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The Sport Psychology Canvas: Designing, adapting, and documenting Sport Psychology provisions in men's football academies in England

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we aim to: (1) identify common contextual forces influencing sport psychology practice in men's football academies in England, (2) classify common sport psychology departments, and (3) provide a research-informed tool for designing, adapting, and documenting sport psychology provisions called *The Sport Psychology Canvas*. The study involved 16 sport psychologists working in men's football academies in England, comprising six women and ten men. Data collection consisted of three stages: two individual interviews with each participant and one round of two focus groups with ten participants split evenly in each group. Following each stage, data were analyzed through open coding, followed by grouping codes into concepts. The findings informed the development of the second interview and focus group guides. The findings are presented in three sections. The first section discusses two key forces shaping provisions, (i) Uncertainty for Players and Staff: How players, parents/carers, and staff navigate existential needs, leading to significant stress and anxiety, (ii) Pervasive Unrealistic Expectations: The impact of unrealistic expectations, often shaped by notions of objectivity and ideals from other sport sciences. Second, we offer an overview of common organizational structures in sport psychology departments, highlighting their strengths and limitations. Last, we introduce *The Sport Psychology Canvas*, a flexible template for designing, adapting, and documenting sport psychology programmes. This Canvas can guide practitioners or department heads in delivering high-quality provisions tailored to their specific context.

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Introduction

The introduction of psychology requirements in the 2011 Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP) has significantly increased applied and research interest in psychology provisions in men's football academies (Premier League, 2011). Since then, many professional football clubs have shifted from employing external sport psychology consultants to

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practitioners embedded within their organization (Champ et al., 2020; Charnock, 2021). To capture this change, research has focused on practitioner development (Champ et al., 2021; Fogaça et al., 2024), how to develop a practice philosophy (Feddersen, Champ, et al., 2023), and delivering sport psychology in football (Champ et al., 2020; Charnock, 2021; Dean et al., 2022). In addition to the shifting landscape of psychology in football, sport and exercise psychologist has become a protected title in the United Kingdom, regulated by the Health & Care Professions Council (HCPC, 2023). Consequently, there is a significant need to understand how sport psychology support structures are implemented, delivered, and evaluated in football (and all elite sport contexts).

Existing research has suggested that the shift from external sport psychology consultants to embedded practitioners has been turbulent and difficult, partly attributed to a lack of understanding of what constitutes high-level psychology provision and negative prejudice toward the discipline (Champ et al., 2020; Dean et al., 2022; Feddersen et al., 2022; Gilmore et al., 2018). To this end, research by Wood et al. (2017) and McGlinchey et al. (2022) highlights that persistent negative prejudices toward sport psychology limit academies ability to meet the demands of boys and young men in football, who are at significant risk of experiencing mental health challenges, and a pervasive stigma often leading to limited help-seeking. Further, misconceptions or misunderstandings can lead to siloing and unclear expectations of the practitioner, resulting in limited efficacy of psychological provisions (Champ et al., 2020; Charnock, 2021; Otte et al., 2022; Rothwell et al., 2020). Indeed, recent studies argue that the efficacy of sports science support, in general, can be limited because it often happens in silos and that “difficulties associated with integrating subdiscipline specialists have become apparent” (Otte et al., 2022, p. 2; Rothwell et al., 2020). However, it remains unclear how policies, regulations, and rationales in the context lead to siloing and potential shortcomings in service delivery.

To rectify issues that developed during the shift from external to embedded psychology provisions, we believe it is critical to zoom out and look at how sport psychology is structured and organized in the academy support system. Otte et al. (2022) argue that doing so necessitates considering the influence of larger social, cultural, and historical forces in football. This argument has been supported in recent research on interdisciplinary sport science support in football, which also notes that service delivery may be influenced (Otte et al., 2022; Raya-Castellano & Uriondo., 2015; Rothwell et al., 2020). To this end, Relvas et al. (2010) noted that there has been a tendency toward homogenization of regulations, policies, and football club structures. The drawback of homogenization is that it may strengthen siloing and further limit the successful integration of sport psychology and other support disciplines (Otte et al., 2022; Rothwell et al., 2020). Another potential consequence of homogenization is that common types of sport psychology departments could arise. Today, the likelihood of further homogenization and conformity remains high due to significant efforts focused on routinized policies and regulations such as the EPPP (see Premier League, 2011), youth development rules (Premier League, 2019b), and the recurrent evaluation of academies based on standardized review protocols (Premier League, 2019a). Understanding some of the important forces leading to current structures can likely help understand common types of sport

psychology departments, the possibilities and limitations associated with these, and be a starting point for designing better service provisions.

Consequently, this paper aims to (1) identify common contextual forces influencing sport psychology practice in men's football academies in England, (2) classify common sport psychology departments, and (3) provide a research-informed tool for designing, adapting, and documenting sport psychology provisions. Fulfilling this purpose should provide valuable guidance to football academies regarding how they structure psychology provisions for players and staff.

Methods

We provide a *taxonomy* in this paper to outline key features of an organizational system (Bailey, 1994; Morris et al., 2021). Bailey (1994) posits that a taxonomy can be used to identify common structures and form a starting point for organizational decision-making. In the case of sport psychology, a taxonomy can provide some structure for a discipline that is notably subjective and ill-understood (in footballing contexts, see McGinty-Minister et al., 2023). It could also be used as a starting point for exploring limitations and possibilities for practitioners to strengthen support (a similar argument was made as per dual career support in Morris et al., 2021). Our work was shaped by the idea that common categories are first constructed in a social context; then internalized and used by individuals. In adopting a social constructivist approach, we emphasize the importance of the culture and context shaping our findings (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Bringing this into our research meant probing our participants' intersubjectivity. We chose to do so by engaging with our participants in one-to-one conversations and groups. First, we carried out two individual interviews with participants to glean insights into the ways sport psychologists see their practice as historically and culturally specific. Later we brought them together in focus groups to discuss their common and contrasting assumptions and ideas. We also compared their views with regulations, policies, and practice guidelines throughout the entire process by using reflective questions and discussing the ways organizations (i.e., dominant groups) influenced their work. The sections below unpack the process further.

