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**Integrating Psychosocial Skill and Characteristic development into an English Academy  
Soccer Coaching Programme: A Preliminary Investigation**

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## **Abstract**

This study aimed to assess the impact of a psychosocial development programme on academy soccer players with coaches being central design and delivery. The 8 Pillars programme (designed to foster Communication, Control, Commitment, Confidence, Concentration, Resilience, Presence and Self-awareness) was delivered through player workshops, coaching practice, and coach-led environmental manipulation. A total of 25 academy soccer players ( $M_{\text{age}} 14.7 \pm 0.3$ ) completed the Psychological Characteristics of Development Excellence Questionnaire-2 (PCDEQ-2) pre- and post-season and a self-report scale for each of the eight prescribed psychosocial skills and characteristics at five timepoints across the season. Significant ( $p < 0.05$ ) improvement between pre- and post-season for ‘Imagery and Active Preparation’, ‘Seeking and Using Social Support’ and ‘Active Coping’ factors within the PCDEQ-2 were evident. Significant ( $p < 0.05$ ) improvements were shown for ‘Communication’ ‘Control’ ‘Commitment’, ‘Concentration’ and ‘Resilience’ scales across the season. These findings give initial efficacy that a targeted, multifaceted programme, largely delivered by coaches, can improve player self-reported psychosocial skills and characteristics in a UK Academy soccer setting.

**Key Words** *talent development, psychosocial, coaching, soccer*

## **Introduction**

The possession of certain psychosocial skills and characteristics (PSCs) can be advantageous for athlete development and life outside sport (Houltberg, Wang, Wei & Nelson, 2018). Such PSCs can include self-awareness, confidence, motivation, mental toughness, imagery, respect, accountability, self-regulation, coping skills, and social skills (Gledhill, Harwood & Forsdyke, 2017; Rongen, McKenna, Cobley, Tee & Till, 2020). Youth soccer academy settings can be appropriate environments to foster PSCs as youth may be within such systems from the age of 8-18 years old. This offers [potentially] long term exposure to age-stage appropriate developmental opportunities, largely via coaching.

The Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP) (The Premier League, 2011) guides UK soccer player development processes and is underpinned by a technical and tactical program with associated physical, social and psychological developmental efforts (FA, 2019). Alongside regulatory requirements, staffing levels, periodic audits of policy and process documents, as well as best practice guidance, the EPPP dictates soccer clubs operate three distinct development phases namely, Foundation Development Phase for Under (U) U9–U11, Youth Development Phase for U12–U16, and Professional Development Phase for U17–U23. As a result, soccer clubs are encouraged to deploy resources to attend to each of these aspects. Upon periodic “audits,” “categories” are assigned to clubs from CAT1 (highest level) to CAT4 (lowest level) with the main differentiators surrounding funding received, full-time staffing, infrastructure, and the age of player selection.

To support psychosocial development efforts, current frameworks exist to for youth sport coaches to create facilitative environments and practices. These frameworks include UNIFORM, which is an acronym for seven skills: (1) Use goal setting; (2) No mistakes, only learning opportunities; (3) Imagery; (4) Full focus; (5) Overtly positive; (6) Relaxation; and (7) Make routines (Horn, Gilbert, Gilbert, & Lewis, 2011). First Tee (Weiss, Stuntz, Bhalla,

Bolter, & Price, 2013). Psychological Characteristics of Developing Excellence (MacNamara, Button & Collins, 2010a, 2010b). 5Cs which is an acronym for Concentration, Confidence, Communication, Commitment and Confidence, (Harwood, 2008) and GOAL (Danish, 1996). The FA four corner model (The FA, 2019) advocates the approach for coaching to include technical / tactical, physiological, psychological, and social ‘corners’ in soccer which helps coaches in soccer settings to frame their planning activities.

A range of efforts to support the development of psychosocial skills and characteristics have been deployed in youth sport settings such as creating empowering, autonomy-supportive, caring environments (Pierce et al., 2016), intentionally taught and reinforced in programme delivery (Weiss et al., 2013) and educational strategies (Harwood et al., 2008). However, assessing efficacy for such initiatives can be problematic and has included a range of methods such as interviews (Dohme, Backhouse, Piggott, & Morgan, 2017), mixed methods (Pierce Gould, Cowburn, & Driska, 2016), coach self-reported efficacy and coach perceptions of players (Harwood, 2008), player self-report, coach ‘on player’ and parent ‘on player’ reports (Harwood, Barker & Anderson, 2015), pre- and post-administration of validated scales (Horn et al., 2011), practitioner accounts of practice (Rowley, Potrac, Knowles, & Nelson, 2020) and multiple base line, single case A-B designs (Middlemas & Harwood, 2020; Jordet, 2005). Conversely, some programmes have not offered evaluations and proposed theoretically and empirically informed reflections for applied practitioners, including youth sport coaches, to consider in their contexts (Mitchell, Cowburn, Piggott, Littlewood, Cook, & Till, 2022). Given the multitude of evaluative methodologies combined with their potential to not capture everything at play, it is difficult to ascertain what works best leaving stakeholders challenged when judging programme effectiveness.

