harry was moved into full-forward, his height acting as a focal point for Clara. A goal from Harry, five minutes from the end, was the decisive difference in the final which finished in a one-point win for Clara. Harry hadn't been able to turn his back completely on the GAA alluding to the pride of place and community spirit associated with playing for his local GAA team, while also discussing the absence of pressure adding to the enjoyment. His father remains indifferent on which sport he focuses on, while his mother particularly busts with pride surrounding Harry playing for Clara GAA. When asked if he got the same feeling playing GAA and soccer, Harry replied:

*"No, it's a lot different, with Clara, it's for your home team and it's lads you went to school with that you're playing with, it's different than playing with Celts; you feel like there's not as much pressure when playing Gaelic. I'd find it more enjoyable. My mam loves watching me play football and Gaelic, but she really does like the*

*Gaelic. She enjoys when I play it, but she thinks that I could make a career out of football with Celts. My dad leaves it up to me, says it's my choice and up to me at this stage." [Harry]*

#### **4.10.3.2. Age 18: Celts under 19**

Harry entered his final year of underage football in the LOI, setting short term goals of winning the league and making more regular appearances in meaningful games for the 1<sup>st</sup> team squad, as he edged towards a decision being made on his future at the club. Celts continued the tradition of playing a youthful squad for their provincial Leinster Senior Cup games, with Harry featuring in the early season fixture again. This didn't end as disappointingly as the previous year's outing, with Celts winning 2-1 against lower league opposition.

To his delight, Harry was selected as the under 19 team captain. Seeing two teammates play regularly in the senior team this year, provided extra motivation and incentive for Harry to work hard over the course of the season. Coming from the previous season where he hadn't scored at all, Harry's drive and confidence saw him getting into more threatening positions which would see him score five goals during the season. For the last two months of the season, Harry trained with the senior squad. He credits this with helping him to adjust to the physicality and pace of senior football. It also helped him to form relationships with the players and management which he felt was extremely beneficial for a youth player *where are you even supposed to sit in the changing room?*

Harry appreciated how difficult his task would be to secure a professional contract. Less than 13% of under 19 players have played senior football within the League of Ireland, (including on amateur terms as many First Division teams are part-time) (O'Connor, in press). Even fewer 'quarter four' players make the progression to senior

football, with only six December-born players signing professional contracts out of the total number of 246 players who were signed for LOI clubs that year (Keegan, 2019).

Later that year, a note in the church parish newsletter signalled to the town of Clara like a town crier that after four years at the club, Harry had signed a professional contract for Celts. Conor gushed about how proud he was of him, and how he's sure that Naz would be also. Praise was also shared by the Celts Head Coach:

*“Harry’s been doing well for the last couple of years and he’s one that we’ve liked and had him around the first team, training on quite a few occasions. I believe that he’s matured a lot, in the last year especially and he’s become a better player.” [Celts Head Coach].*

As the National under 19 league has only been in operation since 2011 (and the under 17 league since 2015) Harry posits that he would probably be playing club football back in Clara and spending significant time invested in his County GAA development squads had these pathways not existed throughout his development. Reflecting on his trial experiences, Harry noted a clear maturity disparity between his experiences as a 15-year-old and as an 18-year-old. The emotions of the situation, the lack of migration readiness and a failure to grasp the enormity of the opportunity, weighing heavily on the not yet developed broad shoulders of Harry as a 15-year-old:

*“I was very young for that [going on trial], it didn't feel like I was at the time but now that I'm looking back on it, I was very young to be going over there [to UK professional clubs]. I didn't realise what it was back then... it was huge, on trial with Banshan Utd, League One but really a Premier League standard team.” [Harry]*

#### **4.10.4. Reflective stop-off 3:**

*This point marked the end of my involvement with the study participants. I will continue to follow their progress through their various sporting paths with great interest and I remain grateful for having been given an opportunity to gain a first-hand insight into their development. The boys blossomed from being 14-year olds boys to confident young men during the five years of the longitudinal study. I was particularly keen to ensure that Naz's story was told throughout the cases. He had a significant impact on two participants, who were keen for his story to be woven through their own. The fact that he was a presence across two significant DDSL clubs also demonstrated further the player movement across the league. Key themes ran through their development years (for example, football being seen as a viable career option in their early development phase, the importance of central figures on development, Irish cultural sports impacting on specialisation and the impact that football structures had on their development).*

##### **4.10.4.1. The influence of the GAA**

The participants continued their differing relationships with the GAA throughout this timeframe (Adam choosing to specialise in GAA, Harry continuing to see value in playing both codes and Nathan maintaining his indifference to this football code). Each sport culture is unique, based on an organisation's history, identity and traditions (Coulter, Mallett, & Singer, 2016). Côté et al., (2007) acknowledged that the development pathway which an athlete selects depends not only on the sport but also the social and cultural context to which the athlete is exposed to, and ultimately influenced by. The importance placed by extended family and peer groups on the GAA



in certain areas typified the potential influence of a mesosystem (i.e., the importance placed on the GAA from Adam's family and Harry's local community) thus reflecting the influence that proximal and distal processes have on the ecology of development on motivations and decision-making (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) particularly when deciding what sport to specialise in. This pervasive presence of the GAA across the majority of Ireland is an issue identified in Study Two by strategic apex holders as impacting the potential growth in numbers and pathway design for young footballers. The experience of the boys with both codes differed significantly. Increased flexibility was evident from the GAA within the above cases in terms of allowing the players to miss training and still play and miss earlier league games yet still be welcomed back to play more important Championship games. This was clearly juxtaposed by the stricter controls placed on the boys from their football clubs (e.g., the '48-hour' rule which was often circumvented between codes by the players and having to sign contracts to say that they wouldn't change clubs at grassroots level following the Kennedy Cup). This stricter control placed upon boys perhaps reduced their sense of agency over their development (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

#### **4.10.4.2. The competition of educational demands**

While progressing within the talent development pathway, the players also had to continue their academic education as typified in athletic transition models (cf. Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004) within the regular second-level education system. Unlike UK academy systems, where schooling is often arranged to compliment the boys' football training regimes, this separation meant that they had to attempt to balance the contradictory demands that come from education establishments and football clubs, which are often two distinct cultures (Bourke, 2003; Christensen & Sørensen, 2009). Footballers are disproportionately drawn from working-class backgrounds

(McGillivray, Fearn, & McIntosh, 2005; Magrath, 2017) where education can be given a relatively low perception of worth (McGillivray et al., 2005). Often seeking achievement in education whilst following a football development pathway is seen by the players as admitting that they have no future in the sport (Parker, 1996). Nathan's early promotion from the under 18s to the under 21 squad before he finished his formal education placed additional demands on his time which meant that he had less free time during the day to study and attend classes as he was training with post-academy players. Due to his move to the UK at 15, Nathan was the only boy in this study not to complete his Leaving Certificate examinations (the primary route for entering 3<sup>rd</sup> level education in Ireland). Lower educational status amongst professional football players in Ireland has been identified with one in three having a 3<sup>rd</sup> level degree and one in five having no qualifications beyond the Junior Certificate (McGuinness, 2018, as cited in O'Connor, 2018). The average wage in the Premier Division is €16,000 per year, with an average of €4,000 per annum in the First Division (Doyle, 2015), with 60% of players having a second job (Malone, 2016).

Living close to football clubs can mediate the presence of accommodating both football and education in a developing footballer's life (Christensen & Sørensen, 2009). Should players find themselves outside of this category, it can lead to such consequences as a significantly lower set of exam results, increased stress levels, school drop-out and mental breakdown (Christensen & Sørensen, 2009). Adam and Harry both noted the negative impact that their involvement in football had on their education, primarily due to competing time commitments and education being seen by the boys as a distraction to football. This was multiplied due to the hours spent travelling to training and matches, experienced by both boys.

#### **4.10.4.3. Luck**

Luck (or chance) has been identified as having an impact on achieving success in a variety of domains (cf. Biondo & Rapisarda, 2018), including on talent development in football academies (Mills et al., 2012) meaning that development is not probabilistic in nature (Vaeyens et al., 2008). Chance has been related to environmental catalysts (e.g., socioeconomic status of the family, hereditary characteristics), injury, change of circumstances, existing teammates filling positions or ‘wrong place wrong time’ (cf. Tannenbaum, 1983; Taylor & Collins, 2019). Nathan chose Ashton Athletic due to the potentially clearer path to the first team. This was hampered when significant foreign investment saw that pathway become considerably more congested. Luck, in the form of environmental catalysts, are evident with the other stories also (e.g., Harry being born a commutable distance from the DDSL and having favourable familial circumstances to enable such travel). Along with analysing the complexity of the football development journey from a situational, relational and decision-making perspective, Gagné and Schader (2006, p.90) suggest that “by recognizing the power of chance and the ways a favourable environment may be created, we may be able to limit the likelihood of negative outcomes and increase the probability of positive outcomes”.

#### **4.10.4.4. Academy to Post-Academy phase development pathways**

Gammelsæter and Jakobsen (2008) suggest that commercialisation and financial profit and a win at all costs mentality is indicative within modern football. Thus, higher-profile players are often brought into clubs to obtain immediate results (cf. Littlewood, 2005; Littlewood et al., 2011) as can be seen with the expansion of foreign players into the senior team and academy teams of Ashton Athletic to attain Premier League success. Green (2009) reports that less than 1% of academy football players will play

football professionally, highlighting the difficulty of progressing through the academy pathway to senior football. The cultural distance between the youth environment and the professional environment is one of the most challenging periods of transition for a developing youth footballer (Richardson et al., 2013) with a lack of clarity among coaches and clubs about what the ideal environment is (Dowling et al., 2018). Junior elite players in English academies need to be better catered for in relation to the psycho-social environments which they are immersed in (Mills et al., 2014; Dowling et al., 2018). Nathan associated with both environments as he had secured a professional contract yet didn't belong to or play for the first team. He found himself attempting to move from a more process-orientated, nurturing, caring and emphatic environment to a lonely, isolated and uncertain post-academy or 'developing mastery' phase which is often bereft of social support (Richardson et al., 2013). Nathan identified this change in the club from being a generally supportive environment to one where he was identified as being surplus to requirements as plans were made to loan him out via established networks in lower leagues.

Harry also identified this 'critical' transition period of development, moving from the nurturing culture to the 'harder' culture of the first team (Nesti & Littlewood, 2011) as he attempted to navigate the seating arrangements of the first-team changing room. Richardson and colleagues (2013) identified the difficulty of the newness of the senior environment for young players making this transition. The gradual increasing of pressure via the underage leagues from under 17 to under 19, progressively increased Harry's tolerance for senior performance stressors. Training with the first team for the last two months of the previous season and experiencing senior competitions facilitated the progression to the senior environment for Harry, thereby reducing the newness and culture shock of the senior environment. Utilising such techniques can

help coaches to navigate the difficult task of managing players who are different stages of their development in this post-academy phase (Dowling et al., 2018).

#### **4.10.5. Individual reflections:**

##### **4.10.5.1. Adam**

Adam's transition to focus solely on playing GAA, can be viewed as conforming to an identity that was valued and rewarded within his specific cultural setting (Butler, 1990) with progression through the underage ranks of his county GAA squad being a stronger part of his identity than progressing to the Rossmore Rovers under 19 squad. Adam didn't have access to a high-level [football] club in his county (or a neighbouring county) and thus necessitated migration to Dublin to advance his progression in football. This structural inequity placed undue additional stress on Adam (e.g., his education suffering due to 3-hour round trips to practice) and also separating him from his social circle. There, he experienced being treated as an outsider ('*country boys*') which was a stark juxtaposition to his experience as an 'insider' in the GAA, due to his family's local history within GAA culture. This impacted on his choice of sport to specialise in. The difficulty in adapting to constant change (of teams and of context) and threats to his identity within this developing mastery phase may have negatively impacted Adam's progression along the underage LOI pathway (Nesti, 2004; Richardson et al., 2013). Burnout is a possible consequence of a prolonged stress period, and its intensity can depend on physical or psychological load (Moen, Federici, & Abrahamsen, 2015). Based the Self-Determination Theory of motivation (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2017), an overemphasis on extrinsic-orientated goals (i.e., seeing football as a source of financial success) relative

to intrinsic goals (i.e., community relatedness) can undermine well-being and lead to decreased vitality and increased anxiety. The increased professionalism, external regulation (i.e., continuous trial process) and extrinsic focus of Adam's relationship with football (i.e., as potential career move) perhaps reduced his sense of autonomy and relatedness with the sport (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Adam's father was a constant presence throughout his development (acting as his coach in both football codes), while the historical success of his uncles also featured regularly as a 'verbal artefact' (Schein, 1981) throughout his development. Sagar et al., (2010) identified that feelings of pressure to succeed and parental stress can contribute to a fear of failure among youth footballers, with a positive relationship between early parental expectations and fear of failure (Schmalt, 1982). Although fear of failure is a competence-based motive, it is also deeply rooted in affiliation issues, predominantly involving parent-child relations (McGregor & Elliot, 2005). A sense of shame and embarrassment can occur when one concludes through cognitive processes of self-evaluation, that one has failed to meet the requirements of socially proscribed action (Smith et al., 2002), and brings with it feelings of inadequacy (Lewis, 1992; Sagar et al., 2010). Players who experience this shame or embarrassment are more likely to seek to avoid failure (McGregor & Elliot, 2005). This potentially manifested itself in Adam's choice not to attend underage Republic of Ireland trials following two unsuccessful trials, and why he chose not to return to Rossmore Rovers where he battled with establishing himself into a new cohort of players. Those high in fear of failure tend to view constructive, positive feedback as 'non-failure' rather than as 'success' (Birney et al., 1969). The GAA environment provided a constant source of this 'non-failure' to Adam throughout his development, and also provided the greatest social label of approval within his particular context (Csikzentmihalyi et al., 1993).

This may have ultimately eroded his desire to progress along the football development pathway.