Participants

We conducted a purposive sampling of 16 psychologists for this study. All were employed or recently employed (i.e., within the previous 3 months) as sport psychologists in men's football academies in England: ten Category 1, three Category 2, and three Category 3 sport psychologists (for an overview of academy classification, see Table 1). It should be noted that current EPPP guidelines (see English Football League, 2019) require Category 1 academies to employ one full-time equivalent psychologist (e.g., licensed or supervised by a psychologist accredited with the HCPC). Yet, there are no requirements for clubs that are designated as Category 2 or lower.

Six of the participants were women, and ten were men. Their average experience practising sport psychology ranged from 1.5 years to more than 20 years (average 7.2 years) and they had been in their current post between 6 months and 10 years (average 3 years). For additional information, see Table 2 in Feddersen et al. 2022, p. 901.

Table 1. Academy classification definition performance pathway.

Category	Description	Age-group
Category 1	This is the highest classification awarded to an Academy. It is an elite environment where Academy Players are provided with additional access to coaching and the potential of full time education from U12. Category 1 Academies can recruit nationally from U14 provided the Academy Player is guaranteed access to a full time education programme.	U9 to U21
Category 2	This is an elite development environment where Academy Players are typically recruited locally but gain access to additional coaching opportunities and education support.	U9 to U21
Category 3	This is a development environment where Academy Players are provided with professional coaching and development opportunities.	U9 to U21
Category 4	Academies focus on their coaching and educational support for Academy Players in the Professional Development Phase	U17 to U21

We aimed to include both men and women working in the same role based on the recommendations of Champ et al. (2021) regarding the importance of including female voices in a historically male sector. Also, including participants of different ages and career stages helped provide insights into the nuances of the profession.

Data collection and analysis

Data collection and analysis was an iterative process consisting of six phases. All data was collected using online meeting software and transcribed verbatim. (1) The first author carried out sixteen individual interviews using a semi-structured guide¹ (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). Here, he asked about the organization of sport psychology within the participants' club (how is sport psychology structured where you work?) and the perceived possibilities and limitations. The first author took notes during the interviews, which functioned as first insights into important topics for the participants. Further, transcription of the interviews also included looking for keywords or phrases often used by the participants.

(2) The analysis during this phase started from the initial notes and keywords/phrases. The first author began an open coding process of the first round of interviews by attaching tags to segments of the transcriptions (examples of tags: *process curriculum*, *hidden curriculum*, or *educational curriculum*). All tags were progressively grouped into concepts signaling commonalities (example of concept: curriculum). Additionally, we began developing insights into the fit between delivery and personal philosophy; arguments for working at the individual, group, or system level; and the influence of regulatory organizations (e.g., the Premier League). These themes also shaped the second semi-structured interview guide.

(3) During the second interview, the participants were invited to reflect on findings from the first analysis and discuss how they matched their experiences. Some of the probes were also framed as questions about the future (e.g., How would you ensure psychology provisions address both performance enhancement and mental health?), which they were asked to challenge and explore how common rationales develop. Again, the first author took notes to provide insights into noticeable agreements or disagreements.

(4) Returning to the analysis entailed going back to the raw data from the first interviews and comparing the initial coding to the new data. During discussion in the research team, we agreed that some of the data could be published to provide insights

into the influence of surveillance (Feddersen et al., 2022) and how the participants evaluated their working context and chose a professional practice framework (Feddersen et al., 2023). However, we also agreed that the data and analysis of implementing and carrying out psychology provisions needed additional discussions. Hence, we developed a focus group guide to interrogate themes focusing on the organization of sport psychology, mental health of players and staff, and practitioner development (see Kitzinger, 1995). We agreed that gathering data using a focus group discussion helped draw attention to agreements and dissent related to preferred sport psychology structures.

(5) Two focus groups with ten of the participants (five in each focus group; average duration 93 minutes), were carried out by the first author in the spring of 2022. Scheduling the focus groups also entailed revisiting consent. In this case to make available their identity to the rest of the focus group. As such, the five participants in each group only knew the identity of their group. As evident from the focus group guide, we spent significant time discussing preliminary findings, how to organize psychology provisions including area of responsibility, which groups to target (e.g., players, staff, parents/carers), and fit in an interdisciplinary group.

(6) Returning to coding for a third time aimed specifically at highlighting differences to better understand contextual best practices. In this phase, we also focused on interpreting how our findings were shaped by larger contextual forces. Specifically, we looked at the way the acceleration of society (Rosa, 2010), organizational structures in football (Otte et al., 2022; Relvas et al., 2010), and psychology for boys and young men influenced psychology provisions (American Psychological Association [APA], Boys and Men Guidelines Group, 2018). Finalizing the taxonomy entailed producing a classification system of the essential components. It is unlikely that we cover all facets of sport psychology departments in the findings since new challenges are constantly emerging and taxonomies are usually broad in nature (Bailey, 1994). For this reason, contextual constraints will influence how it can and is applied in different clubs. In finalizing the taxonomy, we also discuss the findings in relation to relevant literature, which provides further nuances to our interpretations.

We show our findings in three sections. First, we provide insights into the working conditions for sport psychologists, which will help provide a backdrop to interpret the common types of sport psychology departments. Second, we present the common organization of sport psychologists within boys and young men's football academies. This can be used for classification (e.g., for researchers identifying or describing a department). Last, we outline a decision-making model, The Sport Psychology Canvas, which can be used for setting up a new sport psychology department or reviewing an existing one. The overview and the Sport Psychology Canvas are intended to provide research-based insights to practitioners, academy managers, or department heads in their design and documentation of psychology provisions. Before submitting this paper for review, the findings were presented and discussed among the authors, two academy sport psychologists (one of whom was not in the original sample), and two leading representatives from the Premier League. After these discussions, we went back to use their comments to interrogate and clarify our findings before submitting the paper. The main outcome of this meeting was developing a new layout for the Sport Psychology Canvas. Specifically going from a table with questions to the current overview.

Many taxonomies rely on the researchers' analysis and summaries of concepts in the article text, which means that few present raw data, e.g., in the form of quotes (see Morris et al., 2021). Nonetheless, we aim to enhance transparency into the analysis process by providing supplementary material with verbatim quotes related to themes and concept presented below. Additional data is not available due to participant consent. Please, see the end of the manuscript for further discussion on research rigor.