Youth sport coaches are well placed to support the development of PSCs in participants within sport attending to matters of player welfare and wellbeing to achieve optimal psychosocial development (International Council for Coaching Excellence, ICCE, 2013; Lara-Bercial & Mallett, 2016; Zakrajsek et al., 2017). It is surprising that given the scale of the UK soccer academies, combined with the regulatory requirements (i.e., Elite Player Performance Plan, The Premier League, 2011), there are few soccer specific frameworks in existence, beyond Harwood (2008), Harwood et al., (2015), which assist coaches and other support staff, to develop PSCs within young soccer players. To address this dearth of soccer specific guidance for academy practitioners, Mitchell et al., (2022) proposed the 8 Pillars programme in a youth soccer setting as a theoretically informed and practically driven initiative to support the development of prescribed PSCs. These were namely, Communication, Control, Commitment, Confidence, Concentration, Resilience, Presence and Self-Awareness within an English soccer academy setting offering initial reflections how a sport psychology practitioner can best work with coaches on the design and implementation of the programme. Unfortunately, no primary data was presented within the work and therefore the authors could not provide initial efficacy in the programme.

This present study seeks to extend previous knowledge and was inspired by the seminal work of Harwood et al., (2008) and Harwood et al., (2015) in youth soccer whose 5Cs have been highly influential in the soccer coaching sector, given the strength of this existing and eminent work, the 5Cs and many of the processes were included within the current 8 Pillars framework. Being a bespoke programme in one particular setting, further characteristics were identified as important in the development of talent including, Self-awareness (Mills, et al., 2012, 2014a, 2014b, Mitchell, 2016), Resilience (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012, 2016) and Presence (Mitchell, 2015). For definitions and programme overview for each Pillar please see Table 1. We sought to advance previous works by focusing on players,

coaches, their practice, and the wider environment. We specifically chose to co-create content with coaches over delivering education to them. From an evaluation perspective, we sought to extend previous works by using a mixture of validated measurements alongside bespoke measures over an entire soccer season in an attempt to gain programme efficacy.

**\*\*INSERT TABLE ONE SOMEWHERE HERE\***

Resultantly, the primary aim of this study was to provide initial data to help ascertain the impact of the 8 Pillars programme, largely delivered by coaches, on players within an academy soccer setting across a playing season. Specifically, the research question is ‘Does a planned and systematic psychosocial development programme, delivered largely by coaches, elicit favourable player responses in an academy soccer context?’

## **Material and Methods**

### **Research approach**

Gaining efficacy for intervention programme is central to a range of practitioner work such as those in education, psychology, and sport (Achenbach, 2017). The preliminary nature of this work adopted a repeated measures design (Field, 2013) across a season focusing on player responses. A repeated measures approach was seen as advantageous allowed us to exclude the effects of individual differences within the sample.

### **Participants**

To meet the aim of the study, the 8 Pillars programme was delivered at a professional soccer academy, based in the North of England. The soccer club played their first team games in Sky Bet League One and had a Category 3 rated academy out of a 4-level categorisation system with Category 1 being the highest rated (The Premier League, 2011). After obtaining institutional ethical approval from Leeds Beckett Research Ethic Sub-committee (LREC231019) participants were invited to take part in the study via a gatekeeper (Academy

Manager). Subsequent written voluntary written informed consent was obtained from both players and parents. A total of 25 academy soccer players within the Youth Development Phase (YDP; U12-U16,  $M_{\text{age}} 14.7 \pm 0.3$ ) took part in the study. A total of 45 players began the study but failed to complete all the data collection processes due to a range of known factors (injury, non-attendance at workshops, missed questions, school commitments) and unknown factors (non-disclosed reasons). Further, a total of five male academy coaches were involved in the delivery of the programme ( $M_{\text{age}} 36.6 \pm 1.2$ ), with four employed on a part time basis and one employed on a full-time basis. All held their UEFA B coaching qualification with one (full time) coach holding their UEFA A coaching qualification.

### **The 8 Pillars programme**

The 8 Pillars programme was subcomponent of a 36-week coaching curriculum based on the FA's four corner model to include, Technical / Tactical, Physiological, Psychological and Social (The Football Association, 2019). Given previous exemplary works in soccer, the 8 Pillars programme drew from the pivotal work of Harwood (2008) and targeted, Communication, Control, Commitment, Concentration, Confidence as well three further characteristics to include, Resilience, Presence and Self-awareness. In essence, we took the 5Cs approach and added 3 further characteristics based on further research in this area and the specific needs of the context. These pillars have also previously been proposed as facilitative of holistic development in youth sport participants and elite athletes alike (Till, Eisenmann, Emmonds, Jones, Mitchell, Cowburn, Tee, Holmes, & Lloyd, 2020).