#### **4.10.5.2. Nathan**

Schlossberg (1981, p. 15) highlights that an individual's "basic values and beliefs are a factor in his/her ability to adapt to transitions." Nathan repeatedly discussed enjoyment and happiness as his core drivers. This corresponds with Thurnher's (1975) 5<sup>th</sup> typology of life purpose; ease and contentment. In contrast to Adam, Nathan's feelings towards football in his early development stage espoused actions of his own volition and choice (i.e., choosing to remain with Liberty FC), with such self-determined motivations leading to more positive outcomes such as enhanced persistence, effort and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2002).

This potentially impacted on Nathan's motivation to apply himself within the cut-throat world of UK academy, under 18s and under 23s football. Nathan frequently espoused a relational narrative (Carless & Douglas, 2013) which situates interconnectedness and relationships as equally important as or more important than, training or performance outcomes (i.e., continually emphasising his admiration of his mother, visiting Liberty FC regularly, emphasising his brothers' talents, reflecting on life in 'the flats'). This may have mitigated against the risk of forming an exclusive athletic identity based on football and yet also added to the difficulty of migrating abroad to further his football development. Nathan's brother plays an interesting juxtapositional part in this narrative. Shared experiences of football enhanced the sibling bond between the brothers (Whiteman, McHale, & Crouter, 2007) yet when the younger sibling experienced greater levels of success the older sibling perhaps compensated by embarking on a differentiated path (Trussell, 2014; Taylor, Carson, & Collins, 2018) towards education.

#### 4.10.5.3. Harry

On the advice of his brother, Harry's journey into the DDSL started earlier than most boys as he was within commutable distance from the DDSL. Harry was more accustomed to the DDSL from an early age than Adam was, and the travel was more manageable (despite placing pressure on his family). This pressure on the family became a motivating factor as Harry saw his first Ireland cap as being able to repay his father for his sacrifice for Harry's footballing career. Although Harry's brother formed a significant part of his development story, Conor didn't hold the same weight of expectation that Adam's father and uncles did, partly due to his relative lack of sporting success and less hands-on involvement in his teams.

In line with SDT, Vallerand and Losier (1999) suggest that when a coach exhibits an autonomy-supportive style, this creates conditions for athletes to experience a sense of volition and choice about their sporting involvement which enhances their self-determined motivation. Harry refers to his primary youth coach (who forms an ever-present along his development) as having characteristics such as *respect, fun, good communicator*, which may have acted as a positive motivational force for Harry's development. The pervasive influence of Conor's journey on Harry's own pathway could be seen as potentially reducing Harry's sense of autonomy. Another perspective is that following in Conor's footsteps and with him being a constant source of informational support actually provided Harry with a feeling of relatedness. This is a key component in the SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2000), with intrinsic motivation more likely to flourish in situations characterised by a sense of secure relatedness (Ryan & LaGuardia, 2000). Harry didn't talk about the extrinsic (i.e., monetary) rewards that football could provide him, in comparison to Adam, perhaps this left him less



disillusioned with the sport once he didn't make the culturally anticipated move to a UK academy at age 16.

Harry's key club transitions (Oxley town and Celts) presented less obvious change compared to the transitions faced by the other boys, for example due to a familiar network of coaches and administrators, closer geographical distance and the fact that he moved from a Dublin based schoolboy league club to a Dublin based LOI team. Perhaps this continuity allowed him to navigate the usual stresses associated with transitions due to favourable timings of the transition, advantageous role changes (i.e., playing in the DDSL) and the existence of interpersonal support systems (Schlossberg, 1981). Harry's continued engagement with other sports and various forms of football (i.e., club, school, GAA) perhaps reduced his exclusive athletic identify, in a similar manner to how Nathan used his relational narrative to avoid sacrificing identify development (Douglas & Carless, 2006). Harry was a member of multiple sporting cultures and engaged in 'code-switching' with the importance and content of their value systems for each sport dependent upon the context and referent groups (Singer et al., 2016). This allowed Harry to gain confidence by switching to GAA during low-confidence periods within his football development. Early sampling has been identified as a characteristic of athletes who achieved elite status (Baker, Côté, & Deakin, 2005; Coutinho et al., 2016) with elite level athletes often maintaining their multisport participation throughout secondary education (Ginsburg et al., 2014). Harry and Adam were based outside the larger cities, athletes who are from smaller school environments are more likely to be multisport athletes compared to those from larger sized schools (Bell et al., 2016). As noted by Harry, a well-timed growth spurt aided his development and prominence within the underage LOI team, further demonstrating

the emphasis placed on physical maturity over technical ability across the youth development pathway.

#### **4.10.6. Concluding thoughts**

The above Findings and Discussion section provided three composite lived experience case studies of the Irish football development landscape, combined with a broad spectrum of theoretical literature which reflected the complexities of the individual journeys within differing contexts. Integrating sociocultural and psychological perspectives is particularly important if researchers are to better understand the lives of elite and professional sportspeople (Carless & Douglas, 2013). Domingues and Gonçalves (2013) suggest that “it is not so much the ‘type’ of sport trajectory that youth participate in, but what is happening in those environments that is important” (p.43). Indeed, Taylor and Collins (2019) suggest that to understand why gifted performers fail to realise their potential, we must take into consideration individual resources, as well as the environmental and stakeholder input to their development. Bronfenbrenner (1999) suggests that different social settings produce different learning environments, resulting in different experiences from one context to the next. Such differences were identified above in relation to the experiences afforded to Adam, Harry and Nathan (i.e., inequity of club resources, volume and quality of players in the leagues, the geography of quality club settings and coaches, exposure granted to scout and underage managers).

The boys were exposed to the same macrosystem (i.e., country of birth, sport culture, political systems), but akin to Bronfenbrenner’s (1974) research, to have an influence on a developing person this macrosystem must be experienced in the microsystem

where the person is positioned. This was evident throughout the above cases where particular influences were more evident in certain circumstances (e.g., the influence of GAA on the development environment of Adam and Harry).

Bronfenbrenner's later models emphasised the impact that the individual plays in shaping their own development, through the "proximal processes" of interaction between both the context and the individual (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994, p.568), thus identifying the importance of not only analysing the individual contexts of the youth footballers but also their personal characteristics (i.e., personal characteristics and experiences, motivations, personality, past experiences). Proximal processes (connections between aspects of the individuals and the context) sees the individual not as a passive operator within an environment, but as playing an active role in shaping their development (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). This symbiotic relationship might explain why individuals within similar development contexts thrive and others fail to continue their development (i.e., another youth footballer may have rebelled against the dominant role that Harry's brother played in his development resulting in dropout, changing sports or actively discouraging his continued participation). The key to effectively analysing the development context outlined above is understanding the person (character, motivations, ability) and how they respond to (i.e., relatedness, transitions, expectations) and ultimately shape their environment.

Time (historical patterns and sequences) are also seen to influence development in the three cases presented, both at a *micro level*, for example, Harry's brother's background in football, Nathan's school links with the local club and at a *meso level*, for example, older, more developed clubs having a greater financial stability and resources for coaching and facilities. Time also influenced development at *macro level*, for example, the antagonistic sociocultural history of association football and the GAA and the

historical dominance of the DDSL on schoolboy football. DiSanti and Erickson (2019) suggested that one of the most pressing areas for further research in the area of youth sport specialisation is to use a socioecological approach, thus analysing the impact of contextual environment in conjunction with individual-level features.

Development contexts (e.g., environments containing aspiring youth footballers) have ‘developmentally instigative’ characteristics, that with interaction to the developing individual’s characteristics serve to impede or facilitate development (Bronfenbrenner, 1993). Characteristics of successful talent development environments which were lacking in some situations within the various contexts explored include long term aims and methods, wide-ranging coherent support, not focusing on early success, training environments supportive of diversification, a strong and coherent organisational culture and an integration of stakeholder efforts (Martindale et al., 2007; Henrikson et al., 2010). Insights into the potentially debilitating environment of youth football which often exist to some extent in all developmental contexts, were explored in this study (i.e., the antagonism between the schoolboy leagues, perceptions of international coach and scouting bias, inequity of resources). The frequent turnover of coaches and the associated inconsistency of approaches were perceived to hinder player development (Mills et al., 2012). The boys experienced multiple transitions across different counties, leagues and countries, with inconsistency of opportunities, often depending on geographic location.

Facilitative elements of the environment were also identified; for example, the enthusiasm and effort provided by volunteer coaches in developing the boys’ initial motivations for engaging with the sport, the wider football culture in Ireland, aspects of certain FAI development initiatives (e.g., the ETP). This was evidenced by the progression made (particularly by Harry and Adam) throughout their mid/late teens

leading to securing professional contracts. A key question to be explored by the relevant stakeholders in talent development is what ‘developmentally instigative’ facets of these players pathway should be protected, maintained and expanded to other players, and what factors were specifically related to the participants individual psychosocial context (i.e. parental support).

The newly established national under 17 and under 19 leagues which the boys experienced are a positive step in reducing the emphasis on the DDSL within Irish football development. Through effective leadership from the FAI, these leagues can potentially provide ‘developmentally instigative’ characteristics such as proximal role-models; with a focus on long-term, systematic development which will enhance the individualised and on-going development of young Irish footballers nationally. Unless the previously identified issues are recognised and attended to, then perhaps all footballers who grow up dreaming of becoming Irish internationals will be held particularly hostage to fate (e.g. geographic location, family ability to support internal migration). Recommendations for the design and structure of such pathways are explored utilising the findings from Chapter Two, Three and Four, in the subsequent chapter.

# **Chapter Five - Discussion, Conclusions and Recommendations**

*To date there have been relatively few attempts to take a multifactorial perspective in the prediction of high ability in specific activities ... [yet] success in sport is very rarely determined by a narrow range of characteristics.*

*(Bailey & Collins, 2013, p. 253).*

The final chapter of this thesis aims to comprehensively synthesise the findings from the preceding chapters. An overview of the key findings is presented, along with the implications of this work on football talent development pathways within the Republic of Ireland. Further to this, methodological reflections will be provided, along with potential avenues for future research and study limitations.

## **5.1. Aims of the thesis**

The aim of this thesis was to examine the football governance landscape in the Republic of Ireland in relation to its ability to develop elite footballers, whilst exploring the contextual and lived experiences of youth players as they develop within their respective talent development environments. The overarching research objectives were (A) to quantify the demographics of those involved in the FAIs elite development pathway (ETP), (B) to assess talent development practices of all authoritative bodies within Irish youth football with respect to organisational, athletic, psycho-social, cultural and environmental issues and (C) to examine the dominant

challenges faced by young Irish footballers following their entry on, and subsequent progress through, the talent development pathways in Ireland.

Study One addressed objective (A) of the thesis by using a quantitative analysis approach and presented the demographics of those involved in the FAIs primary talent development mechanism (ETP). This chapter analysed whether a Relative Age Effect was in existence within the ETP, the relationship between success at underage levels and RAE, whether a birth-place effect existed within the ETP, assessed the equity of provision for populations per ETP centre, analysed the movement of players from their home club to other (stronger) regions in the country and examined if there was a relationship between RAE and player movement. This analysis was based on the ETP database of 1936 youth footballers.

Study Two focused on objective (B) by assessing the talent development practices of all authoritative bodies within Irish youth football with respect to organisational, athletic, psycho-social, cultural and environmental issues. Specific study objectives included exploring the relationships between the main stakeholders on the TD pathways (i.e., SFAI, FAI, DDSL, Junior bodies, clubs) concerning the historical and current context of Irish football, identifying potential structural and resource inequalities within Irish youth football and assessing the ‘fit for purpose’ nature of the competition and performance structures within Irish youth football (from a strategic apex perspective). This study involved 12 semi-structured interviews with strategic apex stakeholders within talent development authoritative bodies.

Study Three sought to address objective (C) by examining the dominant challenges faced by young Irish footballers following their entry on, and subsequent progress through, the talent development pathways in Ireland. Specific objectives included

investigating and contextualising the transitions and lived development experience of individual athletes within the development pathway, examining players' perceptions of the dominant challenges that impact career progression in Irish football, assessing key psychosocial influences on talent development within Irish youth football and examining the developmental characteristics of the talent development pathway, relative to best practice research. Study Three took a longitudinal research form, studying five boys from the Ireland under 15 international team for a period of four years.

Three key research findings arising from this analysis of organisational structures and practices of the talent development environment were related to the appropriateness of development experiences, stakeholder relationships and structural and resource inequalities.

## **5.2. Key Findings**

### **5.2.1. Appropriateness of developmental experiences**

#### **5.2.1.1. Irish football as a talent development environment**

Martindale, Collins and Abraham (2007) identified five main characteristics of effective talent development environments. These were possessing long term aims and methods, wide-ranging coherent messages and support, emphasis on appropriate development, not early success, individualised and on-going development, and integrated, holistic and systematic development. Henriksen (2010) identified eight



features of a successful development environment; training groups with supportive relationships, proximal role models, support of sporting goals by the wider environment, support for the development of psychosocial skills, training that allows for diversification, focus on long-term development, strong and coherent organisational culture and integration of efforts. The experiences of the cohort in this study appear to be contrary to some of the best practice principles outlined by Martindale et al., (2007) and Henriksen (2010). Specifically, there were signs of incongruent development pathways with an emphasis on early success; this was highlighted by the importance placed around the under 14 Kennedy Cup (Study Two and Three). There was limited support for (sport) diversification which was epitomised by the '48 hour' rule, coupled with a lack of engagement with other prevalent youth sports, namely the GAA, and a lack of individualised development (e.g., those who experienced multiple transitions within key development stages) (Study Two and Three). Elements of good practice were identified (Study Three) in certain situations (i.e. some clubs and underage international teams providing proximal role-models, support and guidance, incidents of individualised development), this outlines the difficulty of introducing homogeneous levels of such positive development characteristics across a county-wide system which often has a wide disparity of available resources (Study Two).