Working conditions for sport psychologists in English Football clubs

The sections below outline two important forces shaping the organization of sport psychology: (i) uncertainty for players and staff, and (ii) pervasive unrealistic expectations. These provide a backdrop for discussing the strengths and limitations of the different sport psychology departments.

Uncertainty for players and staff

A football academy is an ecological niche, which can be described as an extreme example of an accelerated organization in an already accelerated society (*cf.* Rosa, 2010). Its organization and working practices are fundamentally intended to keep up with and accelerate the development of young football talent (e.g., progression through development phases and into senior football). Everyone is expected to work faster and develop faster. This is evidenced by the Premier League's standards for club reviews (*cf.*, Premier League, 2019a), which emphasizes organizational agility, change, and managing for the future. This puts relentless pressure on those working as staff in football academies, the players, and their parents or carers. In the 2023–2024 football season alone, several high-profile first-team managers resigned from their roles citing relentless workplace pressure/stress to continually be the best as contributing factors. For staff at the academy level, employment is equally competitive, and many must work for free, or in low-paid jobs for several years. Altogether, these findings align with a wider historical context that mimics other modern organizations, where one seemingly urgent target follows the next, jobs become precarious, and the lines between work and private life are blurred (see Gilmore et al., 2018; Hickey & Roderick, 2023). We interpret these characteristics as an atmosphere of urgency and uncertainty.

Urgency provides employees and players with a mood to meet needs, which can be interpreted as existential to the individual. It cannot be readily assumed that people in football environments will respond to stressors in a known way. This is in line with findings from McGlinchey et al. (2022), who described the emotional and psychological distress related to being released from an academy (i.e., marked by sadness, pain, and anger). Uncertainty is evident in the many short-term contracts, changes in managerial staff signaling change, and changing patterns in the organization of highly skilled knowledge workers (i.e., re-organization of departments).

To this end, technological acceleration has enabled the collection and processing of enormous amounts of data (e.g., running distance, speeds, movement patterns, fat percentage). The general trend of this has led to widespread rationales of accepted surveillance seemingly intended to control the rate of development, or at least create the

assumption that it can be (Feddersen et al., 2022). The influence of technological acceleration is that it also eliminates the distinction between private and professional life. Staff and players are often expected to be always available through apps or messages. The consequences are that everyone involved with football academies is forced to provide “quick wins/fixes,” which creates patterns of moment-to-moment solutions rather than addressing underlying challenges (see Feddersen, McDougall, et al., 2023, p. 4; Gilmore et al., 2018, p. 432). This has the characteristics of constantly needing to prove one’s dedication, and yet, being fully deserving of resources (e.g., playing time, better contracts) is never earned in full and remains forever conditional in such organizations. Against this backdrop, we advise that the common characteristics presented in Table 2 are loosely organized since urgencies and uncertainty commonly disrupt time schedules or frequently provoke changes to department structures. In such a (hyper-)accelerated context, staff and players are likely evaluated by the speed with which they respond to adversity in desired ways (Rosa, 2010).

Pervasive unrealistic expectations

Common for all models are pervasive unrealistic expectations of psychology provisions. As noted in the introduction, modern academies are multidisciplinary organizations in which different practitioner groups rely on distinctive (objective and measurable) markers of development. In contrast, psychologists often rely on verbal feedback from players and staff to prove the effectiveness of service delivery. Such service delivery often encompasses over 150 players and associated parents/guardians, and circa 50 support staff. The breadth of this role is generally much greater than many other practitioners within football academies. For example, coaches tend to work with one or two age groups only.

Due to uncertainty and urgency (and/or philosophical approach), some practitioners feel compelled to quantify psychological states or competencies (e.g., competitiveness, positive attitude, desire, coachability, or ability to limit personal life’s influence). This tendency is also encouraged by the Premier League Audit Standards calling for all departments to provide “objective markers” (Premier League, 2019a, pp. 59 and 62). In trying to meet expectations and standards requirements, we found that some clubs ask players or parents to provide monthly, weekly, or even daily self-evaluations (e.g., via apps or questionnaires) on chosen parameters. However, players either begin to answer randomly or quickly learn what the club wants to hear and, therefore, attempt to game the system. The consequence of this might be that players or staff who are struggling are overlooked.

The intensification of tasks and duties (i.e., urgencies) and increased oversight (e.g., reviews and calls for standardisation) means that professional autonomy is declining for sport psychologists (for similar findings related to coaches, see O’Gorman et al., 2021). Altogether, staff are pushed to enact top-down policies to be ready for inspection and scrutiny at the peril of providing culturally bespoke and person-centred interventions.

Another way to stretch toward unrealistic expectations is in profiling where some end up using performance profiling (e.g., Jones, 1993) or pseudo-scientific personality testing. As an example, one participant took us through their psychological performance profiling approach, which entailed extensive self-evaluation by each player, evaluation on the same markers by staff, and later discussing the overlap and discrepancies among

staff and with the player. The whole process took a year to complete. Altogether, there was little evidence that profiling was acted on in any of the clubs involved. In addition, very few of our participants used psychometrics and often claimed it was in opposition to the practitioner philosophy. Yet, it is also likely that it is due to limited training in using such tools and competencies in the club (e.g., a clinical psychologist or psychiatrist) for following up with clinical interviews to evaluate potential cases. Profiling is a required practice in Category 1 academies (see Premier League, 2019b, p. 63), and yet, the guidelines and limited understanding of the utility of tests or psychometrics can make this wasted resources (i.e., time and money).

All participants also described how most perceptions of sport psychology were somewhat negative and knowledge among their colleagues in their academies was generally limited. Consequently, players or staff were often advised to go see the psychologist if they experienced significant stress or did not respond to adversity in the desired ways. Seeking or being referred to psychological support can be positive. However, we interpret it as limited decoding capacity among other staff groups, which reduces their ability to deal with distressed players. Accordingly, removing a distressed person by sending them to the psychologist can create a parallel environment that offers empathy and time to work on the distressed person's coping skills. Nevertheless, it rarely deals with the contextual issues leading to distress in the first place. This was especially the case in small teams or academies with a consultant model, and yet, similar stories were shared by practitioners in larger psychology teams.