Academy coaches were involved in the design and delivery of the programme using a co-operative planning (CP) approach seen in professional youth soccer coach development (Andrew et al., 2022) and other settings such as healthcare (Popp, Grüne, Carl, et al., 2021). Such co-operative work, representing a departure from the work of Harwood (2008),



between a sport psychology practitioner (first author) and the coaches was realised in several ways. Firstly, a pre-season coach workshop was delivered to coaches where each of the 8 pillars was defined and rationalised to aid coach understanding of what each pillar might look like ‘in-situ’ across age groups. For example, showing video clips of each age group team remaining in *Control* despite losing or having the *Confidence* to keep the ball when in tight situations. There were discussions and debate around what behaviours or actions constituted which pillar until an agreed set of observable behaviours was formulated for each pillar. For example, there were discussions around at what age should a player move from managing themselves or using skills to influence others in the team. Principles of practice design and suggested coach behaviours were offered to support the development of each pillar making use of discussion, flipchart paper, whiteboards and presenting YouTube clips on phones and laptops. The PROGRESS framework, used to facilitate coach behaviour and session management, which is an acronym for Promote, Role Model, Ownership of Learning, Grow (the pillar in this present work), Reinforce, Empower, Support, Self-Review and Responsiveness (Harwood, 2008; Harwood & Anderson, 2015) was introduced to coaches as a guiding tool by which to plan and deliver sessions. The workshop provided opportunities for coaches to discuss each pillar and map some of their current practices onto the development of each pillar ensuring the programme was co-operatively planned, and they understood that many of their current approaches were helpful in supporting development. This initial workshop provided the buy-in and foundations of the programme that was to be partly delivered by coaches through their coaching practice.

Secondly, similar to Harwood (2008), player workshops (WS) were delivered twice a month in classrooms adjacent to the training pitches by a sport psychology practitioner and supported by coaches who were able to offer context and insight. The curriculum was split in two four-week blocks in which each focusing on one pillar. Workshops were initially

designed and delivered by the first author. To further support the design and delivery of each workshop, a plan of the session was provided to lead age group coaches who were asked to offer feedback, opinion, and contextualisation for their age specific groups. For example, an age group may show high levels of confidence in a game and an age group coach could provide this example in the form of video footage to use within the workshop. Predominantly, coaches were in attendance for the workshops to offer further contextual clarity and reinforcement of message and this also created [an unplanned] co-learning environment to include coaches as well as players. Each workshop session lasted around 45 minutes. Footage of games (provided by coaches to support the co-operative nature of delivery), problem solving tasks and group presentations were used to help support learning and understanding. The main aims for each workshop were to:

1. Define the pillar (WS1)
2. Explore what this looks like in context (i.e., training or competition) (WS1)
3. Offer research informed practical solutions to support the development of each pillar. (WS2)

For example, in the communication pillar players explored different types of communication such as verbal and non-verbal in WS1 and then explored a glossary of terms used within training and competition standardised across the Academy in WS2.

Thirdly, coaches supported the development of each pillar through their coaching activities (practice design and coach behaviours). To support this, coaches were provided with a PDF resource designed by the first author which offered, research based, practical ideas to help them develop learning activities which could support the development of the pillar at that point in the curriculum. For example, Bandura's (1977) Self Efficacy Theory was utilised to provide coaches with examples of how to build sports confidence through their coaching practise. An example of this was the use of influence of vicarious experience

via proximal role models from older age group squads and at times from recent first team games who performed desirable skills or had specific characteristics favourable to success. To further offer support, the first author also made himself available via telephone, WhatsApp, or email for any questions or to share ideas and feedback around how best to support the development of the pillars within coaching sessions.

Finally, through regular interaction via a range of methods, between the first author and coaches, the shaping of the wider environment to include support for the development of PSCs was considered. Formally, there were multidisciplinary team meetings every four weeks and informally there were a range of ad hoc conversations. There were a wide range of planned, implicit, strategies to support the development of the 8 Pillars via the manipulation of the environment in which players experienced. Such environmental manipulations were designed to make developmental efforts not feel like education or training (Foster, Maynard, Butt, & Hays, 2016). For example, Mitchell et al., (2022) supported the development of self-awareness where coaches gave players the opportunity to co-create their own objectives via six weekly review meetings with their age group coach. Players were also granted “golden time” in sessions to work on anything they wanted to within the parameters of space and equipment. This self-directed time afforded opportunities for players to take ownership of their development. Further examples can be seen in table two.

**\*\*INSERT TABLE TWO SOMEWHERE NEAR HERE\*\***

## **Data Collection**

To develop initial efficacy of the programme, player self-report data was collected at five time points during the season, pre-season (baseline, before competition started), three time points in-season (with eight weeks between measures) and at the end of the season (immediately after season end). Within pre-season and post season, players completed the Psychological Characteristics of Development Excellence Questionnaire-2 (PCDEQ-2; Hill,

MacNamara & Collins, 2019) and an 8 Pillars self-report form to obtain some baseline measures. All data collection was at the end of 8 Pillars workshops to maximise completion rates. Participants were instructed to work alone, in silence, and be as honest as possible throughout. The first author left the room so avoid potential bias due to their presence. There was an initial attempt to collect coach data and undertake a triangulation of such data to further our understanding of ‘what works’. However due to a range of factors such as staff absence and turnover this was not possible to collect enough data to do this.