This research has identified four different types of development pathways, or typologies (Storm, 2015) from schoolboy football within Irish football. These pathways include (1) moving from a non-DDSL team (from one of the other 31 schoolboy leagues) and transitioning to a UK academy, (2) moving from a non-DDSL based team and transitioning to a LOI underage team, (3) moving from a non-DDSL team to the DDSL and then transitioning to a UK academy or into a LOI team and

finally (4) those that move directly from a DDSL club to LOI underage team or UK academy (Figure 20).

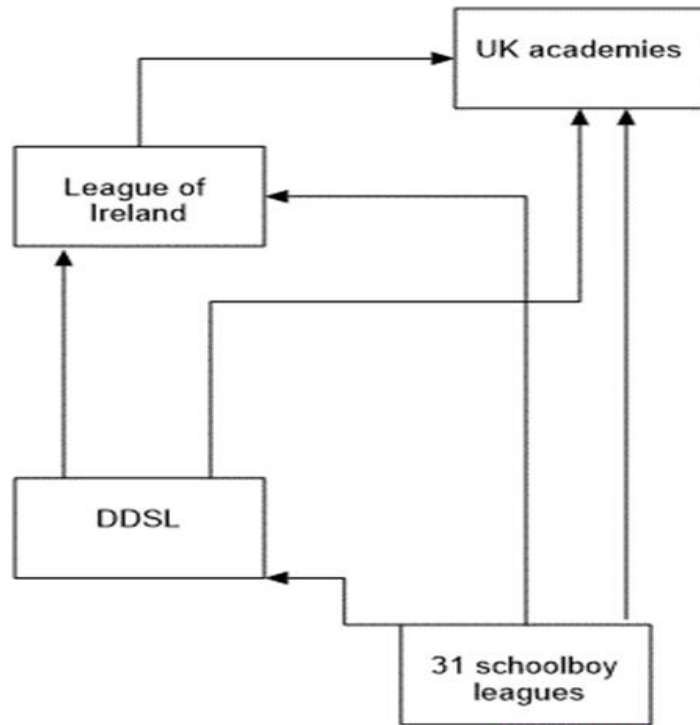


Figure 20 Development pathway options for Irish youth footballers

Pathway 2 and 3 demonstrates the ‘double drain’ or ‘stepping-stones’ identified in Study One as internal migratory patterns. In light of talent development being non-linear (Abbott et al., 2005), combined with the importance of key events and transitions in the developmental pathway, it is essential for NGB support systems to offer flexibility across development pathways, individual optimisation and multiple entry points as features of any successful talent development strategy. With early selection being a feature of the Irish system (i.e., streaming from age 11 for Kennedy Cup squads which are general sources of ETP squads, which then supply the majority of underage international squads); the presence of such significant RAE figures (Study One) particularly within the DDSL traditional feeder clubs to the UK (Study Two and

Three) indicates one example of a limitation of the development pathway due to an obvious bias towards enhanced maturity by coaches, driven by early selection and streaming (Study Two).

#### **5.2.1.2. Appropriateness of the development pathway**

The development pathway experienced by Nathan and Harry (Study Two) allowed them to develop to a point where they progressed to some level of professional football, thus demonstrating the positive experiences encountered by the players. To help to enhance such experiences and to further develop the pathway, insights into certain key developmental experiences are explored below.

Across the array of stakeholders in Irish football consulted in Study Two and Three (including players, parents, club administrators, league administrators, strategic apex) there existed incongruent opinions on the ideal structure of Irish football, potential action plans and who were the appropriate bodies to develop such strategies. One such structure that produced a variety of opinion was the ETP. Concerns identified in Study Two included the friction with local FAI RDOs, the age upon starting the programme and political interference with the programme by leagues. Study One identified that access to the programme was unequal, whereas insights from Study Three found that the programme was perceived to be more useful to rural league-based footballers due to the lack of (or lesser) talent environment resources (i.e., facilities, coaches) at their disposal in comparison to the larger clubs (particularly in the DDSL). Following the introduction of the underage national leagues, the focus and emphasis of the ETP has changed to a younger cohort. This programme has the potential to aid the preparation of players for introduction into the national leagues but perhaps more importantly as a space for those not selected onto an under 13 national league team to continue to progress and develop with the help of quality coaching. This would help to prevent

the polarisation of opportunities between those born early and late in the selection year (Study One).

Study Two and Study Three provided an insight into the ‘red ribbon’ event of underage football in Ireland, the Kennedy Cup. There exist divisive stakeholder views on this competition. The political importance of ‘The Cup’ is evident with the SFAI stating that organising the Kennedy Cup is their primary function. Power is a function of resources and the vaulted place of the Kennedy Cup in the development psyche provides the SFAI with a source of legitimate power in the sphere of underage football in Ireland. The Cup is highly lauded by some administrators due to its efficient organisation and due to its ‘right age’ because that is a typical age to be ‘spotted’ by UK academies (Study Two, Three). Such migratory patterns also act as a funding mechanism for the dominant clubs in the DDSL, who are also often the key actors on the DDSL governing committee (Study Two). This perspective again highlights the emphasis on UK professional clubs as the next legitimate step in the Irish talent development pathway, undermining the role of the Irish footballing structures to develop players. Migratory patterns evidenced in Study One, saw players leaving leagues predominately close to Dublin to join clubs in the DDSL. Study Two investigated how some of the league secretaries are using the Kennedy Cup competition to force players to sign contracts to remain with their original schoolboy league for the following year. This again posits the question of whether the Kennedy Cup exists for evidence-based developmental reasons or if it is a source of power amongst some apex organisations in schoolboy football.

### **5.2.1.3. Education**

A lack of common focus and coordination between social systems within sport development, particularly between schools and football clubs, has been identified

(Domingues & Gonçalves, 2013). In this study, school teams often generated further 'play' opportunities for the boys that positively impacted on their confidence and allowed that sense of social connectivity to remain in football which lacks when the players began on a representational pathway (Study Three). Parker (2000) demonstrated an unconscious view of the projected inevitability of professional footballer status and a parallel unconscious rejection of education from trainee footballers in the UK. Christensen and Sørensen (2009, p.123) identified education as being "a necessary evil or, at best, as a second and time-consuming priority" with some youth footballers in this study anticipating that they would pass their examinations but with a reduced grade and a sense of frustration. Study Three identified increased football engagement as a reason given for disappointing exam results by the young footballers. Interestingly, Reeves and Richards (2019) identified that instead of education and football being seen as separate entities, schools can be useful sites for gaining insights into a youth football players' behaviour, capacity to learn and motivation.

At the time of this study, the LOI under 17 league coincided (for most boys) with their transition year in second level education. This year provided space for players to focus on their football development and lifestyle management, explore the manageability of changing clubs with a longer commute and coping with the increased demands in terms of scheduling, all in the relative absence of educational stress. As the LOI begins to operate leagues at under 15 and under 13 (Study Two), players must manage such transitional stressors faced with a typical education environment, thus placing additional stress on the developing footballer. For some, the presence of a LOI club in their locality may negate movement to the DDSL which would be viewed as a normative transition, thus potentially advantaging their continued educational

attainment. Study Three identified that the perceptions of the quality of LOI clubs in Dublin may mean that players will still choose to migrate to those clubs, even if there is a more accessible LOI club within their region. This necessitates continued travel which could negatively impact on education. If this view of quality and resource inequity remains in schoolboy football, it may take the identification of comparative metrics by the Football Association of Ireland to allay these perspectives (i.e., producing statistics on player progression to senior LOI via various clubs and the number of senior contracts awarded to under 19 LOI players per club, insights on the volume of Dublin-based players representing underage squads compared to the rest of the country).

#### **5.2.1.4. Impact of structures on facilitating internal transitions**

Club movement was shown to be a common feature across the development pathway in Irish football for players (Study One, Two and Three). To successfully cope with a period of transition, youth footballers need to have knowledge of their sport and the transition process, a range of facilitative physical and mental characteristics and access to a high-quality support network (Morris et al., 2016). While family and informal networks play a crucial role in facilitating migration (Gurak & Caces, 1992; Böcker, 1994), Morris et al., (2016) also contend that sport organisations should implement programs with youth athletes to help them to develop coping mechanisms to deal with transitions. Study Three identified that there is a lack of such support formally available within youth football in Ireland.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) presents several hypotheses to investigate his theory of systems and linkages between levels in one's contextual environment. Krebs (2009) identified that some of those hypotheses were specifically relevant to an ecological transition within sport (e.g., moving to a new club). For example, the developmental

potential of a transition is enhanced (a) if the transition is not made alone, (b) if there are linkages between settings that encourage the growth of mutual trust, positive orientation and a balance of power on behalf of the developing person, (c) if prior to entry into the new setting, the person and members of both settings involved are provided with information and advice relevant to the impending transition and (d) the development potential of the settings is enhanced if the person is involved in joint dyads and they actively interact with each other. In this study, examples of these dyads include school-club team, schoolboy league centre-club, club-underage international team, club-ETP. While not specifically referred to by Krebs (2009), hypothesis 50 could also be linked to the migration environment. This suggests that;

*“The developmental effect of a transition from one primary setting to another is a function of the match between the developmental trajectory generated in the old setting and the balance between challenge and support presented both by the new setting and its interconnections with the old.” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 288)*

Study Two and Three presented the disparity between resources across the developmental environment (e.g., playing population and standards, coaching quality and experience, facility provision). This suggests that the challenge faced by some youth footballers following a normative transition from a schoolboy league team to an underage LOI team, varies significantly. When analysing the transition experience in this study in light of such theories, the lack of communication between stakeholders (Study Two) would be particularly concerning in the facilitation of such player movement, particularly those to Dublin (Study One and Three). Stakeholder communication and interaction is a key responsibility of a functioning development pathway to facilitate player migration. A lack of interconnectedness between stakeholders due to historical incongruence (Study Two) seems to negatively impact the relationship between such settings in some locations. Lewin (1951, p.143)

eloquently identifies the potentially disruptive impact of a disconnect felt by a person if this structure and communication is lacking, “the marginal man is a person who stands on the boundary between two groups. He does not belong to either of them, or at least he is not certain about his belongingness. Characteristic symptoms of behaviour of the marginal man are emotional instability and sensitivity.” Perhaps identifying some of the stresses felt by the young footballers in Study Three (for example poor communication, cultural changes, logistical issues), could help the FAI to identify where these disparities are at their greatest and seek to provide interventions to youth footballers who face significant challenges while progressing through the TD pathway.

#### **5.2.1.5. Sport specialisation – the role of GAA culture throughout player development**

The League of Ireland underage structures were in their infancy during this time frame (i.e., under 17 and under 19 were in operation, under 15 and under 13 leagues followed). With Doyle and colleagues identifying that 76% of the younger ETP age group participated in other sports, with the most prominent of those being Gaelic Games, it is important to look at the role of playing other sports in the Irish football TD pathway.

The playing calendar of the sports (GAA being played mainly during the spring/summer months and football being a winter sport) facilitated the playing of both sports through the under 17 and under 19 age-group (Study Three). Harry and Adam (Study Three) were able to combine both sports as there was only minor cross-over in terms of the playing season, with their GAA clubs generally providing them with the flexibility to miss training sessions and minor competition games where needed. During the life-course of this study, the FAI implemented the national Player



Development Plan, with one of the recommendations being to move youth football to a new calendar-based season. This would see football being played throughout the summer, putting it in direct competition with the GAA. Some leagues trialled the change, which was to come into force in 2020. In 2019, schoolboy leagues decided to overturn this change and revert (or in some cases remain) with the traditional school-year season. The FAI met with DDSL representatives to ask them to reconsider the non-implementation of the calendar year proposal, but this was rejected. A statement subsequently released by the FAI outlined that leagues could continue playing calendar year football or revert to the winter season (Fennessy, 2019), again highlighting the lack of overall control and impact on underage footballing structures by the governing body which was identified in Study Two. One of the reasons given by leagues for this persistence with the traditional playing calendar was the threat posed by the GAA on the footballer playing pool during the summer season (Connaughton, 2018; Hartnett, 2019). This would put football and GAA in direct competition for a number of dual players. Feelings of affiliation towards one code would impact on player choice, with Connaughton (2018) highlighting “that GAA is embedded in communities around the country in a way which football can rarely match” (para. 9). As children, the process of sport socialisation occurs from the wider culture in the macrosystem to parents who develop a facilitative sporting ‘habitus’ in the microsystem. To Adam, (Study Three) the GAA held a stronger label of approval within his sporting ‘habitus’ which could explain why he chose to specialise in GAA rather than continuing along the football development pathway. As players are a key resource and source of power amongst governing organisations (Study Two), this direct competition with the GAA prevented the adoption of what was identified by the FAI as a key step in harmonising football development structures.

Conversely, Study Three presented times where playing GAA acted as an ‘arena of comfort’ for both Adam and Harry. The concept of ‘arenas of comfort’ posit that one context can provide a means to recover and renew from stresses experienced in another context and can compensate dynamically for failings in another context (Call & Mortimer, 2001). Harry and Adam enjoyed renewed confidence in their footballing abilities through returning to the less pressurised and ‘comfortable’ local environment of the GAA, generally engaged in with friends. Footballing structures could investigate this potentially beneficial relationship between both football codes in both developing and retaining youth footballers, as one code compensates for current failings or transient perceptions of shortcoming in the environment of the other code.

#### **5.2.1.6. Parental support**

Social support played a vital role for the footballers throughout their developmental experiences (Study Three), which is congruent with previous literature (c.f. Sheridan et al., 2014; Harwood & Knight, 2015). Various entities provide different types of support (i.e., emotional, informational, tangible, esteem) throughout the development pathway (Bloom, 1985; Morris et al., 2016). In line with previous research (c.f. Dixon et al., 2008; Clarke et al., 2016) parental support for the boys followed traditional stereotypical lines, with the mothers providing emotional support and fathers more likely to provide instructional and coaching support (apart from Nathan whose mother performed both traditional roles). The use of family resources to aid their football development (i.e., money, family holidays used for tournaments, travelling time at weekends and evenings) can be interpreted as evidence of the support and value placed on the players’ development by their respective families (Study Three). Study Two provided mixed opinions of the nature of parental support in TD pathways, with parents often being criticised for instigating their child’s move to another club seeking

increased (underage) success, exposure to international coaches and foreign scouts; at the expense of their continued, stable development according to stakeholders.