Taxonomy of sport psychology teams

In this section, we present our empirically developed overview of the way sport psychology provisions are commonly organized (see Table 2). All common models come with opportunities and challenges, which are unique to each club, however, the most common characteristics of different sport psychology models are outlined below.

Findings highlighted that there was no common department within which sport psychology was positioned. For example, some were grouped with coaching staff, others with medical and rehabilitation staff, and one within the loans department (albeit with colleagues in other departments). The inconsistencies in positioning might be attributed to sport psychology still being the least understood discipline of performance support, and the potential scope of the sport psychologist's role to work across multiple departments/areas (Champ et al., 2021; Feddersen et al., 2022). More specifically, whilst some sport psychologists report working solely with players, others operate at an organizational level working across multiple stakeholder groups (and departments) including parents, staff and executive directors/board members. The varied roles occupied by sport psychologists create opportunities for ambiguity regarding where they may best "fit" and provide nuance to previous research that suggested a tendency toward organizational homogeneity (Relvas et al., 2010). Accordingly, there may be homogeneity at the macro level, albeit with more fluidity within and among departments. Hence, how clubs decide to organize their sport psychology provisions is mainly due to the organizational memory, perceptions of sport psychology, and organizational goals.

Table 2. Taxonomy of sport psychology provisions.

Sport Psychology Department	Description	Opportunities	Challenges
External Consultant Model (1 practitioner)	- One practitioner in a part-time role, often less than 0.5 full-time equivalent. - Common in Category 2 and below. - Commonly a blank canvas role where a novice practitioner must develop provisions from the ground up - Often a focus on delivery of ad hoc workshops and individual support for a small number of players	- Introducing psychology provisions to clubs looking to advance awareness. - Coming in and out can maintain an eye for taken-for-granted practices which are counterproductive - Opportunity to design bespoke provisions	- Significant time scarcity - Often unrealistic expectations from staff regarding potential impact. - Reactive provisions - Isolation and limited support for practitioners - Little opportunity for handover to new sport psychologists
Small department (1-2 practitioner)	- One or two practitioners sharing 1-1.5 full-time equivalent role. - Most prevalent in Category 1 academies as it fulfills EPPP requirements - Commonly a blank canvas role or no handover from previous sport psychologist. Hence, novice practitioners must develop provisions from the ground up	- Coming in and out can maintain an eye for taken-for-granted practices which are counterproductive - Opportunity to design bespoke provisions	- Significant time scarcity - Often unrealistic expectations from staff regarding potential impact - Reactive provisions - Isolation and limited support for practitioners - Little opportunity for handover to new sport psychologists
Medium department (2-3 practitioners)	- Two or three practitioners sharing 1.5-3 full-time roles - Provisions are purposefully developed for age groups, often with one practitioner per age group working across players, coaches, and parents (mainly on Foundation and Youth Development Phases)	- Peer support for practitioners. - Ability to review cases and check biases in interventions. - Ability to align resources and work with specific groups (e.g., development phases)	- Some time scarcity - Confidentiality issues in the psychology team - Showing impact matching investment
Comprehensive Psychology Provisions - Large department (4+ practitioners)	- More than four practitioners - Continuity in provisions by purposefully developing an age-appropriate programme, often with one practitioner assigned to each phase and one psychologist overseeing all provisions. - Provisions cover both performance psychology and mental health	- Professional and personal support for practitioners. - Inclusion of clinical psychologist to oversee mental health and provide professional mentoring. Continuity in psychology provisions. High-level focus on both performance and mental health.	- Confidentiality issues in the psychology team - Collaboration in a large team and confidentiality issues. Significant monetary investment from clubs. - Showing impact matching investment

Possibilities and limitations of the *External Consultant Model* and *Small Department*

Common for the *External Consultant Model* and the *Small Department* is that both work as ways to introduce sport psychology into football academies or to meet classification requirements. For Category 2 or 3 clubs, these models demonstrate a commitment to progressing within the Premier League's category system, which offers increased funding and

resources. Our participants noted that when extra resources were acquired (e.g., by advancing to higher category or investment), other departments tended to be prioritized over psychology. Consequently, Category 1 academies often maintained small psychology departments that met minimum requirements despite receiving the most financial support.

The consequences of the consultant model or a small team are a high turnover of staff and limited consistency in service provision during the transition from previous to current sport psychologist. For example, participants spoke about not having access to the work of their predecessor and as such entering the environment with a blank canvas for service delivery (see Table 2). Our findings highlight that most individuals operating in these roles are young (under the age of 35), male, and inexperienced (i.e., still in training). To this end, presenting them with a blank canvas and expecting them to design a sport psychology support system/program is an unrealistic expectation.

These constraints along with others (e.g., the time-consuming building of new working alliances) mean that provisions might slow down, pause, or take a significant dip in quality. Altogether, the small team was the most common model in our data, and yet, several drawbacks are negatively affecting the quality of provisions and care for vulnerable players and staff.

Possibilities and limitations of *Medium* and *Comprehensive* sport psychology departments

Clubs investing more resources in sport psychology often do so to cover all development phases (i.e., the Foundation Phase, the Youth Development Phase, and the Professional Development Phase) and those investing the most can also provide comprehensive care for staff. *Medium* and *Comprehensive* psychology departments (see Table 2) are afforded the opportunity to create continuity in provisions and succession plans as psychologists move on and new are employed. With multiple psychologists, it gets easier to provide age and developmentally appropriate support for players and their carers/parents. They can also provide supervision for each other to advance competencies, check biases in intervention planning, and ensure provisions live up to practitioner guidelines from the HCPC. Nonetheless, larger teams may also experience confidentiality issues, where private information from a client is shared without proper consent (Feddersen et al., 2022). Further, it may also be difficult to change delivery methods if the contextual expectations or regulations change because it may lead to personal stress or defensiveness when protecting their way of doing things.

