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HOLISTIC DEVELOPMENT IN THE MODERN ACADEMY



Summary of event
held at Leeds
Beckett University,
March 4th 2024



Representation from;

The Football Association, The English Football League, Association of Sporting Directors, Doncaster Rovers Football Club, Huddersfield Town Football Club, Manchester United Football Club, Sunderland Association Football Club. Key club positions included. Coach Developer, Head of Coaching, Academy Managers, Coach, Player Care, Performance Analysis, Head of Academy Medical, Academy Sport Psychologist.

Also;

Centre for Sport Coaching (Leeds Beckett University), Centre for Child and Adolescent Physical Literacy (Leeds Beckett University)

This summary is compiled by Dr Tom Mitchell, Senior Lecturer in Sports Coaching, Centre for Sport Coaching, Carnegie School of Sport, Leeds Beckett University

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AIMS

The aim of the day was to bring together stakeholders to discuss and debate activities and challenges associated with holistic player development within the English Football Academies. The formal objectives presented on the day were:

To bring stakeholders (clubs, NCBs, regulators, & academics) together to share experiences, perspectives, and practices, associated with holistic development.

To start a conversation about holistic development within football with a view to establishing a community of practice and further events.

KEY FINDINGS

This following is a summary of notes created and shared by attendees, post it notes collected on day, as well as my own personal reflections. These can be broadly split into:

1. **Planning**
2. **Doing**
3. **Reviewing**

Findings will be presented as questions which emerged from conversations on the day.



PLANNING

HOLISTIC DEVELOPMENT IN THE MODERN ACADEMY





HOW DO WE DEFINE AND COMMUNICATE WHAT HOLISTIC DEVELOPMENT IS?

The day presented differing views on what holistic development is within an academy setting.

Some felt holistic development was centred around the four-corner model (physical, technical, psychological and social) and by attending to these aspects across the academy experience this was deemed holistic development.

Others took a broader view of developing 'better people' as well players.

These differentiating views of what holistic development is may well lead to differentiated approaches across academies in this space. That is not to say there shouldn't be different approaches.

HOW DO WE 'POSITION' HOLISTIC DEVELOPMENT?

There were different viewpoints around the positioning of holistic development within academy programmes.

We see a performance value in developing personal and social characteristics because the game demands well rounded, holistically developed individuals.

We are developing people and players as the progress rates are so low we need to help players leave the game as equipped as possible.

We want to give players the best possible experiences whilst within the academy.

These differentiated views may impact upon who might be responsible for the planning and delivery of holistic development in academy settings. For example, if we take a more performance orientated approach to holistic development, coaches may become more involved in integrating holistic development into their practice. If we take a more 'Plan B' orientated approach this might move to practitioners such as player care officers or those responsible with education aspects and thus create a siloed delivery model?

[This is something to explore further – the positioning of holistic development, how it is implemented in academies and how this is communicated to other stakeholders]

WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR HOLISTIC DEVELOPMENT?

There were different views across the participants on the day.

There was a view that responsible for holistic development was 'everyone's' responsibility within an academy setting.

There was also a competing idea that there should be specialised staff to support holistic development within an academy setting.

There were concerns that asking coaches to engage in holistic development was adding 'another responsibility'. This was a particular concern with (and for) part time coaches.

[There is value in further exploring what do coaches think coaching is? Is it just an exercise in movement/technical, tactical and physical preparation through notably game-based training models – or is it something wider than this?]

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PLANNING





There was a further view expressed that football academies are held to a 'higher account' than, for example, schools. Questions were asked about what the boundaries for holistic development are? For example parents and schools are other obvious stakeholders in a young child's life and where does a football club's responsibility start and end?

Sporting directors and board members were seen as pivotal in defining the level of responsibility and lengths to which holistic development is delivered in club settings.

[Something to explore further - is this happening in all/some clubs?]



DOING

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HOW DO WE BEST DO HOLISTIC DEVELOPMENT?

There seemed to be clear agreement that this should include people first, quality experiences, shared language and culture, responsibility and ownership.

There seemed to be two approaches to holistic development:

Player Support Team model:

All support mechanisms (e.g. Coaching, S&C, Player Care, Sport Psychology) would seek to serve the player.

This approach has implications for those involved in organising how and when practitioners support and access players. For example, the need to manage competing demands of coached sessions vs educational aspects for players.

All specialisms that support the players are valued in equal measure. For example, does a player care staff member have an equal voice when compared to a sport scientist?

Coach Centred model:

All support mechanisms would be delivered through the coach to the player in an integrated manner.

This approach may require a review of whether or not coaches are equipped to work with multiple specialists and then transfer such knowledge at session level as well as curriculum level. This approach has implications for coach education and coach wellbeing.

On the day we also returned to notions of how much we can ask of coaches, especially those that are part time. The challenge of staff turnover was also noted and how can clubs maintain a coherency of experience for players.

HOW DO WE BEST ALLOCATE RESOURCES FOR HOLISTIC DEVELOPMENT?

Time and resource were commonly faced issues. Specifically, access to specialised staff was seen as a barrier, especially at those clubs with a lower resource allocation.

One solution was to seek to work with other stakeholders such as schools, parents, charities and universities to help provide a holistically developmental experience.

Time for each specialist area was also seen as a challenge regardless of resource level. For example, 'time on the grass' was seen as vital for player development although this often competed with other areas such as education, sport psychology, S&C. This has implications for those responsible for managing the curriculum.

Individualising holistic development was also seen as a major challenge. How do clubs do this?

[This is something a collective group could return to in more detail]

Holistic development for loan players and what this looks like was presented as an area some wanted to know more about.



REVIEWING

HOLISTIC DEVELOPMENT IN THE MODERN ACADEMY





HOW DO WE ASSESS EFFECTIVENESS OF HOLISTIC DEVELOPMENT EFFORTS?

There was a clear view that we should seek to celebrate broader successes beyond football. For example, if someone goes onto achieve a higher education award, starts their own business, or goes into a non-playing football related role.

Examples might be a board of academy journeys within the training facility, or a graduation event.

A lack of formalised and consistent monitoring tools was identified. MDT meetings were cited as a mechanism for presenting information about a player although it was often felt that data wasn't presented in a clear manner.

One suggestion might be the creation of a holistic monitoring tool that MDT specialists could feed into.



CONCLUSIONS



There appeared to be a great deal of appetite to work towards effective holistic development. There is value in bringing a range of practitioners together to talk about the issues involved.

The key challenges with planning are centred around positioning holistic development within each club and having a clear view on purposes. This may help set boundaries and review who has responsibility for this agenda.

There are also key challenges with resource allocation (e.g. to specialists) and the models through which holistic development is delivered (e.g. player centred, or coach centred). Delivery models are likely to be influenced by club hierarchy and their understanding and positioning of holistic development within football programmes. Assessing effectiveness in holistic development efforts is another challenge which clubs either do not undertake or often work in silos.

The ultimate aim of days like this should be to offer opportunities for sharing, discussion and understanding.

To move this area forward it might be useful to obtain views of those working on the ground around their views of holistic development and obtain a wider, MDT, perspective of the purpose of holistic development across a range of clubs. [This could be a feature of future work.]

If you have any comments or further suggestions, please do get in touch.

Dr Tom Mitchell