The significance of transition points along a development pathway influences parental relationships with points of temporal uncertainty seeing the employment of strategies to help manage these transitions (e.g., emphasising the importance of education, convincing children to attend to additional training or physical preparation, choosing which sport to specialise in) (Clarke et al., 2016). Parents played a vital role in interpreting the sport specialisation process for players (Study Three) which may be useful for NGBs to understand as they strongly influence athletic decision making yet are often kept at arm's length by governing organisations.

## **5.2.2. Stakeholder relationships**

### **5.2.2.1. Organisational disconnect / incongruence**

Study Two identified key tensions across the landscape of strategic apex stakeholders in Irish football. These centred around NGB leadership, board composition and political dominance, financial tensions and a lack of organisational justice. The lack of organisational justice was linked to perceptions of fairness related to how certain leagues were given preferential treatment by the FAI and the struggle over (and competition for) the key resource in underage football, namely players. Due to the unstable financial position of the FAI, players have become key 'assets' within stakeholder power dynamics. These talented youth players are often seen as a key (financial) resource for organisations (i.e., clubs/ schoolboy leagues) to survive and thrive. Study One identified the patterns associated with player movement which has

intensified this dynamic, namely around concepts of periphery, semi-periphery and core footballing areas. The tendency for players to migrate towards the DDSL intensified the perceptions of unfairness across schoolboy football and increased the antagonism felt by surrounding leagues to the FAI and the DDSL, as players are ‘assets’ for the continued funding of clubs and are promotional vehicles due to their potential exposure on underage international teams (Study Two and Three). In Study Three, Nathan was exposed to this resentment in the form of anti-DDSL sentiment from the other schoolboy leagues during youth tournaments.

Study Two also identified the governance behaviours exhibited by the FAI as perceived by the SFAI. Key issues revolved around acting in the best interests of members, formalising roles and responsibilities, communication practices and perceptions of inaccurate disclosures. The delegate system of representation tends to strengthen the political leverage of the DDSL. This power imbalance was expressed at the micro level with players being asked to come back to their local league to secure Kennedy Cup representation and insights into the flaunting of travel distance rules by clubs, often with a presence on the DDSL governing structures (Study Three).

#### **5.2.2.2. National Player Development Plan**

In an attempt to harmonise playing structures nationwide, the FAI sought to introduce the Player Development Plan (PDP), which required the adoption of the plan’s key elements by stakeholders. The “most consistent determinant of performance” for sporting governing bodies is stakeholder satisfaction (O’Boyle & Hassan, 2014, p.307). UEFA recognised the importance of regular stakeholder consultation by including the concept into its National Association good governance strategy (UEFA, 2018). A key consideration is that if a group can affect an organisation’s viability, then the primary objective for that organisation is to create value for stakeholders; to do

this effectively they must focus on how value gets created for stakeholders (Freeman et al., 2010). Stakeholder dissatisfaction from historical incongruence and complaints over current practices (i.e., poor communication, lack of transparency, perceptions of unfairness) negatively impacted the ability of the FAI to fully implement its PDP. Sections of footballing stakeholders (i.e., clubs and schoolboy leagues) failed to see the ‘value’ in wholeheartedly accepting the PDP by the FAI (Study Two) which was introduced to reduce the imbalance of development opportunities experienced (Study One and Three).

### **5.2.3. Structural and resource inequalities**

Certain inequalities across the talent development pathway were identified throughout the three studies. In Study One, inequalities arose in the form of place and date of birth and migration patterns. Study Two allowed for the reasons behind such inequities in the development pathway to be explored qualitatively, analysing the strategic apex view on structural and resource imbalances which included standards of coaching and facilities, access to both international club and underage Ireland international team scouting networks and financial inequalities. As players are often seen as ‘assets’ to clubs and leagues which can yield financial benefits when it comes to being sold, the feature of migration led to greater antagonism between key development agents (e.g., regional leagues and the DDSL). Study Three provided the lived experience of such imbalances, with issues such as differences in the quality of coaching staff, the existence of appropriate facilities and resources, number of players and visibility, leading to a constant theme throughout their development of moving club or moving league. Player movement was also spurred by the underage development structures.

For example, a “peaking for Kennedy Cup” culture within youth football was noted (LS3), with one SFAI official reporting that “... kids being told 'if you don't make the Kennedy Cup, you're finished.’” In Study Three, Harry’s father noted the prominence of the Kennedy Cup, wanting his son to move back home to secure a place on his local team in order to secure a place on the county Kennedy Cup team and thus gain exposure to scouts and underage coaches at the Kennedy Cup.

Migration, both internally to the DDSL (Study One) and then to the UK professional clubs (Study Two and Three), is seen as a likely (and sought after) outcome of such imbalances. The encouragement of migratory behaviours was a source of concern amongst football officials (Study Two). As club movement and migration (internal and external) features strongly across the talent development environment of Irish football (Study One, Two and Three), this generated further research focus in relation to theorising the antecedents of such movement.

#### **5.2.3.1. Migration**

Bronfenbrenner (1979, p.27) defined human development as;

*“the process through which the growing person acquires a more extended, differentiated and valid conception of the ecological environment, and becomes motivated and able to engage in activities that reveal the properties of, sustain, or restructure that environment at levels of similar or greater complexity in form and content.”*

A key aspect of this approach is that the contextual environment must extend with the developing person, producing more complex arrangements to challenge and stretch that development for further actualisation of skill to occur. If an environment doesn't offer opportunities for further growth, then patterns of migration can result as those

environments are sought out. Labour migration and international mobility became established as a strategy for increasing standards of living, which is facilitated by social and cultural factors and infrastructures in these communities. Changes in the policy environment have led to obstacles to this international mobility (Carling, 2002). With the globalisation of football and the broadening of migratory patterns to the UK, this has resulted in an increase in what Carling (2002, p.5) described as “involuntary immobility” for youth Irish footballers wishing to continue along the established development pathway. The players’ journeys described in Study Three show a variety of migration forms (namely voluntary non-migrant, involuntary non-migrant and migrant).

In Figure 21, the migratory aspiration/ability model by Carling (2002) has been adapted to reflect the context specific development pathway with elite youth football in the Republic of Ireland. This model suited this type of analysis as it encompasses the very essence of the bio-ecological approach to development, including various levels of influence from macro to micro, and drawing from the ‘proximal processes’ concept where the individual isn’t a passive actor in their development, but their characteristics are influenced by and yet also reciprocally influence their surrounding development environment. Variation in migration can be attributed to differences in ability, aspiration or both (Carling & Schewel, 2018).

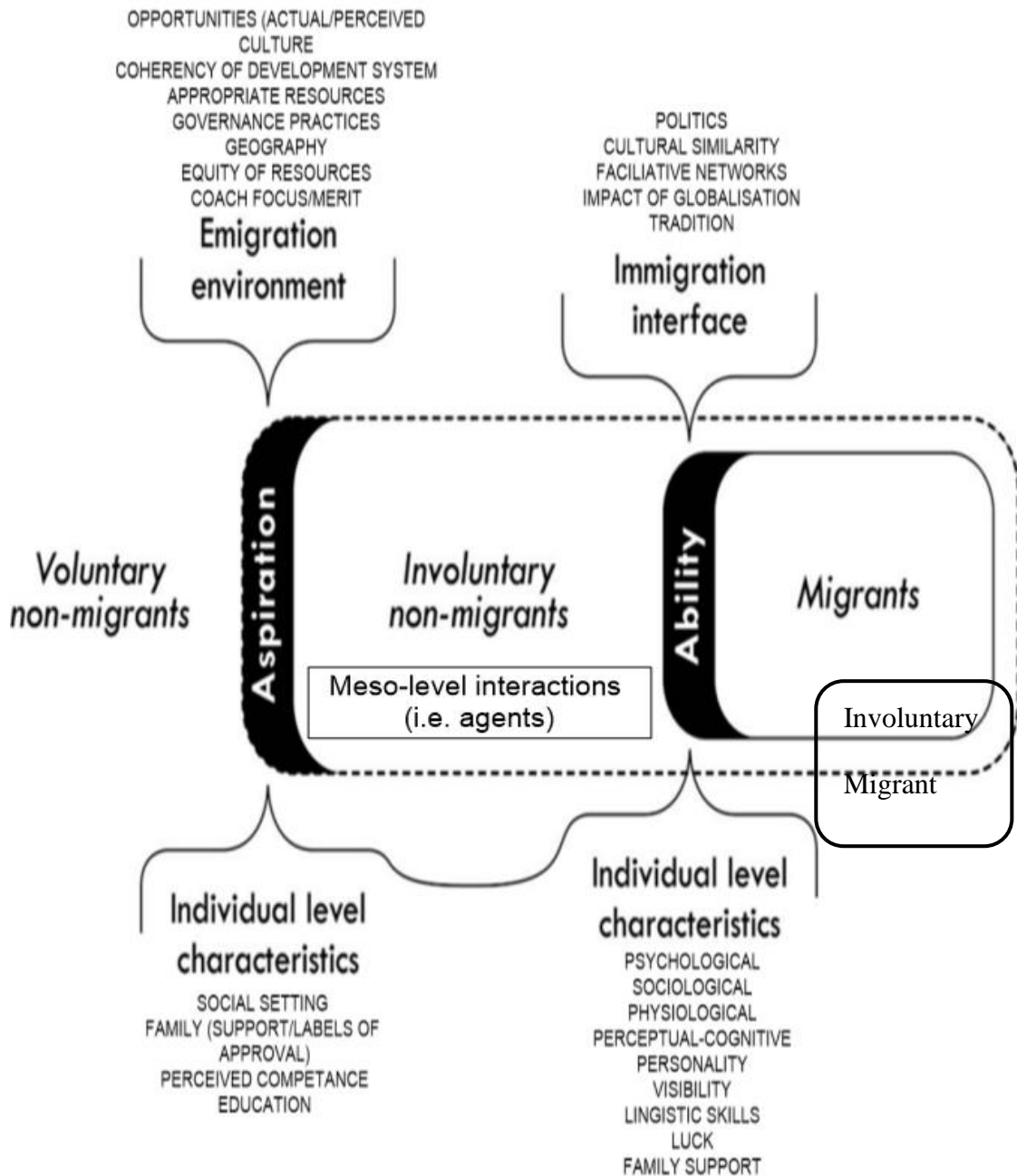


Figure 21 Migration factors in Irish football (adapted from Carling, 2002)

*Migration aspiration*

Carling (2002) suggests that aspiration to migrate be analysed at two levels. Firstly, the macro-environment question of why there is a demand to migrate within this emigration environment; the social, economic and political context in which the social



constructions of migration exists. The emigration environment focuses on the development pathways analysed in Study One and Study Two. This context rich picture of the environment includes aspects such as, the equity of resources (seen in Study Two as differing in terms of player numbers, financial resources, visibility to scouts etc.), equity of opportunities (i.e., impacted by place or date of birth effect), coherence of the system and its governance (political) structures (i.e., league secretary motivations), geography (unequal chances of making the ETP depending on county, extent of internal migration depending on location).

The second analytical approach relates to the micro-level. Individual characteristics such as, family history, personality traits, educational attainment, in accounting for those that want to stay, and those that want to go. To turn an aspiration to migrate into the actual ability to migrate, individual level characteristics (i.e., psychological, sociological, family support, visibility to scouts/agents) are vital. At a macro level, actualising migration is also influenced by forces such as facilitative networks, cultural similarity, established traditions of movement, which are again bridged to micro-level factors by meso-level interactions. Those that developed in a certain environment (e.g., where football is valued culturally, with access to resources) with certain individual characteristics (social support, perceived and actual competence) may form aspirations to migrate to continue their football development. An individual's aspiration to migrate to continue their footballing development (internally to the DDSL or externally to the UK), are mediated by such individual level characteristics (i.e., labels of worth or approval placed on football by family, perceived and actual competence, social settings and perceived importance of education). Those were investigated in Study Three in terms of familial support for progression of the boys,

the value labels attributed to football versus GAA in the community and perceived competence leading to increased training and investment in the sport.

The model is scaffolded on a macro-micro level dyad, but Carling (2002) also highlights the influence of the meso-level in linking these levels together, for example, family and other social networks. As can be seen in Figure 21, meso-level interactions are those between micro-level and those between micro and macro level. Interactions can include the role of agents between parents and clubs, as demonstrated by Nathan in Study Three. Also, the relationship between family members and clubs, again demonstrated by Nathan with the relationship between his mother and his club and also in the relationship between Harry's brother and his club of migration.

#### *Migration ability*

A player's actual ability to migrate can also be assessed on two similar levels, with migrant ability being determined by the interplay between the immigration interface and their personal characteristics. The macro-level, or the immigration interface, encompasses the available modes of migration each with associated risks, costs and requirements, reflecting the relationship between Ireland and predominantly UK clubs. Cultural similarity and facilitative networks (Study Two and Three) has meant that UK clubs have traditionally been 'finishing schools' for young Irish football players. Broader issues such as increased football player movement into Ireland's traditional migratory destination (i.e., the UK) has meant that there are fewer places for young Irish players who have the aspiration to migrate; to actually do so (Curran, 2017). Accordingly, the impending impact of Brexit may also have an impact on this immigration interface in terms of age of contracting players from the EU (McDonnell, 2020). Clubs within the DDSL who have historical relationships and facilitative

networks with professional UK clubs were often the main destination for internally migrating players (Study One). Being part of this ‘stepping-stone’ to the immigration interface (i.e., DDSL) was a primary motive for driving overall internal migration patterns (Study One) and individual migratory decision making (Study Three), causing tension between strategic apex organisations (Study Two). At the micro-level, individual characteristics will influence who can fulfil their migration aspirations, within these conditions set by the immigration interface. Study One examined the role that date of birth had on access to development pathways, suggesting inequality based on whether a player was born in a specific location, Study One and Three also identified the role that location had on an individual’s ability to migrate to Dublin to gain visibility and continue their development, both factors indicating variation on individual level characteristics imposed by the talent development system. Visibility was also noted in Study Two and Three as being unequal across the country in relation to underage coaches and UK academy scouts.