### **8 Pillars Self-Report Form**

Drawing inspiration from the work of Harwood (2008) and Harwood et al., (2015), a bespoke 8 Pillars self-report form (see Appendix A) comprising of 24 questions was administered. Participants were asked to complete this using a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (not very confident) to 7 (very confident) and was associated with their efficacy in displaying behaviours or using skills aligned with pre-agreed observable behaviours for each pillar (See Mitchell et al., 2022). Each question was preceded by the statement ‘I am confident in my ability to’. An example question for control was ‘Respond quickly and positively after success OR error’.

### **PCDEQ-2**

The PCDEQ-2 provides talent development environments (TDEs) with a valid and reliable measure form which to base effective psycho-behavioural interventions, ultimately improving the effectiveness of talent development (TD) processes (Hill et al., 2019). Although the programme was not specifically designed to attend to each of the 7 factors of the PCDEQ2 this was seen as a useful, reliable, ‘general measure’ in which to assess change in a wide variety of areas over time on this programme. The PCDEQ-2 is an 88-item, 7- factor solution

with an overall reliability of  $\alpha = 0.879$  and was originally validated with 512 male academy sports participants. The seven factors are namely, Adverse Response to Failure (associated with fear of failure), Imagery and Active Preparation (the need for effective and controllable imagery in both skill refinement and the management of arousal), Self-Directed Control and Management (associated with self-regulation and self-control), Perfectionistic Tendencies (associated with perfectionism, anxiety, fear of failure, and the obsessive component of passion), Seeking and using social support (associated with the facilitative role effective support networks), Active Coping (associated with the self-regulated deployment of coping mechanisms), and Clinical Indicators (mental health, namely eating disorders, anxiety, depression, and behavioural change;). Question responses were marked on a 6-point Likert scale from 1 (“very unlike me”) to 6 (“very like me”).

We chose to use a mixture of validated and bespoke measures as we wanted to ensure we obtain as much information as possible when seeking to gain efficacy in the 8 Pillars programme implementation. We hypothesise that by supporting the development of the 8 Pillars, which were agreed as important to do so by club stakeholders, we would also be attending to many areas of the PCDEs. Such hypothesised links are highlighted in Table Three.

**\*\*INSERT TABLE THREE SOMEWHERE HERE\*\***

Given the ecological nature of the research, several attempts to support validity of the self-report form were undertaken. *Face validity*: The self-report form was designed in conjunction with Academy Coaches, Academy manager, and the Head of Coaching who offered contextual insight into desirable behaviours they would like to see. This collaborative process ensured the questions were representative of the desired behaviours that the soccer

club wanted to develop giving the self-report form face validity (Hagger & Chatzisarantis, 2009). *Social Validation*: Given the applied nature of the research, formal and social validation was difficult to obtain. However, there were opportunities to speak to coaches and review the 8 Pillars programme delivery every 4 weeks within multidisciplinary (MDT) meetings as a regular set of agenda items. For example, ‘What is going well in the 8 Pillars Programme’, ‘How do you [coaches] feel players are responding to the programme?’ and ‘How are you [coaches] responding to the programme?’ In addition to regular meetings, a staff WhatsApp group was used for further dialogue on the progress of the intervention (Page & Thelwell, 2013). Upon training nights, the first author would regularly be present and would informally talk to players about the programme to further explore the effectiveness of the intervention and its effects (Page & Thelwell, 2013). *Procedural Reliability*: To ensure that participants were treated equally, no scores were viewed until all participants had completed the entire data collection process. Furthermore, the predetermined and regularity of workshops delivered by the same person in the programme ensured consistency of experience (Barker, McCarthy, Jones, & Moran, 2011).

### **Data Analysis**

Using SPSS version 28, descriptive statistics were calculated for each factor on the PCDEQ-2 for pre- and post-season as well as a series of paired samples t-tests to locate pre and post differences. Further, a series of repeated measures one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) were used to investigate differences in scores from the 8 Pillars Self-Report form across the 5 time points at Pillar level. Where Mauchley’s test of sphericity was violated, degrees of freedom were adjusted using the Greenhouse-Geiser correction (Field, 2013). Differences were considered statistically significant at  $p < 0.05$ . Effect sizes were examined

using the following thresholds were Partial eta squared values of 0.0099, 0.0588, and 0.1379 were benchmarks for small, medium, and large effect sizes, respectively (Richardson, 2011).

## **Results**

### **PCDEQ-2 pre- and post-intervention analysis**

Table four presents the pre- and post-season PCDEQ-2 scores. The paired samples t-test reported significant differences between pre- and post-programme involvement for ‘Imagery and Active Preparation’, ‘Seeking and Using Social Support’ and ‘Active Coping’. Using criteria established by Richardson (2011), large effect sizes were noted for ‘Seeking and Using Social Support’ and ‘Active Coping’ whilst medium effect sizes were noted for ‘Imagery and Active Preparation’.