An unintended issue for clubs that are successful in integrating sport psychology with their other departments is the medicalization or psychologization of common experiences. We found that some clubs used approaches to sport psychology derived from psychiatry or clinical psychology; e.g., clinical formulation sessions, a process designed to create a shared understanding of complex psychological disorders (Bickley et al., 2016). In most cases, this added strength and robustness to collaboration among sport psychologists and helped integrate clinical support in culturally sensitive ways. Yet, we received some stories from our participants suggesting that medicalised language started to further distance psychology from being an area that coaches (and players) felt able to

talk about, and heightened stigma surrounding mental health and vulnerability (for similar findings, see McGinty-Minister et al., 2023). The consequence of this is that normal reactions to abnormal stressors can be pathologized.

The overview of common organization and the synthesis of strengths and limitations lead to the next sections in which we present a decision-making model. This model can be a starting point for practitioners coming into an academy with the intention of developing provisions from the ground up. It can also assist established practitioners or psychology teams in evaluating challenges or suggest areas for improvement.

The Sport Psychology Canvas: designing, adapting, and documenting Sport Psychology provisions

This section presents an empirically developed decision-making tool, *The Sport Psychology Canvas* (for short: The Canvas; see Figure 1).² It is a strategic template intended as a guide for relevant stakeholders when making important decisions regarding the development and integration of sport psychology departments in academy football clubs. It is intended as a flexible model, which can and should be adapted to the changing needs and context of the organization. The Canvas has guiding questions in each area, and the instructions below provide guidance based on our empirical conceptualization compared to research, and policies.

We advise that clubs with an embedded sport psychologist or a sport psychology team could use it to design provisions, update it annually or during relevant changes to the club, and to guide documentation of provisions. It is unlikely that sport psychologists in consultancy roles will have much time to use the Canvas or engage with administrative regulations (e.g., under requirements and structures). Nonetheless, it remains relevant to

The Sport Psychology Canvas

Practitioner:	Club:	Date:	Phases to Support	
Formal Requirements What are the EPP requirements for the psychologist role? How is the sport psychologist role regulated by the HCPC? Are there any areas we must deliver on and document? Resources Youth Development Rules, HCPC Standards of Proficiency	Remit: Area of Responsibility What tasks and areas of activity do we assign to psychology? What are the key relationships? (e.g., coaching, player care, sport science) How does the remit influence the areas for delivery? (e.g., to staff or players) What remit is suitable based on perceptions towards psychology and culture? In psychology teams: Do we assign practitioners to different age groups or organise them in another way? (e.g., one for staff and one for players and carers) Examples Organisational psychology through delivery to staff, group or team-based with players, one-to-one sessions with clients, performance-focused, welfare and thriving focused	Foundation What stakeholders do we target and how? Should we carry out profiling, and how? How do we adapt delivery to children and their environment? How do we provide transition support? (e.g., to the next phase or leaving the academy) How do we glean feedback from stakeholders?		
Current Organisation of Sport Psychology How and where is psychology organised? Who are the most important formal relationships (e.g., line manager)? How does psychology fit with the current scheduling? Resources Organisational charts, schedules, policies, succession plans, budgets	Psychology Practice Framework What constraints and opportunities influence practice? What are the most pressing issues for the people we work with? What are my/our core beliefs related to psychology? What theoretical frameworks do we draw on? How does my/our role influence psychology in this club? Do we have any preferred intervention strategies? Types of Practice Framework Counselling model, medical model, psychological skills training, multi-disciplinary team focused, shared/complementary team framework	Youth Development What stakeholders do we target and how? How can we carry out profiling that supports players? How do we adapt delivery to children and their environment? How do we provide transition support? (e.g., to the next phase or leaving the academy) How do we glean feedback from stakeholders?		
Planned Changes and Reorganisation Is there any planned restructuring, reorganisation, or retrenchment? Do we need to develop succession plans? Are we changing psychology provisions expanding or limiting? Resources Organisational charts, schedules, policies, succession plans, budgets		Professional Development What stakeholders do we target and how? How can we carry out profiling that supports players? How do we adapt delivery to adolescents and their environment? How do we provide transition support and aftercare? (e.g., to senior team, loan, being sold, or being released) How do we glean feedback from stakeholders?		
Knowledge and Perceptions of Sport Psychology What are the current perceptions towards sport psychology among staff? How can I/we develop key relationships to influence perceptions? How do staff currently get their information on psychology in football? What value do they see in psychology for themselves or for players? Do we need a structured psychoeducation programme to increase knowledge? Common characteristics Limited knowledge, other sport science take priority, time scarcity, stigma, masculinity and gender roles, expectation of quick fixes, and scepticism towards ideas from outside football	Organisational Memory What is the most important indicator of success, and where does it come from? How do ideas of "our right way of doing things" create resistance or support? Are there any historical ideas about the club that are particularly important to be aware of? Examples Historic blueprint for success, ideas of priorities leading to success, people with tacit relationships within and to "treatment" outside the club	Organisational Culture How do staff describe the culture in the club? What are the most salient rituals, artefacts, assumptions, or values? Are there any minority rituals, artefacts, assumptions, or values that people routinely overlook or discredit? Do different staff or age groups share similar views? What subgroups exist in the club? What power relationships influence the culture? Examples Top-down culture, self-organisation, resistance due to organisational memory, or a tendency to discredit or overlook alternative interpretations	Vision and Mission What is the overall vision for the academy? How do psychology provisions fit into this vision? How do we plan to support this vision? Are there any concrete steps we can take to do so? What do psychology provisions need to achieve the vision? (e.g., resources) Examples Advancing to a Category 1 academy, developing more players for the club's senior team, developing resilient players	

Figure 1. The Sport Psychology Canvas.

use it as an overview of the ways different forces influence a practitioner's philosophy and delivery across age-group (e.g., Organizational Memory, Culture, and Vision).

Requirements and structures

The first area is the most rigid, meaning that these features rarely change, and when they do, it takes great effort.

Formal requirements

Here, the formal requirements placed on sport psychology practice should be noted. In English football academies, these come from the Premier League, The FA, the HCPC, BASES, and the BPS. They cover regulatory policies (Premier League, 2019b), review standards (Premier League, 2019a), and codes of conduct (e.g., The British Psychological Society [BPS], 2021). Outlining necessary requirements helps ensure ethical and lawful psychology support. Some practitioners might also be interested in gleaned insights from international organizations, such as guidelines for working with boys and men (APA, 2018).