#### **5.2.3.2. Migration model and the subsequent impact on Irish football**

The case studies in Study Three served as examples of different types of migrants from this model. Nathan had the aspiration and also the ability (e.g., technical ability, affective psychosocial characteristics and facilitative development environment) to ‘migrate’. Adam was an example of a ‘voluntary non-migrant’ in relation to internal football migration, evidenced by the choice not to return to play LOI football, choosing instead to remain in the culturally significant environment of GAA. Thus, as described by Carling (2002, p.12), staying “because of a belief that non-migration is preferable to migration.” Harry was an example of an ‘involuntary non-migrant’ during his

development pathway. He went on trials but was not signed by the UK clubs. Harry was facilitated in his continued development by the fact that he had a LOI club within travelling distance that was achievable by his parents. While undergoing his trials, Harry espoused the characteristics of a fourth, as of yet undescribed, type of migrant, that of an ‘involuntary migrant’ (see Figure 21). This potential type of migrant is one who migrates (having the ability) but who doesn’t fully have the aspiration to go, demonstrating cognitive dissonance about the process. This might be due to a sense of homesickness or feelings of missing out on education provided (i.e., Leaving Certificate).

Currently the immigration interface (usually the ‘stepping-stone’ of the DDSL and UK clubs) is outside the direct governance sphere of the Football Association of Ireland. With the continuous power struggles and flux between strategic apex stakeholders (i.e., SFAI, DDSL and FAI as outlined in Study Two), this can lead to a lack of coherency in talent development approaches. If the development pathways within Irish football were improved (i.e. by the meaningful funding of the underage leagues, buy-in to the PDP, clear roles and responsibilities formulated, greater levels of meaningful stakeholder communication) this might reduce the necessity for international migration, particularly at youth levels for these ‘involuntary migrants’. Impacts of foreign policies (e.g., Brexit) and features of increased market access and globalisation, can impact on the places available for migrating players from Ireland to the UK. The development of underage national leagues will aim to reduce the dependency on this interface with UK clubs and allow the FAI to gain greater control over talent development processes related to Irish players.

## **5.3. Practical Recommendations**

Several practical implications for various levels of football administration in relation to talent development practices both in the Republic of Ireland and beyond have emerged from the data during the duration of the study process.

### **5.3.1. NGB data**

From 2019, the FAI have mandated that all clubs must register every player through a national registration database (Sporting Greystones FC, 2019). The utilisation of a national database for registration data would allow for a more thorough analysis of player data, which doesn't rely on the data from individual programmes (e.g., ETP). This database should be used to further assess the information on equality which was analysed via the ETP data (e.g., place and date of birth, migration) to analyse further if such inequities are present purely within this ETP programme or if they are extrapolated out across all playing levels. For example, Study One demonstrated a significant RAE within the ETP programme. A broader analysis of dates of birth across all playing levels will identify when and where along the pathway this trend towards quarter one births begins. This study analysed the migration patterns of ETP players, the reality might see many more players migrating to the DDSL. This registration data will also allow the FAI to identify exact playing numbers nationally. This should be utilised to make informed decisions on issues such as the location of ETP centres, as inequities in relation to numbers feeding into each centres were identified in Study One. This will reduce the influence of stakeholder power and

vested interest in making strategic talent development decisions (evidenced in Study Two).

### **5.3.2. Stakeholder relationships**

A coherent organisational core, based on sound values and a robust philosophy, stemming from macro to micro level, is essential for effective action. Following on from identifying structural inequities (Study One), Study Two explored the perceptions of the strategic apex stakeholders with respect to the organisational and administrative issues associated with Irish football. It was apparent that financial relationships engaged in with structurally subordinate organisations (e.g., FAI and DDSL) have caused friction amongst key stakeholders within the development pathway. NGBs must be cognisant of the implications of accepting financial assistance from such organisations as it may impact the power balance between both organisations and across the governance structure. This is particularly relevant in situations where there is historical animosity and an environment of mistrust, often ineffective leadership and poor communication (Study Two). Each body within the strategic apex of football in Ireland need to consider the impact that their current communication and relational practices have on perpetuating historical incongruences and influencing future strategic planning.

#### **5.3.2.1. ‘Stakeowner’ development**

Within the SFAI, differing perceptions of their role in football governance existed, with some focusing on its administrative function, while others espoused a more overarching governing role. Their role in advancing player development structures was not a priority identified by the SFAI members. The national ‘Player Development Plan’ (PDP) was introduced by the FAI to harmonise player development across the 32

schoolboy leagues. The adoption of Recommendation 10 of the national PDP (focused on the continuity of football by shifting to a one season calendar) remains currently at the discretion of leagues, with its key recommendation (i.e. a change to the playing season from winter to calendar year) being rejected outright by some leagues and being trialled and then reverted to the original school season by others (Fallon, 2019; Mackey, 2019). The differing perceptions and preferences espoused by stakeholders (Study 2) could see this as being viewed as a positive, autonomy retaining action for the Leagues, with others viewing such a change in guidance as the FAI not taking a strong enough role within talent structures, thus outlining some difficulties for the NGB in relation to stakeholder management and policy implementation.

In a country “with no professional underage competition/coaching/development structure” (FAI, n.d. b, para. 2) it is incumbent on the NGB to intervene with evidence-based development policies which match the relevant contextual issues within Ireland. The above studies identified a number of these contextual issues. For example, Study One identified a strong RAE, which Study Two explored as being a result of early competitive structures, with one coach reporting that they wouldn’t select players born past April for the Kennedy Cup. The FAI have noted issues related to this emphasis on physicality, the format of the tournament and its age appropriateness, yet find themselves without the power balance or traditional legitimacy (or perhaps the political appetite) in underage football to be able to change the tournament.

Lack of patience, resources and time can limit the attention paid to stakeholders but NGBs must seek to assess existing power balances within their stakeholder ecosystem, to identify stakeholder salience (in the form of power, legitimacy and urgency) when seeking to establish a change to current practices. This will allow the NGB the opportunity to understand preferences of key stakeholders, evaluate the impact of

actions and demonstrate a willingness to engage in cooperative practice, thus developing a ‘stakeowner’ environment of governance. Suggestions from this context of how that might be achieved relates to the opening of questioning at AGMs, providing influence and empowerment in relation to best practice and not in relation to resource power (i.e., financial influence of the DDSL) and remaining transparent. It is acknowledged that this can be a difficult proposition for NGBs, particularly when dealing with subordinate bodies whose own members differ significantly in terms of their preferred communication methods, strategies and objectives.

#### **5.3.4. Inequalities necessitating migration**

The Football Association of Ireland should consider its influence on the migratory pathway within Irish football. Changes within the development structures could reduce the emphasis on migration (both internal and external) which currently exists. This can be achieved at the ‘emigration environment’ level (see Figure 21) where the landscape of Irish football could be improved directly by the FAI so as to somewhat reduce the attractiveness of going abroad, particularly for those who would prefer to stay for educational purposes (e.g., ensuring opportunities for playing the sport, equity of resources throughout the country, enhancing governance practices, providing appropriate and equitable resources nationwide). The recent implementation of a regional spread of underage teams linked to senior League of Ireland teams should increase the opportunities for progression outside the DDSL within this emigration environment.

The NGB can also have an impact on the volume and subsequent success of migration within the development pathway at the ‘immigration interface’ (e.g., removing the



emphasis on the DDSL as a stepping stone or semi-periphery between Irish football and UK professional academies by providing increased visibility to other leagues nationwide).

### **5.3.3. Evaluation metrics**

As identified above, despite the installation of underage leagues to enhance the opportunities for player development nationally, there still exists a view of quality and resource inequity in schoolboy football. Despite these competitions engaging players from aged 12 upwards, its creation is not wholeheartedly accepted by stakeholders (Study Two). Primary concerns focus on the cost implications, the focus on early specialisation, issues related to early selection policies impacting perceived competence, narrowing the development pathway and opportunities, impact on players education and social life and a geographic inequity in relation to the spread of teams represented. Currently, there exists no publicly available evaluation metrics for these league structures. A key recommendation for the FAI is to develop a set of evaluation metrics to gauge the ‘success’ of these underage leagues. Additional resources (from the FAI and UEFA) are being directed towards these leagues and away from the traditional routes of development (i.e., schoolboy leagues and clubs) and have been an additional layer of incongruence amongst stakeholders (Study Two) thus the FAI must objectively demonstrate the effectiveness of their talent development policies and pathways. The FAI should introduce development metrics which would perhaps remove the sole focus from being on the winners of the underage leagues and on to other aspects of development (i.e., number of players progressing through the pathway, UEFA coefficient of the LOI).

In 2015, a consultancy report prepared for the FAI by Conroy Consulting stated that “the introduction of the U19 league is viewed very much as a success” (2015, p.21). Again, no metrics exist as to how this is judged or evaluated. For example, O’Connor (in press) asserted that despite the introduction of the under 19 league in 2014, the number of players in the senior League of Ireland who were exclusively LOI produced hasn’t increased since the pathway was initiated. Such metrics could enable footballers faced with the decision of migrating to a Dublin based club or staying with their perhaps lesser established local LOI club, additional insights rather than basing decisions on facilitative networks or clubs with established reputations for enhanced visibility to scouts (Study One, Two and Three). If such metrics were developed in conjunction with salient stakeholders and made available to the public with insights on targets reached, then this could help to secure future buy-in from stakeholders (i.e., schoolboy leagues, SFAI, clubs) by demonstrating the positive impact that such developments have made to Irish football.

#### **5.3.4. Education**

If as stated in the Irish Governments’ National Sports Policy that “the welfare of athletes who pursue their sports, sometimes to the detriment of their education and long-term careers, is a matter that is important to Government and to Sport Ireland” (NSP, 2018, p.57), then it is imperative that the Government mandate all sporting Governing Bodies to add some form of educational oversight to the key processes within their talent development pathways which impact on school-age athletes.

Within this setting, it may include the FAI monitoring the educational attainment of and offering further academic support to, players on their programmes (through in-

club schemes) and engaging formally with those who return from scholarships abroad, possibly academically unable or lacking the motivation to re-enter the Irish education system. As noted above, institutional support is key within transitions, thus the FAI should have staff engaged in a formal monitoring process of boys (and girls) who travel abroad to academy programmes and to facilitate them possibly returning to Ireland and re-entering the football pathway by providing psychological and informational supports. With the decreasing number of Irish players appearing at Premier League and Championship level in England (Malone, 2019), continued efforts can be made to highlight the attractiveness of continuing along an Irish education pathway (via second level education and progressing onto Education Training Board programmes or 3<sup>rd</sup> level) combined with playing in the LOI during a player's teenage years. The existence of the national underage leagues should offer increased partnership potentials with 3<sup>rd</sup> level institutions to provide further education opportunities for youth footballers engaged in the development pathway. As explored in Study Three, the presence of the under 17 league aligned with transition year reduced the negative impact of such increased time spent travelling to, training and playing football on the footballer's education attainment. Educational attainment did suffer for some when they progressed into their Leaving Cert year. This flexibility will also not be the case for the under 13 and under 15 LOI participants. Educational impacts could be monitored by the FAI, perhaps by having an education officer and hosting work-shops in clubs for all stakeholders. The regional spread of national underage teams should naturally further reduce the travel distance time for youth players (in comparison to the migration hub of the DDSL), thus reducing this potentially negative impact of lack of time spent on academic educational practices.

### **5.3.5. Ecological development**

As mentioned previously, the concept of time is a distinguishing factor of Bronfenbrenners' bio-ecological theory. Study One produced a snapshot of the talent development system, but without the organisational analysis (Study Two) this snapshot would, on its own, be relatively meaningless in relation to fully understanding the preconditions that led to such a picture. Study Three adds a lived experience layer to fully understand the relationship of time on the development journey (i.e., how historical macro relational issues influence current pathway design and functioning). The concept and importance of time should be embedded into all talent development research to assess how legacy issues can impact on current execution of development plans and on future strategic planning. Decision-making from NGBs need to be made with the full ecological context in mind; macro level decisions made with an awareness of the potential knock-on effects at micro level, and also the layers that buffer the macro to micro spheres where plans (e.g., development plans) can get rejected or changed so their actual beneficial intent is lost (i.e., subordinate organisations subverting initial NGB development plans).

### **5.3.6. Future relationship with the GAA**

Opportunities for harmonious interaction between Ireland's largest team sports should be explored by both the FAI and the GAA. Study Three showed the benefits that participating in Gaelic Games had on developing football players (i.e., providing an environment to recover confidence, a social outlet with friends) despite the perceptions by stakeholders that participation in the GAA negatively impacts football development (Study Two). A key rejection point for Recommendation 10 of the PDP was due to

summer football competing with Gaelic Games for players during those proposed months. The strong cultural pull of GAA will resonate in large geographical areas within the country so considerations could be made by the FAI on how to ‘package’ football to reduce the existing cultural allure of the GAA within certain communities (i.e., extending the reach of RDOs). Whilst acknowledging the difficulties for youth coaches in terms of the practicalities of scheduling training and setting expectations among youth players; considerations could be provided by the FAI as to how best to facilitate the dual-functioning of two popular sports within an already narrow playing population (i.e., considerations on the scheduling of each sport, a mandated acceptance of dual-players at LOI under 13 and under 15).