**\*\*INSERT TABLE FOUR SOMEHWERE NEAR HERE\*\***

### **Self-Report 8 Pillars over time**

Descriptive and statistical data for each of the 8 Pillars can be seen Table 5

**\*\*INSERT TABLE FIVE SOMEHERE HERE\*\***

For all 8 Pillars medium and large effect sizes were reported between Time point 1 (TP1) to Time point 5 (TP5). Separate One-Way Repeated Measures ANOVA using a Greenhouse-Geisser adjustment for the degrees of freedom was performed for each of the 8 Pillars to assess changes over time. Significant improvements over time were reported for Commitment, Communication, Control, Resilience, and Self Awareness. There were no significant differences for Confidence or Presence.

## **Discussion**

The aim of this study was to build on previous intervention works to assess player responses to the 8 Pillars programme designed to improve PSCs in an academy setting with a fore fronted coach delivery model as well as environmental manipulation. This novel work

used a co-creation approach to programme design within a soccer academy setting, deploying a mixture of validated and bespoke assessment tools in a longitudinal repeated measures approach concerned with the development of prescribed PSCs. We found significantly improved self-report levels of ‘Imagery and Active Preparation’, Seeking and Using Social Support’ and ‘Active Coping’ from the PCDEQ-2 as well as significant improvements over time for Commitment, Communication, Control, Resilience, and Self-Awareness. This research demonstrates that intervention works of this nature can elicit favourable perceived improvement of some, but not all, PSCs. As such, the study provides initial, partial, efficacy in the 8 Pillars programme for developing PSCs.

When using the PCDEQ-2, pre- and post-season, soccer players reported significant, positive changes in ‘Imagery and Active Preparation’, ‘Seeking and using social support’ and ‘Active Coping’ suggesting that the use of targeted and purposeful approaches such as workshops and practical coaching interventions and environmental manipulations can foster favourable change. Our initial interpretations are that these three factors are the mostly skill related and could be more easily ‘taught’ than the other four factors. For example, the need for effective and controllable imagery strategies in both skill refinement and the management of arousal has been advocated for high level sports performance with well-established and teachable routines available (e.g., Gould, et al., 2002). Active Coping recognises the proactive, self-regulated deployment of coping mechanisms. Again, the importance of holding a positive and proactive approach to challenge is a well-established factor associated with both development and performance (Greenglass & Fiksenbaum, 2009). No significant changes were seen in Adverse Response to Failure, Self-directed Control & Management, Perfectionistic Tendencies and Clinical Indicators. This suggests that the interventions applied may not be wholly appropriate to develop such skills or that indeed such skills are not yet developed in the present population or there was a ceiling effect.



The results from the 8 Pillars self-assessment revealed significant improvements for five of the eight Pillars, namely Commitment, Communication, Concentration, Control and Resilience. This suggests that considered planning efforts to include evidence-based concepts (see Table One) guiding the development of 8 Pillars which were delivered in a considered order has a positive effect in player self-report scores. The multifaceted approach also appears to have had a positive impact on the perceptions of players completing the self-assessment. Specifically, we propose that alignment of ‘taught’ workshop content alongside practical coach delivery and consideration of the environment in which each Pillar was fostered proved a key factor in supporting significant improvement in many of the Pillars and some of the PCDEQ-2 (Hill et al., 2019) factors. Such findings agree with other psychosocial development programmes that advocate a mixed model of delivery (see e.g., Harwood, 2008). Exceptions to this were Confidence and Presence. Regarding the Confidence pillar our interpretation was that high confidence may be a pre-requisite characteristic required to enter an academy system. For example, to take risks in 1v1 situations. As such is not a particular skill to teach but more of a characteristic to foster. Conversely, confidence changes depending on one’s experiences at that present time it is difficult to see development. Presence is a more abstract characteristic which has notions of leadership and influence which again is something to be nurtured rather than taught. Presence may also be something that develops over longer periods of time (i.e., where changes can’t be detected in a single season). Furthermore, lack of a significant change across either the PCDEQ-2 or 8 Pillars self-report may be a reflection of the complexity when delivering a programme of this nature pointing to a need to further refinements in this area. For example, more opportunities to develop reflective skills (Knowles et al., 2006) or a stronger autonomy supportive coaching style (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003).

When considering the dual use of a bespoke 8 Pillars self-report and the PCDEQ-2 we noted mixed agreement between our hypothesised alignments (see Table three) and our findings from the data analysis. Our proposed alignment for Imagery and ‘Active Perpetration’, Seeking and using Social Support’ and Active Coping’ we in agreement with our initial hypothesised alignments. However, this was not the case for all Pillars and PCDEQ-2 factors. For example, the Control pillar showed significant improvement over time whereas the proposed aligned PCDE factor of ‘Adverse Response to Failure’ did not significantly improve, this is somewhat surprising given their similar intentions and definitions. This was also the case for ‘Self-directed Control and Management’, ‘Perfectionistic Tendencies’. The ‘Clinical Indicators’ factors was not specifically targeted through the 8 Pillars programme. Such findings indicate that a bespoke field-based instruments may not fully align with validated scales and as such, researchers need to carefully consider their evaluative tools which developing and implementing bespoke programmes. Such differences are also likely to be a reflection of the soccer specific information designed and delivered on the programme and on the 8 Pillars self-report items compared to the PCDEQ-2 (Hill et al., 2019) which offers a more general sport measure.

