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Key stakeholder perceptions of the implementation of the English Football Association's girls' Emerging Talent Centre pathway

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Abstract

The restructure of the English Football Association's (FA) girls' soccer talent pathway in 2022 aimed to expand the available talent identification (TI) and development (TD) opportunities (i.e., access to FA-licensed environments), with particular focus on providing access to historically under-represented players (e.g., ethnic minority and lower socio-economic groups). Sociological attributes, including socio-demographic factors, influence TI and TD, but it is uncertain whether stakeholders consider these to foster inclusive environments. This study aimed to explore key stakeholder's perceptions of the implementation of the new Emerging Talent Centre (ETC) pathway, focussing on whether socio-demographic factors are considered during player recruitment and retention. Semi-structured interviews with ten key stakeholders including FA Women's Technical Division staff ($n=2$), ETC managers ($n=4$) and coaches ($n=4$) were conducted, drawing on personal experiences and perspectives. Player ethnicity ($n=2111$) and socio-economic status ($n=2940$) data were utilised to assist understandings of these perceptions. These data were compared with socio-economic data from the previous pathway to assess early influence of the new pathways' implementation. Thematic analysis identified three key themes: stakeholder beliefs of the ETC pathway (clarity of pathway aims, early successes, early concerns); facilitators to increasing inclusivity and accessibility (extending organisational reach, flexible approaches to TI, engaging and supporting parents); barriers to increasing inclusivity and accessibility (socio-cultural, practical). Unique insight into stakeholder perceptions will impact further development of the ETC pathway, ensuring youth and senior domestic and national squads are representative of local and national populations.

Keywords

Accessibility, diversity, ethnicity, female soccer, inclusivity, scouting

Introduction

Following the UEFA Women's 2022 EUROs, UEFA and the FA reported a 140% increase in formal and casual soccer participation levels among girls in England under the age of 16.¹ This increased participation in girls' soccer necessitated a redevelopment of the infrastructure to support the talent identification (TI) and development (TD) pathways in England. These increased numbers acted as a catalyst for the launch of the new girls' Emerging Talent Centres (ETC) which replaced the existing Regional Talent Clubs (RTC) and Advanced Coaching Centres (ACC), ensuring the greater demand for soccer can be met at the base of the elite talent pathway pyramid. The former RTCs ($n=28$) and ACCs ($n=11$) offered limited geographical coverage, restricting the

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number of available opportunities to enter and progress through the FA talent pathway.²

The ETC pathway increased the coverage to 56 FA-licensed centres (increased to 73 for the 2023–24 season), providing access to players who may not have had an RTC or ACC within their local area. This facilitated an increase from 1722 players in the former pathway to over 4000 players across the ETC network in 2022.² RTC players trained multiple times a week, competed in FA-approved leagues and fixtures (e.g., North or South RTC League, FA Girls' Youth Cup) and were not permitted to represent a grassroots club.³ Unlike the RTC pathway, ETC players are permitted to register with a grassroots club where they train and compete in a regular fixture programme. The ETC pathway complements their exposure to grassroots soccer; accessing multiple soccer environments is anticipated to enhance individual player development through challenges that were not available to RTC players (e.g., training/competing with and against boys).^{4,5} ETCs must schedule their fixtures to avoid conflicting with grassroots commitments, which take priority for players. As such, ETC fixtures are held during school holidays or on evenings when players are not involved in grassroots matches or training.

The purpose of the new ETC pathway was to identify and develop future potential players by providing local, accessible high-quality training environments.⁶ The wider reach was theorised to offer more opportunities to players from under-represented groups in women's soccer (e.g., ethnic minority and lower socio-economic groups) to access an FA-licensed talent environment, consequently working towards the FA's strategic aim of increasing the diversity of players who progress through the talent pathway and into senior elite soccer.⁶

Stakeholder perspectives on socio-demographic factors are critical to advancing diversity, inclusivity, and accessibility in elite youth soccer. Strategic stakeholders include the sport's National Governing Body (NGB), who are crucial to implementing and monitoring successful TI and TD strategies⁷; operational stakeholders including academy managers, talent scouts, and coaches are regarded as the most significant stakeholders to impact TI and TD due to their direct influence on player recruitment and promoting inclusive environments.^{8,9} Existing stakeholder research, however, has been delimited to perceptions of TI and TD regarding technical and tactical skills, game awareness, and psychological attributes.^{4,10} Sociological factors (including socio-demographics) have been deemed less important in predicting future potential than the aforementioned factors.^{11–13} The FA's objective to increase the diversity of players within the girls' talent pathway reflects a strategic priority; considering the perspective of operational stakeholders will clarify whether ETC managers and coaches are acting in accordance to meet this objective.^{14,15} Furthermore, the paucity of

research on stakeholder perspectives of socio-demographic factors in elite youth soccer, combined with the influence of these factors on TI and TD,^{9,16–18} provides a rationale as to why this topic requires further exploration for both researchers and practitioners.