#### **5.4. Methodological reflections**

Despite the ‘incompatibility thesis’ between methodological approaches advocated by some researchers, this study utilised a mixed methods approach. This allowed the researcher to understand more fully the relevant contextual issues surrounding Irish football and to gain deeper insights into the workings of various relationships. The choice of a pragmatic, mixed methods approach has been vindicated here with Study One providing a quantitative, objective, snap-shot of the talent development pathway, complimented by Study Two and Study Three offered the interpretivist perspective on such structures. This difference of approach allowed for triangulation and further exploration of data to occur.

In behavioural and social sciences, “longitudinal studies have a major role in enhancing understanding of natural developmental processes and the analysis of

change” (Boys et al., 2003, p.363). The use of a longitudinal study of this length is unusual within talent development research. The dimension of time allowed the author to gain an insight into how decisions executed at the macro level impacted on the lived experiences of youth footballers progressing through such pathways more so than purely utilising reflective interview data as context was readily provided and the influence of time could be portrayed and assessed. As this longitudinal study spanned five years, there existed the challenge of what time-point to use in setting the contextual scene as governmental and structural processes are subject change over that timeframe (i.e., in relation to youth team composition, development processes by the NGB, contextual influences). As the ecological approach to talent development incorporates many different layers of factors that impact on development (i.e., governance, environmental, psycho-social, political, cultural), thus the task (particularly in Study Three) to attempt to reduce the broad range of factors that impact upon development was challenging. Ideally the author would’ve liked to present all five case-studies, but the volume of the data set didn’t allow for this to occur. The challenge in using composite case-studies was to amalgamate the anecdotes while keeping the stories ecologically valid.

The use of timelines as a visual aid to enhance the qualitative data gained in the initial longitudinal study interview was also another innovative method utilized in this study. This method primed the participants to increase the accuracy of information retrieval (Mace & Clevinger, 2013). This method was also used to aid pattern recognition of transitions in Irish football. Due to the nature of the cohort involved (14-year olds), this method added a focal point to the initial interview and facilitated greater clarification of development sequences as it allowed the participants to identify a clearer sense of timing.

## 5.5. Limitations

- The samples were drawn from those already engaged in the FAIs talent development pathways (i.e., ETP in Study One, Republic of Ireland u15 squad in Study Three). This study may have produced different results if it drew from the normative playing population. This approach was chosen to get as much information as possible regarding the pathways and to ensure coverage of all key elements raised in Study Two, due the boys' exposure to these facets of the pathway (i.e., ETP, SFAI Leagues and clubs, underage international squads, knowledge and experience of underage LOI, balancing competing demands).
- Due to the PhD facilitating a four-year longitudinal study, the length of time from its inception to completion was significantly longer than a traditional four-year period of PhD study. This means that the environment of Irish football at the initial review of literature and data collection phases has changed significantly in some cases (e.g. the newly established under 15 and under 13 leagues, the purpose and structure of the ETP has changed with the subsequent introduction of the underage leagues, emerging changes in power balances throughout the strategic apex, changes to coach education pathways).
- No data existed at the time of data collection from the FAI on playing population. Thus, in Study One, the Relative Age Effect was compared to general population data instead of actual playing population, and the number of migrating players were identified as those who were selected onto the ETP and not the full number of players.

- This study was based within the footballing structures of the Republic of Ireland which may pose a question regarding the potential generalisation of data (Woodside, 2010). Yin (2013) refers to case study generalisation as “an effort to generalize from a small number of cases to a larger population of cases” (p. 325). Flyvbjerg (2006) and Ruddin (2006) have defended qualitative generalising, denying the inability of cases to supply means for scientific development. Case studies lead to the creation of hypotheses rather than presenting statistical facts (Woodside, 2010). Cronbach (1975) labelled this a “working hypothesis” (p.125), meaning that every case study can contribute to the acceptance or denouncement of the hypothesis and help to construct new theoretical premises (Yin, 2018). Steinberg (2015) asserted that case-study research is on par with ‘large-N’ research with respect to generalisability. Generalisability to other contexts can be improved by examining the range of attributes within the original case, identifying an abundance of relevant common attributes to another case and having lower numbers of unique attributes between those cases (Kennedy, 1979; Gomm, Hammersley & Foster, 2000). Thus, for other sporting organisations seeking to attempt to generalise from this work, they could identify the contextual similarities between this study and their own setting. This could include their population base, financial stability, workforce and volunteer base, structures, resources, goals and objectives, other sporting organisations operating, political and economic similarities. The author provided extensive background contextual research in Chapter One to allow such cross-comparisons to occur and to allow readers to evaluate the potential learnings from this study to another context. Within this study, a multi-site perspective was maintained, which saw a regional spread of



interviewees and case-study participants. This helps to provide greater generalisability than single-site studies (Firestone & Herriott, 1983; Lazar, Feng & Hochheiser, 2017), as such representativeness is essential for good external validity (Gerring, 2004).

The role of theory is central in relation to generalisation from case studies. Case studies can provide a direct application of a theory to a case, which is a valuable tool for illustrating the theory by highlighting, exemplifying and potentially challenging its central tenet (Ylikoski, 2019). This PhD used existing literature on development as its overarching central foundations (cf. Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Henriksen et al., 2010; Martindale et al., 2010). Individual studies drew on various other relevant literature (e.g., RAE, place of birth, stakeholder theory, migration). Case studies can make an important contribution by demonstrating the evidence of a social situation that has not been anticipated by existing theories (Flyvberg, 2006; Becker, 2014), an example of this above is the suggested addition of a third sector to the migration theory of a 'involuntary migrant' (see Figure 21) to account for the sector encountered in Study Three which doesn't currently feature in migration literature. Namely, those that would prefer to stay in their country but have to migrate to continue their development. Regardless of the conversation about generalisability, Simons (2015) states that case studies are the study of the particular and even as a unique case is valuable in its own right.

## 5.6. Future Research

The findings of this thesis provide opportunities for future research in the area of talent development pathway structure, organisation and design, and from an applied perspective how to aid athlete transitions through development pathways and key psycho-social skill development through this development phase.

The aspiration/ability model as applied to sport migration could be extended with further research. Subject to this further research, a new addition added to the migration graph (Figure 21) of an ‘involuntary migrant’ could warrant further investigation. This would include footballers who have the ability to migrate to further advance their playing career but would prefer to remain in Ireland and continue with their education if the necessary support and development pathway for football was available.

From 2019, the FAI are instructing all schoolboy leagues to register their players via an online portal. This would allow future research to occur on the landscape of talent development patterns within Irish football (e.g., analysing whether a RAE occurs purely at ETP level or is it present from an earlier in the pathway, analysing the full range of internal migration patterns and assessing geographical and spatial patterns of talent production).

The ‘stakeowner’ concept by Fassin (2012) identified those stakeholders who have a genuine and legitimate stake in an organisation and strive for mutual benefits. Study Two aligned this concept to the potentially valuable contribution of the SFAI to the FAI and to football organisation in the country as a whole. This notion should be explored further in greater depth in sporting organisations in terms of how to develop and sustain such positive working relationships, particularly within financially and politically unstable relationships.

Time was a key variable within this study, in terms of its influence on the historical deep-rooted nature of the current relationship functionality across the organising bodies involved in youth development (evident in Study Two and Study Three). Time is referred to in development literature (cf. Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Henriksen et al., 2010) but could be expanded and linked to culture and stakeholder research to adequately account for the continuation of such traditions in light of attempted cultural and structural change by strategic apex holders (e.g., the proposed implementation of a national Player Development Plan).

The various hypotheses produced by Bronfenbrenner (1979) to investigate developmental contexts should be explored in greater detail in relation to a sporting context. This thesis explored those relative to the structural process and environment related to migration, but other hypotheses provided relate individually to the full spectrum of microsystems, mesosystems and macrosystems. This could include the role that competing sports could have in term of providing an ‘arena of comfort’ for developing athletes across the TD pathway (Call & Mortimer, 2001). The application and testing of Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) multitude of hypotheses as they could relate to development within a sporting context could provide ample opportunity for future research.

The aim of Study Three was to investigate the lived experience of the boys engaged on the development pathway within this context. As the overall aim of the thesis was to examine the football governance landscape in the Republic of Ireland in relation to its ability to develop elite footballers, this necessitated a focus on some of the broader concepts (i.e., timelines, influence of other sports, education, key psychosocial support mechanisms, transitions, culture, political influence at micro level). Taylor and Collins (2019) suggest that researchers must take individual resources, as well as the

environmental and stakeholder input to their development into consideration to understand why gifted performers fail to realise their potential. Due to the large data set and in-line with the primary thesis objectives, Study Three focused on the environmental and stakeholder input into their development. Further longitudinal research could focus in greater detail on the ‘developmentally generative characteristics’ (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), individual resources and characteristics acquired and demonstrated by youth footballers throughout their engagement in a TD pathway.

## **5.7. Conclusion**

This thesis examined the football governance landscape in the Republic of Ireland in relation to its ability to develop elite footballers, whilst exploring the contextual and lived experiences of youth players as they developed within their respective talent development environments. This research was necessary amidst the culture of increased calls by a wide variety of stakeholders for accountability following the continued non-implementation of the Genesis report. The report stated that basic management techniques were non-existent in the organisation and that the FAI had poor and ineffective communication with stakeholders. Specifically, there was a need to examine Irish football regarding the responsibility of the FAI and the ‘fit for purpose’ nature of its talent identification and development processes and relationship with stakeholders in the development processes of youth footballers. The FAI identify their strategic responsibility for this talent development by stating “as the governing body of a country with no professional underage competition/ coaching/ development

structure there is an obligation to assist in the structured development of young players nationwide” (FAI, n.d. b, para. 2).

Context specific research can aid the evaluation of specific programmes aimed at achieving certain outcomes by “filling in the gaps between what policies are intended to do and how people experience them” (Holland, Thomson & Henderson, 2006, p. 19). Key findings of this study were related to the appropriateness of the development pathway, stakeholder relationships cultivated between governing organisations and structural and resource inequalities. The research identified incongruent development pathways with an emphasis on early success, limited support for early diversification and a lack of individualised development. Migration was another significant facet of the development environment, often dictated by a disparity between resources (e.g., playing population and standards, coaching resources, facilities, perceptions of access to international scouts and underage international teams). Certain tensions were identified across the strategic apex landscape which centred on leadership, board composition and political dominance, financial tensions and a lack of organisational justice. The difficulty in harmonising playing and development structures (via a National Player Development Plan) can be seen in this context as being exceptionally challenging to execute.

Practitioner recommendations from this thesis include utilising NGB data more effectively to encourage rational decision-making and the subsequent ability of the NGB to implement evidence-based policies (i.e., the location of development centres based on feeder area population size, identifying the emerging patterns of a RAE along development pathways). NGBs must also seek to assess the power balances across their network of stakeholders to identify stakeholder salience when seeking a change to established or historical practices of talent development. Understanding the

communication and working preferences of key stakeholders, understanding historical dynamics, and demonstrating a willingness to engage in cooperative practice will aid the establishment of a ‘stakeowner’ environment.

The bio-ecological model of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 2001), suggests that different social settings produce different learning environments, resulting in different experiences from one context to the next. This was evidenced and extended in this research by incorporating a longitudinal study over the key developmental years of youth footballers (Study Three). The footballers experienced quite different learning environments within their unique contexts (i.e., access to quality clubs, playing population, perception as ‘outsiders’, typical migration trajectories) which provided a variety of challenges for each youth footballer. As human development is the result of changing relations between the person and their dynamic, multilevel environmental context (Lerner, 2002), it is important to view talent development policies and practices as not having a homogenous impact on all developing footballers, across a variety of contexts. The model was formulated to examine not “the forces that have shaped human development in the past, but . . . those that may already be operating today to influence what human beings may become tomorrow” (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000, p. 117). The relationship between maturation, migration and place of birth (Study One), the wider governance and societal landscape facilitating and guiding development (Study Two) and immediate family and community environment (Study Three) all have ‘developmentally instigative’ characteristics, that with interaction with the developing individual’s characteristics, continue to impede or facilitate development within Irish youth football. This research sought to identify key ‘developmentally generative’ and ‘developmentally disruptive’ characteristics across Irish football (i.e., disparity related to date and place of birth,

power balances across governing organisations, contextual specific advantages, individual level characteristics, culture, facilitative networks and the relationship with other sports).

A novel feature of this research was that it employed a country-specific analysis (i.e., the Republic of Ireland) which has been advocated by researchers (cf. Sotiriadou et al., 2008) as being imperative to avoid generalising governance and development frameworks from other sport systems or countries. This research also utilised a mixed-methods approach, which allowed the researcher to expand on and triangulate data. This provided scope for the subsequent development of research questions and allowed for a full investigation of talent development processes and practices (e.g. Study One quantitatively illustrated the demographics of the Emerging Talent Programme (ETP), Study Two allowed for stakeholder views of the programme to be explored, while Study Three provided an insight into the lived experience of the programme). The use of visual timelines and the length of the longitudinal study also added a novel and methodically valuable addition to the study of player development.

As identified by LS2 (Study Two), “the talent is out there”; therefore it is hoped that this research has helped to further develop an understanding of the appropriate development environments in Ireland for youth footballers and the importance of a congruent wider football environment (i.e., the impact of organisational disconnect on stakeholder communication and relationships, coherent development practices and structures) to instigate national development policy (i.e., a National Player Development Plan) for the benefit of talent development practices for youth footballers.