### **Reflections and Applied Implications**

These findings give initial efficacy that coaches can play a pivotal role in a psychosocial skills development programme within their training plans and that such a targeted, multifaceted programme can improve psychosocial skills and characteristics in UK Academy soccer settings.

The findings of this study have several applied implications.

1. These preliminary findings suggest that a planned, systematic, multifaceted and integrated programme of psychosocial development, delivered largely by coaches, can

foster PSCs that are associated with successful performance. This outcome can be partially achieved through workshop delivery, coaching practice, and environmental manipulation.

2. Coaches should be involved in the design stage of programmes and provision of this nature and this study demonstrates the benefits of a co-creation approach. Such a co-creation approach has been advocated as being part of an effective learning environment in coach development (Stoszkowski, & Collins, 2016; Nelson, Cushion and Potrac, 2013). This was demonstrated in the coaches' contribution to player workshops. Further, it would be advantageous for coaches to be within those workshops to offer further context to the content delivered, this is a unique and novel finding of this study.
3. Coaches must also be involved in the delivery of the programme through their coaching practice and therefore should receive either adequate professional development or work with other stakeholders such as sport psychology practitioners (Nelson et al., 2013) to help them do this via regular meetings and informal conversations. Such development has resource implications for those involved in resource allocation. These recommendations are in line with guidelines on Holistic Talent Development Environments (HTDEs, Megicks, Lara-Bercial, Till & Rongen 2023) which include holistic philosophy (developing people and performers), stakeholder alignment (in this case the MDT) and a long term and development focus (planning).

The latter two points further align with the proposed benefits of a co-creation approach to programme design and delivery.

### **Strengths, Limitations and Future Directions**

The strengths of this study are that we were able to target and evidence systematic development in *some* prescribed psychosocial skills and characteristics in academy soccer players using a longitudinal mixed methods design in a complex and dynamic environment. This study is also one of the first to use a multifaceted model to include coach-co creation, player education, coach development, informal coach support and environmental manipulation in order to develop prescribed psychosocial skills and characteristics. As a result, this study offers preliminary findings that can be considered unique and novel.

This study is not without limitation, the 8 Pillars self-report form did not undergo any formal validation procedures prior to administration. Secondly, we did not use a control group further limiting the extent of claims that can be made about the specific impact of the programme. However, in this context it was not practically viable where players of high ability were all vying to get to the next stage in their progression. Thirdly, the data collection was undertaken over only one season and as such we were not able to measure the longer-term impact of such a programme on participants. It is recommended that monitoring over years and assessing outcomes of the programme such as signing of a professional contract or life after soccer, would also be recommended to assess the true impact of programmes of this nature. Fourth, we were not able to ascertain which model of input had the most impact for example workshops, environmental manipulation or coaching practice. Fifth, despite our initial attempts we were unable to successfully capture meaningful data from coaches due to time limitation and coach turnover. This means we have not been able to fully assess the perspectives from this stakeholder group. Finally, despite our best efforts to minimise bias, the use of self-report questionnaires is potentially limited by respondent biases such as item interpretation, recall, and social desirability (MacNamara & Collins, 2013). As a result, the findings from this self-assessment should be viewed with some caution. These limitations by

enlarge, reflect the messy realities of fieldwork in fastmoving and ever-changing environments such as academy soccer.

Further work is needed to explore optimal aged and staged programme design associated with the development of each pillar to determine best practice through coaching, workshops, and the wider environment. Research with coaches is also recommended to ascertain how they might be best served in terms of effective coach development to ensure education in this area is as impactful as possible on practice. Finally, steps to assess coach efficacy as well as observing coaching practice should be implemented as part of any evaluation to further monitor the influence of any coach development.

### **Conclusions**

The present study aimed to evaluate the 8 Pillars programme designed to support the development of psychosocial skills and characteristics in a youth soccer academy largely delivered by coaches whilst working closely with a sport psychology practitioner. The main finding was that a combination of workshop delivery, coaching practicing and planning the features of the wider environment contributed to the increased perceptions of psychosocial development via the PCDEQ-2 (Hill et al., 2019) and a bespoke self-report tool across an entire soccer season. Not all prescribed psychosocial skills and characteristics were developed to the same extent suggesting partial efficacy in a programme of this nature. The findings give confidence that targeted, multifaceted programme, delivered largely by coaches can improve *some* self-reported psychosocial skills and characteristics within academy soccer players.