Current organisation of sport psychology

The purpose of this section is to attain insight into how sport psychology is currently organized and coordinated within the larger structures and investments of the academy and requires key stakeholders to map out the type of sport psychology provisions that already exist in the club (see Table 2), the department in which they are currently organized, and how provisions are coordinated within the current schedules.

Regarding scheduling, it is critical to outline how psychology is prioritized compared to other disciplines (e.g., strength and conditioning). More specifically, stakeholders should review personnel profiles, succession plans, the time allocated to sport psychology service delivery, policies, availability of resources, and facilities. This is important as participants in the current study highlighted that sport psychology delivery is routinely canceled or rescheduled due to a lack of facilities and perceptions that other disciplines must take priority. Moreover, choosing where to house a sport psychologist is important because placing them in the same office as coaches or other staff may create confidentiality issues. These include seeing confidential notes on clients, observing clients seeking the psychologist and making interpretations of their mental state, or making it seem like psychologists are too close to staff, which can limit help-seeking (Andersen et al., 2001; Feddersen, 2023).

We advise that it is important to focus on the current features of the academy before moving on to any planned changes.

Planned changes and reorganisation

Many of the guidelines provided by the Premier League involve managing for future change and adapting to unforeseen conditions (Premier League, 2019a, 2019b). This makes it important to consider any planned changes to the academy's organization (e.g., moving sport psychology to a new department). Some academies may want to

progress from a Category 2 to a Category 1 designation, or move between the taxonomy of sport psychology teams (see [Table 2](#), both of which have implications for sport psychology provision. Hence, this could involve developing expansion plans or succession plans for key practitioners. Both entail discussing whether to replace an outgoing practitioner (consultant or single practitioner) with one having a similar professional practice framework or to outline new emergent needs.

It is important to note that this section should focus more on concrete plans for reorganization and restructuring, while Organizational Goals should focus on the vision and mission of the academy.

Perceptions and knowledge of sport psychology

Similar to many previous studies (e.g., [Champ et al., 2020](#); [Dean et al., 2022](#); [Gilmore et al., 2018](#); [McGinty-Minister et al., 2023](#)), we found several examples of limited understanding of what represents good sport psychology and skeptical attitudes toward the integration of the discipline. The limited understanding was widespread (e.g., requests to breach confidentiality), exemplified by how sport psychology was audited (e.g., requests for objective measures). Being aware of attitudes toward sport psychology can have a profound influence on the area of responsibility and the delivery methods at each development phase. This makes it critical to map out an overview of established and absent relationships to identify opportunities and threats to service delivery within the specific context.

Organizational memory, culture, and vision

In this section, practitioners should outline larger patterns in the academy such as organizational memory, organizational culture, and vision.

Organizational memory

Organizational memory refers to a tendency to focus on salient events in the academy's past, which can serve as a blueprint for success in times of crisis ([Bjørnstad et al., 2024](#)). The most common rationales underpinning limiting sport psychology were staff being skeptical of new ideas and reluctant to change current ways of doing things (e.g., exclusion of sport psychologists from multi-disciplinary team meetings). These deeply held rationales were often linked to a limited understanding of what good sport psychology is. Examples include seemingly harmless things such as canceling sport psychology talks because other activities took priority or not scheduling time for sport psychology. Organizational memory can lead to rigidity in adaptability and, therefore, act as a form of complex resistance ([Bjørnstad et al., 2024](#)).

Organizational culture

In considering the potential impact of organizational memory, organizational culture should be viewed as a temporal concept. Culture is highly personal and how each stakeholder approaches this section is likely based on a range of personal, social, and

historical factors. Consequently, having an eye for culture entails capturing the ways organizational memory represents historical processes that lead to the point in time for filling in the Canvas. It also involves discussing how organizational memory and culture may shape the future. For example, should the academy face a crisis or adversity, there could be a tendency to revert to the most salient blueprint for success from the academy's history. Further, the way practitioners approach culture is largely based on their national context, education, or past experiences; and may use diverse perspectives on culture. For an overview of strengths and pitfalls related to different perspectives on culture see Feddersen, McDougall, et al. (2023). To this end, it is particularly important to maintain awareness of players' and staff's journeys and how this influences their interpretation of the academy's culture. Bjørnstad et al. (2024) showed that staff and players in football are likely to interpret culture differently depending on their career stage, previous experiences, and time with their current club. Altogether, we stress that focusing too intensely on meaning, rituals, values, or basic assumptions without an eye for time and relationships can be a recipe for failure.

Vision and mission

In this section, relevant stakeholders should highlight the overarching vision and mission for the football organization, and specifically the academy. Having a clear and easy-to-articulate vision and mission is imperative for optimal organizational functioning, harmony amongst staffing groups and individual role clarity (Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009). Role clarity is particularly important in roles where there are potential areas of professional overlap (e.g., between psychology and player care). Clear roles should help to alleviate challenges like ambiguity about service delivery and evaluation, as highlighted by participants in this study. This section should outline the organizational goals and detail where, how, and with what support, sport psychology can support the achievement of these objectives.

Remit: Area of Responsibility

We have placed *Remit: Area of Responsibility* and *Professional Practice Framework* at the center of the Canvas as they both influence and are influenced by the other areas. In the Canvas, *Remit* refers to the area of responsibility for sport psychology practitioners within their academy. A recent review by Tod et al. (2024) showed that effective practitioners manage their responsibilities with flexible interpersonal skills and feedback on their processes and intervention outcomes (i.e., organizational savviness). In conceptualizing this section, we compared our findings with changes to the EPPP and audit standards (Premier League, 2011, 2019a, 2019b, 2022) and research exploring sport psychology in football academies (e.g., Champ et al., 2021; Dean et al., 2022; McGinty-Minister et al., 2023; Souter et al., 2018).

When discussing our participants' responsibility in the academy, many embedded practitioners shared common stories of starting out delivering one-to-one support to players but due to a range of organizational constraints (e.g., time, facilities), they were required to shift their approach and deliver organizational support to multi-disciplinary groups. Whereas those employed in consultant roles mostly focused on players. This

demonstrates that the type of sport psychology provisions influences the area of responsibility and should be considered in planning and evaluations.