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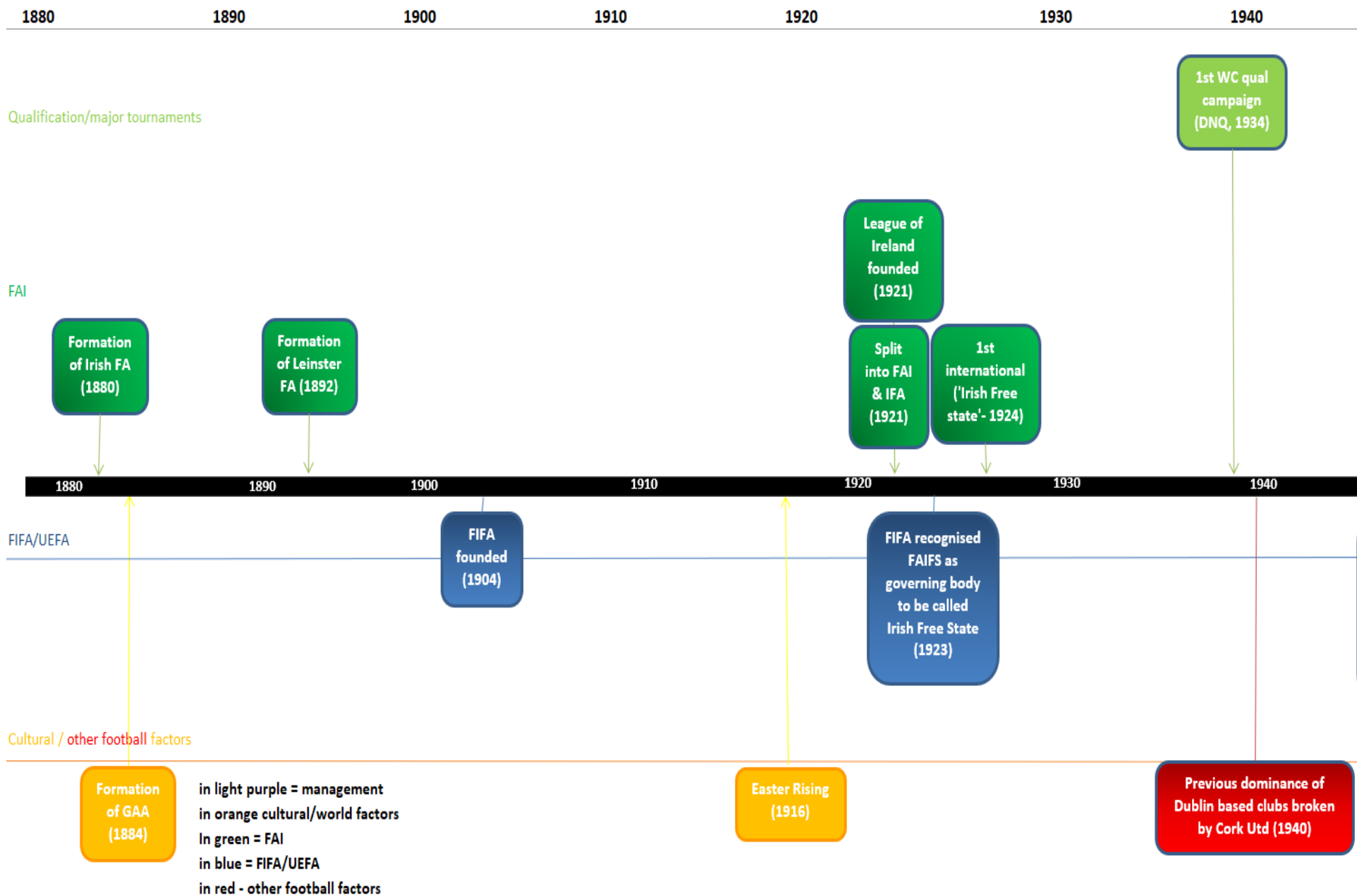
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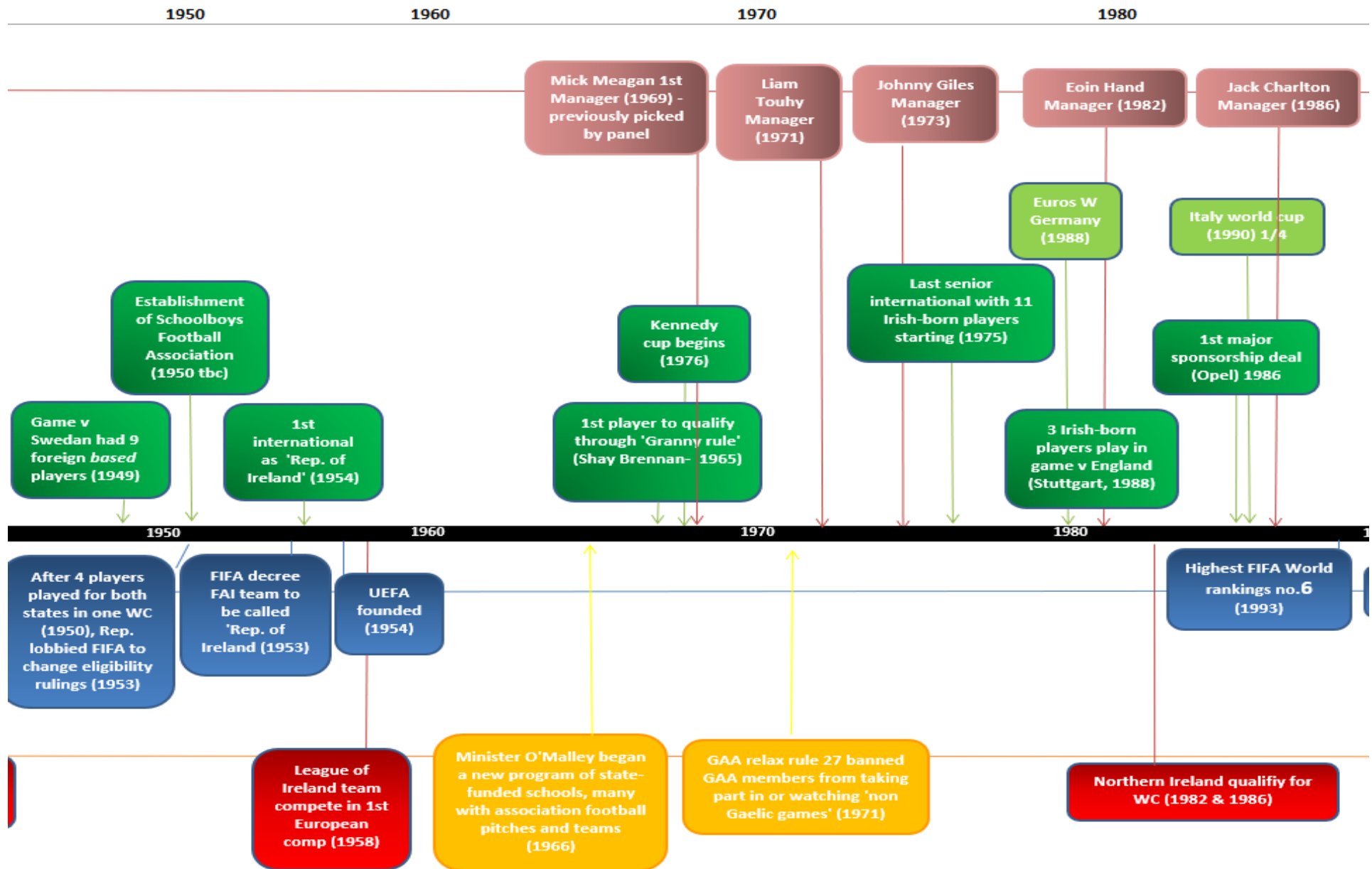
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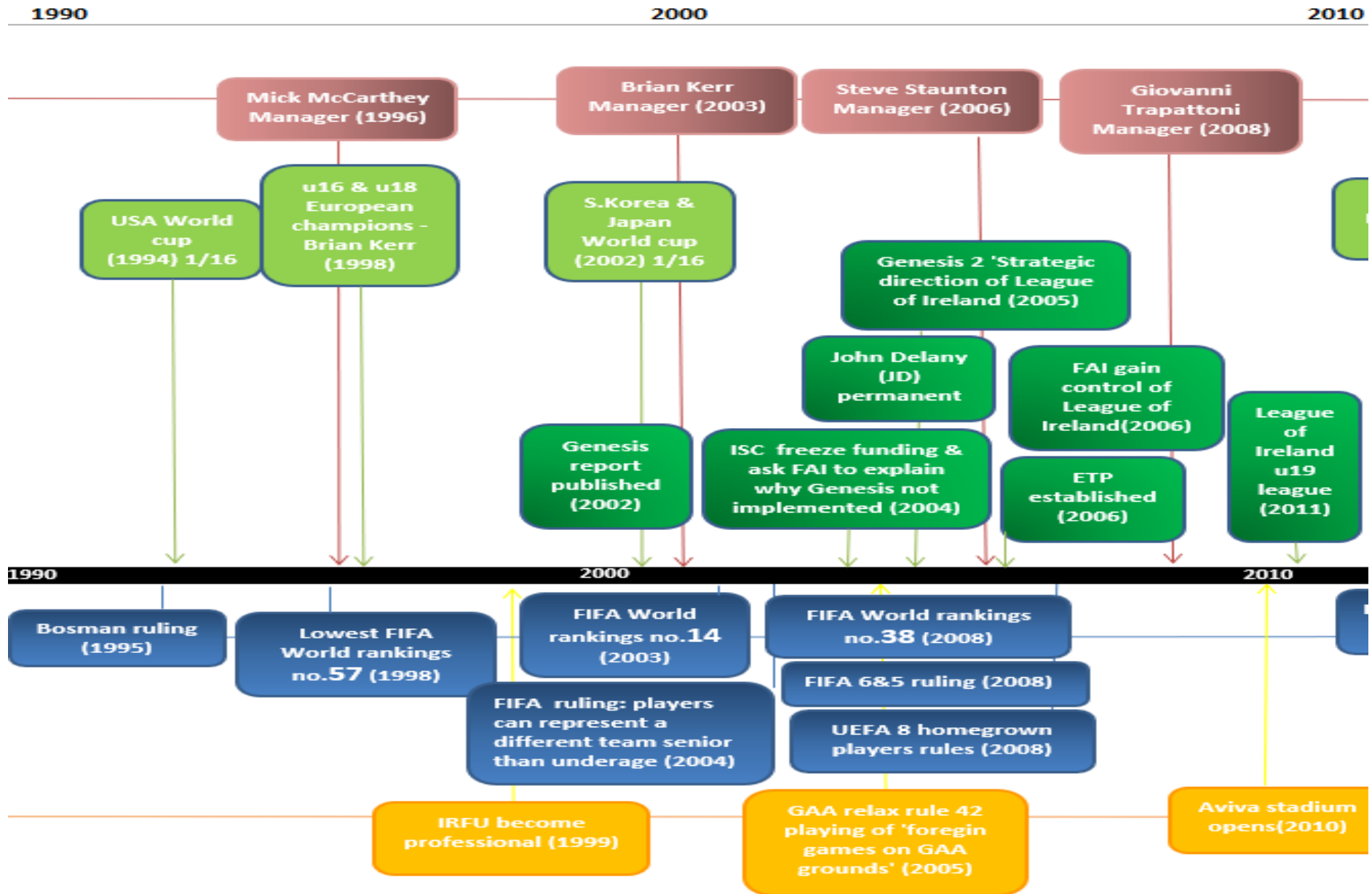
## List of Appendices

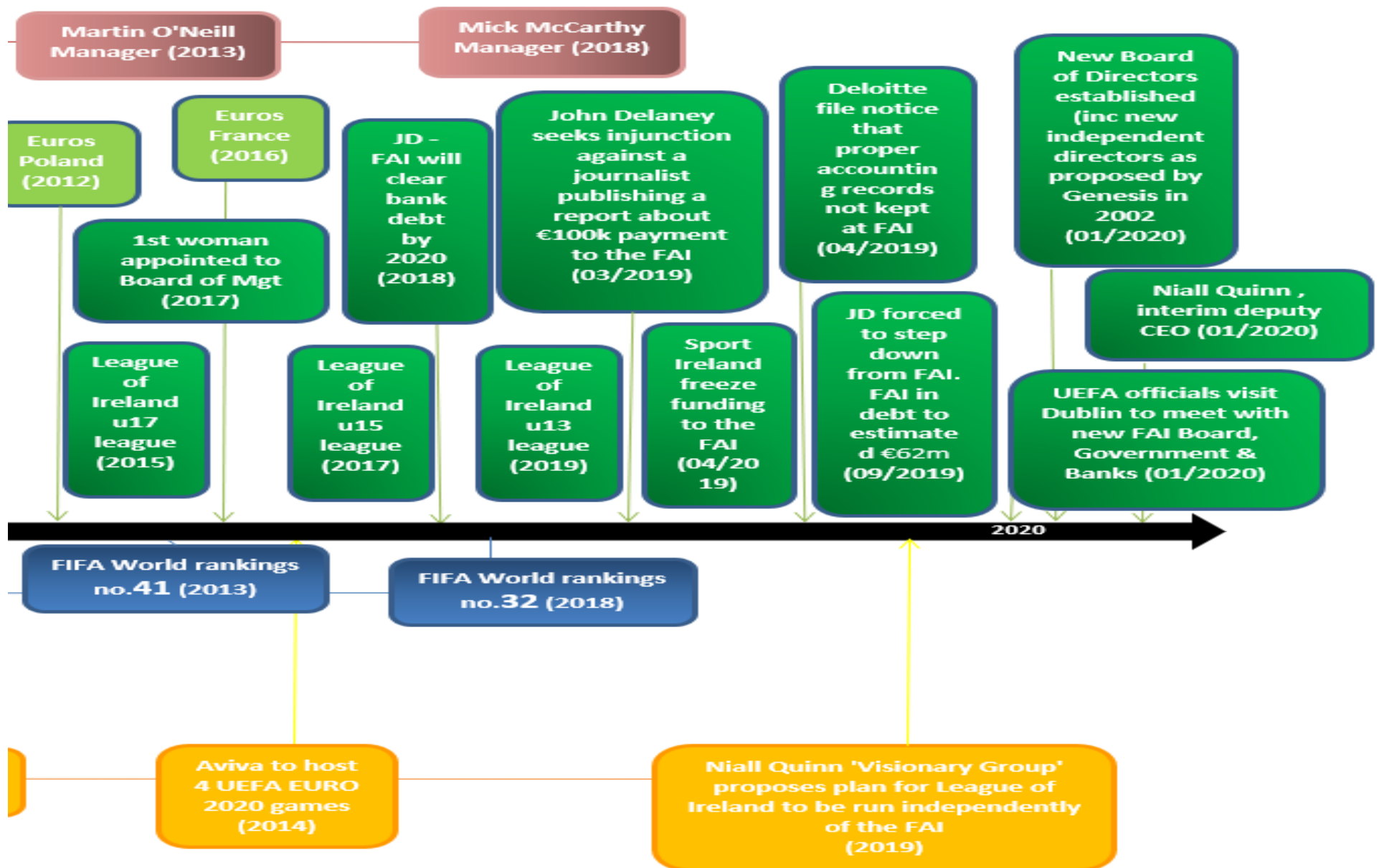
- Appendix A: Football timelines graph
- Appendix B: Gatekeeper participation letter and information sheet (Study One and Two)
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**LIVERPOOL JOHN MOORES UNIVERSITY**

**PARTICIPANT LETTER  
& INFORMATION SHEET**



**Gatekeeper – ETP national manager**

**Talent Identification and Development in Irish Football: an examination of  
organisational structure and practice**

Dear gatekeeper,

My name is Laura Finnegan and I am currently researching the experiences of young elite Irish soccer players as part of my PhD studies. A key aspect of this study will be to examine the experiences of youth elite footballers engaged on the ‘Emerging Talent Programme’ currently being run by the Football Association of Ireland.