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**Table One:** 8 Pillars Definitions

PSSC	Definition	Block	Weeks	4-week breakdown	Exemplar guiding concepts for workshop and coach support
Communication	Sending / receiving messages effectively including coach to player and player to player interactions	1	1-4	Workshop 1 Workshop 2 Coach Supportive Observation MDT Meeting	Verbal Communication, Non-verbal communication, Shared Common Language
Control	Can regulate own thoughts and emotions	2	5-8	Workshop 1 Workshop 2 Coach Supportive Observation MDT Meeting	Self-Regulation, Goal Setting
Commitment	Quality and quantity of motivation to get better in training and competition	3	9-12	Workshop 1 Workshop 2 Coach supportive Observation MDT Meeting	Basic Psychological Needs, Self Determination
Confidence	Belief that they can execute skills to a desired level for themselves and the team	4	13-16	Workshop 1 Workshop 2 Coach Supportive Observation MDT Meeting	Vicarious Experience, Verbal Persuasion, Performance Outcomes
Concentration	Can focus on a specific task and avoid distraction	5	17-20	Workshop 1 Workshop 2 Coach Supportive Observation MDT Meeting	Internal and External focus of attention, Cues
Resilience	Role of mental processes and behaviours in protecting themselves from negative stressors	6	21-24	Workshop 1 Workshop 2 Coach Supportive Observation MDT Meeting	High Challenge, High Support
Presence	To stand out as an individual person	7	25-28	Workshop 1 Workshop 2 Coach Supportive Observation MDT Meeting	Autonomy Support, Leadership, Responsibility
Self-awareness	To know one's strength and areas for development in given contexts.	8	29-32	Workshop 1 Workshop 2 Coach supportive Observation MTD Meeting	Reflection

**Table Two:** Example Coaching and Environmental Manipulation

PSSC	Block	Weeks	Example Coaching and Environmental Manipulation (s)
Communication	1	1-4	Promoting player led half time team talks, supporting reflective discussions, Co-create own team plans (sharing ideas, listening, debating).
Control	2	5-8	Playing Up (harder games, designing in failure), Winning only outcome on some selected matches or tournaments, Overloads in small sides games (SSGs)
Commitment	3	9-12	Focus (and feedback) on effort / performance over outcome (Task orientation).
Confidence	4	13-16	Play Down (lower challenge point, designing in success), Train next to or with older age groups to see the standard (Vicarious experience).
Concentration	5	17-20	Players observing and feeding back to others, Leadership and ownership responsibilities wherever possible. Media interviews / training. Refereeing.
Resilience	6	21-24	Variety in games programme (harder games, designing in failure). Play Up (increase the challenge). Be coached by other coaches (possibly older age group coaches who may be more performance orientated) (Inoculation).
Presence	7	25-28	Leading warm-ups, Leadership and ownership responsibilities wherever possible, Media interviews / training. Refereeing.
Self-awareness	8	29-32	Create own reviews, own team plans, Annual tour or overnight trip, Social event e.g., to restaurant or cinema, Design own learning objectives, make use of 'golden time', Encourage reflection (via e.g., reflective diaries, discussion or questioning).

**Table Three:** Hypothesised alignment between 8 Pillars and PCDEQ2 Factors

<b>Pillar (s)</b>	<b>PCDE Factor</b>
Control	Adverse Response to Failure
Control, Concentration and Resilience	Imagery and Active Preparation
Control, Resilience, Concentration, Confidence, and Self Awareness, Commitment	Self-Directed Control and Management
Self-awareness, [over] Commitment	Perfectionistic Tendencies
Self-Awareness, Communication, Presence	Seeking and using social support
Control, Self-awareness	Active Coping
N/A	Clinical Indicators

**Table Four:** PCDEQ-2 pre and post season

<b>Factor</b>	<b>Pre-season mean (SD)</b>	<b>Post season mean (SD)</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>p</b>	<b>Cohens D</b>
Adverse Response to Failure	2.11 (0.59)	2.00 (0.50)	1.35	24	0.19	0.17 (Small effect)
Imagery and Active Preparation	3.42 (0.87)	4.10 (1.02)	3.24	24	<0.01*	-0.72 (Medium effect)
Self-directed Control and Management	4.52 (0.69)	4.40 (0.62)	1.49	24	0.15	-0.27 (Small effect)
Perfectionistic Tendencies	3.01 (0.74)	2.90 (0.71)	0.83	24	0.41	0.18 (No effect)
Seeking and using social support	4.20 (0.79)	4.87 (0.76)	4.82	22	<0.01*	-0.86 (Large effect)
Active coping	4.21 (0.78)	4.85 (0.66)	5.85	24	<0.01*	-0.89 (Large effect)
Clinical Indicators	2.01 (0.80)	1.79 (0.65)	1.63	24	0.11	0.30 (Small effect)