It is also important to engage with questions regarding which phases to support and how. What does a focus on individual support provide? What does an organizational approach enable? Which departments do we collaborate with most closely, and how does that influence our areas of responsibility (e.g., player care or coaching)? Answering these questions is linked to attitudes toward sport psychology in the academy. For example, it is not always suitable to deliver organizational sport psychology to staff if there is significant adversity in this group. In this case, practitioners must find ways to introduce sport psychology in other contextually suitable ways (Champ et al., 2020; Charnock, 2021).

For almost all participants, providing contextually suitable provisions meant starting by addressing the performance question to create buy-in from players and staff. This helped them develop working alliances and demonstrate their value to the organization. Enhancing delivery is, therefore, likely a gradual process of fitting provisions to social, cultural, and contextual norms. Over time, our participants gradually began working on a wide range of psychological challenges (e.g., goal setting, focus control, performance anxiety, eating disorders, and depressive symptoms). Being aware of organization, stereotypes, and biases toward psychology can help sport psychologists design appropriate provisions. In medium and large teams, understanding one's area of responsibility was generally linked to providing comprehensive support and implementing personalized well-being strategies for players and staff.

Professional practice framework

Developing the professional practice framework is central to providing appropriate psychological support. This process likely involves addressing questions about the area of responsibility, the organization's history and culture, and its long-term goals. Sport psychologists working in football often need a flexible framework due to an unpredictable daily schedule, frequently changing self-interests, micropolitics, and unclear expectations (e.g., see Champ et al., 2021; Dean et al., 2022; Gilmore et al., 2018; Nesti, 2010). However, it should go without saying that practice should adhere to HCPC standards for conduct in sport psychology. It also remains crucial for practitioners to consider the wider implications of their intervention strategies. This is especially important when adopting an eclectic approach, to avoid uncritical cherry-picking.

A previous academic article from this study emphasized how sport psychologists continuously adapt their personal philosophy and preferred theoretical backdrop to their working context (Feddersen et al., 2023). Building on this, we suggest considering how practitioner's core beliefs and preferred theoretical approach affect their delivery methods. To assist users of the Canvas, we point to guidance for individual practitioners (Poczwadowski et al., 2004), sport psychology teams (Diment et al., 2020), and aligning psychological support with multidisciplinary teams (Bickley et al., 2016; Otte et al., 2022; Raya-Castellano & Uriondo, 2015). Altogether, this research can help outline the professional practice framework of the current psychologist(s) or identify preferences for a future practitioner. This can be a starting point for discussing the academy's

preferred delivery methods for various stakeholders, phases, and formats (e.g., one-to-one, group, team).

Phases to support

In the Canvas, we have divided these considerations into the three phases: the Foundation, the Youth Development, and the Professional Development Phase. This section of the Canvas is the most flexible because provisions can change ad hoc and often require adaptability from everyone involved. Therefore, it is necessary to align these features flexibly with the rest of the academy's characteristics.

We have added a shaded area on the right with arrows pointing from one phase to the next. This shaded area and the arrows highlight the importance of coherence in provisions between phases and during the transition from one phase to another (or out of the football academy). Discussing coherence through the phases should take into consideration developmental psychology and psychology for young boys. The categories below should be considered for each phase when filling in the Canvas.

Stakeholders receiving psychology provisions

The stakeholders that psychologists work with depend on the psychologist's areas of responsibility and professional practice framework. However, available resources (e.g., dedicated time, number of practitioners), attitudes toward sport psychology (e.g., it should focus on the players), and the EPPP requirements are also important influencing factors. Tod et al. (2024) noted that working across stakeholder groups requires humility and sensitivity to stakeholders' identity markers, such as age, race, ethnicity, language, socio-economic background, and religion. Our findings did not evidence that one approach worked better than another, rather the most important thing is to adapt delivery to stakeholder expectations and contextual factors. Additionally, successful provision might include psychoeducation, where practitioners gradually introduce concepts and build collaborative alliances. The most relevant stakeholders could be players, coaching staff, or parents/carers. However, participants noted that physiotherapists are often crucial due to their holistic training and prioritized time with players.

Delivery methods

Our participants, along with several previous studies (e.g., Champ et al., 2020; Charnock, 2021; Gilmore et al., 2018), highlighted the volatile and unpredictable nature of their environment. Therefore, a practitioner's success is likely tied to their ability to adapt (Tod et al., 2024). Andersen et al. (2001) noted that the spontaneous nature of sports environments requires flexible delivery methods. This remains true today, as our participants explained that conversations can arise unexpectedly on the field, during travel, in hallways, or through phone calls and texts at any time. To take back some control, early-career practitioners may prefer a classroom-based approach due to their educational background, or they may favor one-to-one sessions lasting about an hour, as in traditional psychotherapy training.

Practitioners should ensure that their approach is bespoke to the development phase that they work within. For example, one-to-one psychotherapy sessions with young children can be very challenging, even for experts (DeRobertis, 2006). Therefore, it may be

more effective to target parents/carers and coaches in this phase to support the child's environment. In contrast, psychological skills training might be best delivered through workshops with an educational curriculum to players in the Youth Development Phase where they are familiar with similar education settings/structures.

Curriculum and transition support

We have included space for focused notes on curriculum and transition support. This is because many of our participants emphasized the importance of age- and development-appropriate delivery and content. Some had designed an age-appropriate psychology curriculum that gradually introduced concepts using flexible delivery methods, such as workshops, one-to-one sessions and pitch based delivery. However, some participants rejected the idea of a set curriculum, arguing that individuals face unique challenges based on their identity markers (e.g., age, language, socio-economic background, religion, nationality). They believed that psychoeducation is best tailored to the individual. These findings reflect contemporary discussions in education, in which it is discussed whether students acquire skills or competencies via a taught curriculum or the curriculum ceases to exist and becomes learning opportunities where learners pursue personalized development (Biesta, 2016).