To quantitatively analyse the participants on the programme, it would be beneficial to access non-identifiable information on past participants including date of birth, county of birth and club, remaining in line with the FAIs data protection policies.

If possible, I shall also be seeking access to fourteen-year-old players whom are on the Republic of Ireland u15 squad (also members of the ETP). I feel that exploring the lived experiences of this group over an extended period of time, will give a comprehensive analysis of the ETP and overall talent development systems within Irish youth football. This communication could be made via you acting as a gatekeeper for the FAI to parents/careers of the current cohort of players offering them the chance to participate in the study.

Before you decide, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it involves. Please take some time to read the following information. Should you require any further information then please do not hesitate to ask. Please take adequate time to decide if you want to participate or not.

### **1. What is the purpose of the study?**

The aim of this study is to gain a greater understanding of the talent development systems within Irish football. The study aims to investigate the appropriateness of these systems in relation to athletic, psycho-social, cultural and environmental issues unique to an Irish youth footballer and to assess if the current structures support this development.

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

No. It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do you will be given this information sheet and asked to sign a consent form. You are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason. A decision to withdraw will not affect your rights/any future treatment/service you receive.

### **3. Are there any risks / benefits involved?**

The results of the study may be published in the public domain but the identities of the players, their clubs, leagues etc will be anonymised throughout. You will receive a copy of the report and will be afforded the opportunity to discuss the findings with the researcher.

#### **Contact details of researcher:**

Laura Finnegan

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*051-845686/ lfinnegan@wit.ie*

#### **Research supervisor:**

David Richardson

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**LIVERPOOL JOHN MOORES UNIVERSITY**

**CONSENT FORM**



**Gatekeeper - ETP national manager**

**Talent Identification and Development in Irish Football: an examination of organisational structure and practice**

**Laura Finnegan**

**School of Sport and Exercise**

**Liverpool John Moores University**

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information provided for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason and that this will not affect my legal rights.

3. I understand that any information provided by the gatekeeper during the study will be anonymised and remain confidential.

4. I agree to take part in the above study (providing ETP data and postal access to parents).

Name of Participant                      Date    Signature

Name of Researcher                      Date    Signature

**Contact details of researcher:**

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**LIVERPOOL JOHN MOORES UNIVERSITY**  
**PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT LETTER**  
**& INFORMATION SHEET**



**Organisational Stakeholders - Study Two**

**Talent Identification and Development in Irish Football: an examination of  
organisational structure and practice**

Dear \_\_\_\_\_

My name is Laura Finnegan and I am currently researching the experiences of young elite Irish soccer players as part of my PhD studies. As part of my study I am hoping to conduct interviews with the main stakeholders involved in the development of young Irish soccer players. As a stakeholder in an organisation tasked with this development, I believe that you fall into this category and consequently would like to offer you the opportunity to participate in my study. Before you decide, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it involves. Please take some time to read the following information. Should you require any further information then please do not hesitate to ask. Please take adequate time to decide if you want to participate or not.

**1. What is the purpose of the study?**

The aim of this study is to gain a greater understanding of the talent development systems within Irish football. The study aims to investigate the appropriateness of these systems in relation to athletic, psycho-social, cultural and environmental issues unique to an Irish youth footballer and to assess if the current structures support this development.

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

No. It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do you will be given this information sheet and asked to sign a consent form. You are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason. A decision to withdraw will not affect your rights/any future treatment/service you receive.

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

Should you agree to participate then you will be asked to complete an interview. This interview will be informal in nature and should last approximately one hour. This interview will be recorded but all information given will be completely anonymous.

## **4. Are there any risks / benefits involved?**

There is the potential for very slight emotional discomfort in the interviews (e.g. talking about your organisations role in the development of footballers and potentially the failings of that organisation in the process); however participation is voluntary meaning you may withdraw at any time. The results of the study may be published in the public domain but your identity will be replaced by a false name. The purpose of gaining such insights is to improve the conditions and experiences of future footballers.

## **5. Will my taking part in the study be kept confidential?**

All information offered by the participant will be strictly confidential. Interviews will be recorded. Once recorded, interviews will be transcribed and stored on a password protected laptop. Following transcription, interviews will be deleted. Responses are anonymous and pseudonyms will be used to protect your identity.

### **Contact details of researcher:**

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*Waterford Institute of Technology*

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**LIVERPOOL JOHN MOORES UNIVERSITY**

**CONSENT FORM**



**Organisational Stakeholders - Study Two**

**Talent Identification and Development in Irish Football: an examination of organisational structure and practice**

**Laura Finnegan**

**School of Sport and Exercise**

**Liverpool John Moores University**

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information provided for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason and that this will not affect my legal rights.

3. I understand that any personal information collected during the study will be anonymised and remain confidential.

4. I agree to take part in the above study.

5. I understand that the interview will be audio / video recorded and I am happy to proceed.

6. I understand that parts of our conversation may be used verbatim in future publications or presentations but that such quotes will be anonymous.



Name of Participant                      Date    Signature

Name of Researcher                      Date    Signature

**Contact details of researcher:**

Laura Finnegan  
*Dept. Health, Sport & Exercise Science*  
*Waterford Institute of Technology*  
*051-845686/ lfinnegan@wit.ie*

**Research supervisor:**

David Richardson  
*School of Sport and Exercise Sciences*  
*Liverpool John Moores University*  
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*+44 (0)151 904 6285*

**LIVERPOOL JOHN MOORES UNIVERSITY**  
**PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT LETTER**  
**& INFORMATION SHEET**



**Parents / Carers u16 footballers - Study 3**

**Talent Identification and Development in Irish Football: an examination of organisational structure and practice**

Dear \_\_\_\_\_

My name is Laura Finnegan and I am currently researching the experiences of young elite Irish soccer players as part of my PhD studies. As part of my study I am hoping to conduct interviews with the main stakeholders involved in the development of young Irish soccer players. As a player in the Emerging Talent Programme and Ireland u15 squad, I believe that your child/ child in your care, falls into this category and consequently would like to offer him the opportunity to participate in my study. Before you decide, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it involves. Please take some time to read the following information. Should you require any further information then please do not hesitate to ask. Please take adequate time to decide if you want to participate or not.

**1. What is the purpose of the study?**

The aim of this study is to gain a greater understanding of the talent development systems within Irish football. The study aims to investigate the appropriateness of these systems in relation to athletic, psycho-social, cultural and environmental issues unique to an Irish youth footballer and to assess if the current structures support this development.

## **2. Does your child/child in your care have to take part?**

No. It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do you will be given this information sheet and asked to sign a consent form. The child is still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason. A decision to withdraw will not affect your or your child's rights/any future treatment/service you receive.

## **3. What will happen to my child if he takes part?**

Should you and your child agree to participate then your child will be asked to complete a number of interviews (one per year for a period of 4 years), an initial timeline depicting their sporting history and an end of year questionnaire for 4 years). These interviews will be informal in nature and should last approximately one hour. This interview will be recorded but all information given will be completely anonymous.

## **4. Are there any risks / benefits involved?**

There is the potential for slight emotional discomfort in the interview (e.g. the youth footballer talking about previous injury, burnout, being dropped from squads); however, participation is voluntary meaning he may withdraw at any time. The results of the study may be published in the public domain, but his identity will be replaced by a false name. Participation in this study will have no impact on his selection to future development pathway initiated by the FAI or on future underage international squads.

## **5. Will his taking part in the study be kept confidential?**

All information offered by the participant will be strictly confidential. Interviews will be recorded. Once recorded, interviews will be transcribed and stored on a password protected laptop. Following transcription, interviews will be deleted. Responses are anonymous and pseudonyms will be used to protect your identity.

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**LIVERPOOL JOHN MOORES UNIVERSITY**

**ASSENT / CONSENT FORM**



**Carers and u16 Footballers - Study 3**

**Talent Identification and Development in Irish Football: an examination of organisational structure and practice**

**Laura Finnegan**

**School of Sport and Exercise**

**Liverpool John Moores University**

Youth footballer (or if unable, parent/guardian on their behalf) to circle all they agree with:

Have you read (or had read to you) information about this project? Yes/No

Has somebody else explained this project to you? Yes/No

Do you understand what this project is about? Yes/No

Have you asked all the questions you want? Yes/No

Have you had your questions answered in a way you understand? Yes/No

Do you understand it's OK to stop taking part at any time? Yes/No

Are you happy to take part? Yes/No

If **any** answers are 'no' or if you **don't** want to take part, don't sign your name!

If you **do** want to take part, you can write your name below

Your name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Your parent or guardian must write their name here if they are happy for you to do the project.

Print Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Sign: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

The researcher who explained this project to you needs to sign too.

Print Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Sign: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Contact details of researcher:**

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**Timeline questionnaire:**

1. What age did you start playing football with a club?

2. Chart all of the teams that you've played for/play for:

*Include all age-groups, county representative squads, school teams, international squads etc.*

E.g.

<b>Club</b>	<b>Main coach</b>	<b>Age-group / section</b>	<b>Dates of playing</b>	<b>Hours a week training</b>	<b>Hours a week playing</b>

3. What was the highest level of representation that you've achieved and when it happened?

*E.g. County / National*

4. What other sports do you/have you played?

*Include all age-groups, school teams etc.*

*E.g.*

<b>Club</b>	<b>Main coach</b>	<b>Age-group / section</b>	<b>Dates of playing</b>	<b>Hours a week training</b>	<b>Hours a week playing</b>

5. What was your favourite football team to play with out of the list above and why?

6. What is your next goal as a football player?

7. Outline any key milestones you've had (i.e. give estimated dates and descriptions)

- a. Either in your football career directly i.e. competitions won, team promotions
- b. External events that have shaped your football playing, interest etc
- c. People that have had a significant influence in your football playing

## **Interview guide – Study 3**

### **Longitudinal participants**

**Study 3:** To examine the dominant challenges of young Irish footballers following their entry on, and subsequent progress through, the Emerging Talent Programme (ETP). N=5 (Fourteen year old players that are beginning their first year on the ETP). One interview will be conducted each year with the participants, thus the structure of the interview will vary slightly (i.e. prospective/ retrospective view points). Participants are also asked to complete an end-of-year review questionnaire each December/January.

#### *Introduction:*

Explain the aim of the study

#### *Case study details:*

Explore the player's football background and their involvement in football to date (using their visual timeline produced by the researcher via Microsoft Excel, from the timeline questionnaire submitted previously).

Dominant personnel in their career to date

Support experienced within the talent development pathway (ETP)

Characteristics/skills that a player needs at each phase

Dominant transitions experienced thus far

Experiences, support received and progression/regression through those transitions

Experiences with migration pathways

Environmental, cultural, psych-social challenges faced at various stages

Motivations for a career in football

Season goals

Interactions with other stakeholders (e.g. FAI/ SFAI personnel)

Functions of specific components of the environment and about the relationships between those components, at the micro- and macro-levels

*Conclusion:*

Clarification of key issues

Invite participant to offer any topics that have not been discussed already

Thank participant

## Longitudinal study end of year review

December 20xx

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Hi,

Just a quick hello to wrap up another year! As usual you can return this to me in the stamped addressed envelope or reply via email.

Kind regards,

Laura

*Questions:*

1. Are you still playing soccer? Yes No For what team:
  
2. If not, why did you stop playing?
  
3. Who did you play for this year 2016? (Include ALL teams e.g. include club, age groups, schools, dev squads, international, other sports also)
  - a. Also include how many hours roughly a week you trained
  
4. If playing, who had the biggest influence on your football this year? What makes you say this person?

5. If playing, do you feel your football workload has made you miss out on anything?  
(e.g. school work, time with friends)

6. If playing, do you feel that you have improved as a footballer over the past year?

a. If so, in what areas?

b. Why do you think you have improved?

7. What was the highlight of your sporting year? Why?

8. List your (sporting and personal) goals for 2017?

7. Rate your general level of physical exertion/stress over the past year (i.e. how physically hard you felt you've worked over the past year, if your body felt tired). Circle 1 if it was light, 10 if the workload was really tough.

1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 – 6 – 7 – 8 – 9 – 10

8. Rate your general level of mental exertion/stress over the past year (i.e. how mentally hard has the past year been). Circle 1 if it was light, circle 10 if you felt mentally burnt out by constant playing/training.

1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 – 6 – 7 – 8 – 9 – 10

9. Rate your general level of fun over the past year. Circle 1 if you've found your overall football experience to be not fun at all, circle 10 if it was very enjoyable).

1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 – 6 – 7 – 8 – 9 – 10

9. Any further comments? (anything else that you feel is important to say)

Thanks, I'll chat to you later in the year, take care,

Laura