\*denotes Significant difference



**Table Five:** Descriptive and Statistical data for changes in the 8 Pillars over time

Pillar	Mean SD TP1	Mean SD TP2	Mean SD TP3	Mean SD TP4	Mean SD TP5	F	p	Partial Eta Sq.	Pairwise
Communication	5.18(0.80)	5.55(0.67)	5.89(0.54)	5.89(0.56)	6.00 (0.54)	$F(4, 96) = 14.38$	$p < 0.01^*$	$\eta_p^2 = 0.38$ (Large effect)	TP5>TP1 TP3>TP2
Control	5.04 (0.98)	5.29(0.62)	5.67(0.75)	5.57(0.84)	5.60(0.83)	$F(4, 96) = 5.55$	$p < 0.01^*$	$\eta_p^2 = 0.19$ (Large effect)	TP3<TP1
Commitment	5.61(0.92)	5.79 (0.84)	5.92(0.70)	6.00(0.61)	6.04(0.63)	$F(4, 96) = 2.98$	$p = 0.04^*$	$\eta_p^2 = 0.11$ (Medium effect)	TP5>TP1
Concentration	5.63(0.82)	5.77(0.86)	5.85(0.78)	5.92(0.93)	5.96(0.77)	$F(4, 96) = 3.15$	$p = 0.03^*$	$\eta_p^2 = 0.12$ (Medium effect)	TP5>TP1
Confidence	5.47(0.81)	5.52(0.68)	5.65(0.65)	5.75(0.61)	5.80(0.67)	$F(4, 96) = 1.46$	$p = 0.22$	$\eta_p^2 = 0.06$ (Medium effect)	N/A
Resilience	5.40(0.96)	5.64(0.84)	5.61(0.83)	5.85(0.83)	6.03(0.53)	$F(4, 96) = 4.18$	$p = 0.01^*$	$\eta_p^2 = 0.15$ (Large effect)	TP5>TP1
Presence	5.62 (0.97)	5.69(0.78)	6.07(0.70)	5.71(1.35)	6.03(0.51)	$F(4, 96) = 1.99$	$p = 0.15$	$\eta_p^2 = 0.08$ (Medium effect)	N/A
Self-Awareness	5.65(0.78)	5.71(0.84)	5.81(0.98)	6.12(0.63)	6.21(0.53)	$F(4, 96) = 3.57$	$p = 0.02^*$	$\eta_p^2 = 0.13$ (Medium effect)	TP5>TP1

\*denotes Significant difference

## Appendix A

### 8 Pillars Self Report Form

**Name** **Age Group** **Month**

#### Communication

Sending / receiving messages effectively – Communication, good or bad directly influences thoughts, feeling and subsequent actions and performances.

#### I am confident in my ability to

Listen to teammates / coaches with respect

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

*Not confident at all* *Extremely confident*

Use positive, constructive criticism to teammates if e.g., a move has broken down

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

*Not confident at all* *Extremely confident*

Body language always positive and purposeful

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

*Not confident at all* *Extremely confident*

#### Control

Associated with regulating one's thoughts and emotions.

#### I am confident in my ability to

Respond quickly and positively after success OR error

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

*Not confident at all* *Extremely confident*

Get up immediately after being tackled to get back into the game

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

*Not confident at all* *Extremely confident*

Don't argue with e.g., a ref / coach if decisions are not correct.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

*Not confident at all* *Extremely confident*

#### Commitment

This relates to the quality and quantity of *motivation*.

**I am confident in my ability to**

Stay involved in play

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<i>Not confident at all</i>					<i>Extremely confident</i>	

Look to create

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<i>Not confident at all</i>					<i>Extremely confident</i>	

Show for teammates

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<i>Not confident at all</i>					<i>Extremely confident</i>	

**Confidence**

Psychological state empowered by the belief that a player can execute skills to a desired level for themselves or the team

**I am confident in my ability to**

Want the ball when losing

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<i>Not confident at all</i>					<i>Extremely confident</i>	

Play with a sense of urgency

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<i>Not confident at all</i>					<i>Extremely confident</i>	

Try passes or skills without fear

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<i>Not confident at all</i>					<i>Extremely confident</i>	

**Concentration**

Helps to regulate quality of performance, decision making and maximising learning.

**I am confident in my ability to**

Adopt correct positions in open play

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<i>Not confident at all</i>					<i>Extremely confident</i>	

Anticipate movements of opponents

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<i>Not confident at all</i>					<i>Extremely confident</i>	

Quickly refocus after a break in play

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<i>Not confident at all</i>					<i>Extremely confident</i>	

### Resilience

This is the role of mental processes and behaviour in promoting personal assets and protecting an individual from the potential negative effect of stressors.

#### I am confident in my ability to

Maintain deep seeded self-belief that they can do something

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<i>Not confident at all</i>					<i>Extremely confident</i>	

Approach problems with a positive mindset

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<i>Not confident at all</i>					<i>Extremely confident</i>	

Seek support if I have a problem / challenge

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<i>Not confident at all</i>					<i>Extremely confident</i>	

### Presence

This relates to having the ability to stand out from the crowd, may be linked to leadership qualities and helping others.

#### I am confident in my ability to

Self-motivated to do extra practice

Not afraid to ask a question

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<i>Not confident at all</i>					<i>Extremely confident</i>	

Be willingly and authentically helpful

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<i>Not confident at all</i>					<i>Extremely confident</i>	

Try to help others

1                      2                      3                      4                      5                      6                      7

*Not confident at all*

*Extremely confident*

### **Self-Awareness**

Self-Awareness is an amalgamation of the other seven pillars. The self-aware player takes personal responsibility, knows themselves and drives their own development

#### **I am confident in my ability to**

Take personal responsibility for my own development

1                      2                      3                      4                      5                      6                      7

*Not confident at all*

*Extremely confident*

Can independently reflect on performances and development

1                      2                      3                      4                      5                      6                      7

*Not confident at all*

*Extremely confident*

Can set my own goals to support my development

1                      2                      3                      4                      5                      6                      7

*Not confident at all*

*Extremely confident*