To this end, the Club Review Standards (see Premier League, 2019a) mention how a curriculum can demonstrate provisions related to mental and emotional well-being, player care, life skills, personal development plans, and psychology, all of which may potentially fall within the psychologists' responsibility. Practitioners will likely be reviewed based on the above areas, although the type of curriculum is not specified. It could be a nonlinear, hidden, rhizomatic, structured, or individualized curriculum, developed in line with the practitioner framework. Several participants noted that the people conducting the review often have little specialized knowledge of sport psychology. Consequently, practitioners may need to adjust how they communicate their provisions.

Another relevant area to engage with is transition support. There are several normative (e.g., moving to a new age group or phase) and non-normative (e.g., injury) transitions that players may face within a football academy. The pervasive uncertainty and urgency of football environments can exacerbate the challenges associated with transitions for players and staff (Champ et al., 2020). Hickey and Roderick (2023) discussed how the saturated labor market in football entails an "ever-present risk of deselection or injury" (p. 1050). The stress of deselection from an academy can, in some cases, lead to identity loss and severe mental health challenges (McGlinchey et al., 2022). Further, recent studies have shown the precarious working conditions for staff (Gilmore et al., 2018; O'Gorman et al., 2021), making transition support a relevant area for many stakeholders. Consequently, academies must discuss how to best support players and staff during transitions within and when leaving the academy.

Measurement and profiling

The Premier League's Standards grading for psychology provisions specifies that "best practice objective markers are routinely taken" (see Measured under Performance

Support: Department delivery (all depts); Premier League, 2019a, p. 62). Furthermore, the Club Standards review also states that evidence of sport psychology can be provided based on a “review of testing battery” (Premier League, 2019a, p. 59). These ideas point to a narrow understanding of psychology, as they impose sport science and objective rationales onto the subdiscipline. This feeds pervasive and unrealistic expectations toward all common types of sport psychology departments and is at odds with participants in this study’s approach to delivering sport psychology. Additionally, our findings pointed to severely limited knowledge of what represents expertise in applied sport psychology among stakeholders within the club and the people auditing psychology support provisions. Nonetheless, all clubs are reviewed along the same parameters. Therefore, it remains important for practitioners to consider how they document measurement and profiling. More importantly, however, practitioners must contemplate how to use profiling to support their stakeholders in an ethical and balanced way.

Feedback and review

The final feature to discuss is feedback and review. Many of our participants received feedback from informal peer networking groups using group text-chats. Participants noted the importance of these methods especially when they were the only sport psychologist in their academy. Such chats provided peer support and opportunities for practitioners to check and challenge their work, an integral part of development (Champ et al., 2021). Larger psychology teams can often benefit from discussing cases, scrutinizing their intervention choices, and providing feedback on the processes. Recently, Tod et al. (2024) proposed that supervision can facilitate better working processes. This is already in place for many undertaking a PhD or professional doctorate in the United Kingdom. Yet, one issue we encountered was a misalignment between the framework/philosophical approach adopted by practitioners and their supervisors, leaving practitioners feeling pressured to adopt the theoretical or conceptual framework as their supervisor rather than be authentic. Hence, we signpost relevant questions posed by Tod et al. (2024) particularly whether the practitioner and supervisor have compatible professional philosophies (p. 10).

Obtaining and tending to service feedback might be crucial to ensure that provisions remain aligned with the organizational history and culture, and the organization’s long-term goals.

Concluding thoughts

This paper set out to (1) identify and classify different types of sport psychology departments within men’s football academies in England and (2) provide a research-based decision-making process for designing, adapting, and documenting sport psychology provisions.

First, we delivered insights into the working conditions for sport psychologists in English football academies. We showed that particularly two broad forces shape provisions, (1) uncertainty for players and staff and (2) pervasive unrealistic expectation. Second, we offered an overview of four common types of sport psychology departments

along with their respective strengths and limitations (see Table 2). Our findings suggest that s. Our findings also show that there is no ideal type of service delivery. Instead, a clear alignment between the provision provided and the academy's requirements enables best practice. Nevertheless, meeting calls for a comprehensive, integrative approach to supporting players and staff's performance and mental health likely necessitates a medium-sized department or comprehensive support model. The latter in particular affords opportunities for personalized support, that takes the client's (e.g., players or staff) needs and circumstances into consideration.

Last, we delivered the research-informed Sport Psychology Canvas (see Figure 1) that can help key stakeholders plan, deliver, and document high level provisions. It is envisioned as a flexible template that should be adapted to the specific context by directing attention to areas for discussion. It does not require a specific theoretical or conceptual approach; hence, practitioners can bring their own ideas and practice philosophy into it. The Canvas could also facilitate didactic work aimed at preparing future sport psychologists or research efforts examining the connections, for example, among the organization's history and culture and delivery.

Research rigour and limitations

The rigor in this article is underpinned by a social constructionist approach where findings gradually developed through multiple interactions among researchers, participants, colleagues, and peer review (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Over the past four years, we have shared preliminary findings at research workshops, international conferences (e.g., the FEPSAC European Congress), and academic articles (Feddersen et al., 2022, 2023). Additionally, we involved the participants and other practising sport psychologists at each stage of the coding process, such as after developing the first concept and secondary interview or focus group guides. Finally, we presented and discussed the findings with representatives from the Premier League. We believe this exemplifies how we have interrogated and clarified conceptual gaps throughout the research (e.g., one participant challenged the idea of having a curriculum at all).

Nonetheless, the cyclical process of data collection, analysis, and interrogating findings is presented neatly in the methods section. However, the patterns of this process were often simultaneous and changed more quickly in practice than in print. The boundaries of our data collection methods limit deeper insights into contextual idiosyncrasies usually enabled by ethnography or other types of fieldwork. Additionally, the overview and the Canvas must remain extendible for researchers or practitioners to add new dimensions or concepts (Bailey, 1994). A rigid taxonomy can become obsolete due to significant changes, such as the introduction of the EPPP. It is difficult to ascertain whether the Canvas is dynamic enough to provide useful explanations of sport psychology departments in the future. Hence, it is critical to challenge our findings in the future and, if necessary, propose refinements.

Notes

1. Interview and focus group guides can be accessed following this link: <https://doi.org/10.18710/KFKYBJ>

2. The Sport Psychology Canvas is available for download and use under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International. We have also included a more generic template for practitioners who want to adapt the Canvas to other countries and sports. Please, see the supplementary material or contact the corresponding author.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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