Despite the current lack of evidence on the influence of socio-demographic factors on TI and TD in elite youth soccer, there has been an emergence in literature on the socio-economic backgrounds of elite (youth) male and (senior) female soccer players. Within English male soccer academies, coaches, scouts, and recruiters may be more inclined to offer contracts to players from greater socio-economic backgrounds, consequently excluding players from lower socio-economic backgrounds from elite talent pathways despite being recognised for their talent and potential.¹⁹ Within female soccer research, evidence from the United States and Brazil suggests that elite senior female soccer is dominated by players from greater socio-economic backgrounds.^{20,21} Whilst this provides some evidence for players with higher socio-economic status having a greater likelihood of reaching elite senior status, it is uncertain whether stakeholders recognise this and are delivering initiatives aimed at promoting greater inclusion and access from lower socio-economic environments within female youth soccer. Furthermore, elite soccer pathways differ between nations,⁴ and it is yet to be determined whether socio-economic status impacts entry into elite female soccer pathways in England. The aforementioned research, however, highlights this may be a factor in reaching elite senior level and that talented players from lower socio-economic backgrounds may not be afforded the same opportunities to progress through talent pathways.

Socio-economic deprivation is often associated with ethnic minority groups in the United Kingdom²²; this intersection has been manifested in their lack of participation in the lower levels of grassroots sport.^{23–25} Grassroots soccer acts as the precursor to the elite talent pathway; despite this, there is a research deficit on this issue from an elite TI and TD perspective in male and female age-group soccer.²¹ Barriers ethnic minority groups may face when sustaining long-term engagement in grassroots soccer may include cultural and family expectations, prioritising education, religion, fear of discrimination, and lack of social support.^{25,26} It is undetermined as to whether these barriers exist in elite female youth soccer, where the playing expectations and demands are higher.

The combined effect of the re-structure of the FA girls' soccer talent pathway and the articulation by the FA of clear key performance indicators relating to increasing accessibility and inclusivity within this new infrastructure led to one clear research aim of this study. This study aimed to investigate stakeholder perceptions of the implementation of the ETC pathway, with specific focus on whether

socio-demographic factors are considered by strategic-, and operational-stakeholders, and coaches when attempting to enhance inclusion and access to the elite girls' talent pathway.

Methods

Study design, rigour and philosophical underpinnings

This study was developed in collaboration with the FA, through a series of meetings between the research team and stakeholders within the FA Women's Technical Division. At this point in the development of the research it was important to ensure that the study met the needs of the organisation, provided original knowledge, and used rigorous data collection methods.

The lead author was embedded within the FA as part of their PhD and had established good working relationships with many of the staff within the organisation, including participants within this study. This insider position enabled the lead author to gain understanding and familiarity of the elite female soccer talent pathway and thereby enhance the richness of interviews.²⁷ Their awareness and involvement in the pathway helped build trust and rapport with participants, supporting the breadth and depth of information provided. Recruiting participants based on their first-hand experiences within the talent pathway helped ensure credibility within the research. Despite the lead author's insider position within the FA, it may be argued that they held an outsider position due to the limited professional interaction they have with the participants and the lack of shared professional experiences working within an NGB, girls' soccer pathways, or as a soccer coach.²⁸ To ensure reflexivity, the research team worked as 'critical friends', and as a sounding board to challenge the lead author's interpretations, offering reflective feedback throughout data collection and analyses.²⁹ This occurred during regular meetings with the research team, who would often question the lead researcher in their approaches (e.g., could there be an alternative way of viewing your interpretation). The aim of this approach was to enhance awareness of subjectivities throughout the research process.³⁰ The research team included researchers who had experience working within elite men's and women's soccer, and researchers with qualitative methodological expertise.

This study is underpinned by a constructionist ontology (i.e., that reality is socially constructed) and relativist epistemology (i.e., reality is multiple, created, and mind dependent).³¹ This approach acknowledges that each participant will have different views of the ETC pathway based on their role within their organisation (The FA or an individual ETC) and their involvement with the new pathway's implementation. A sequential explanatory design was applied.

Participants and data collection

Upon ethical approval from a university ethics committee, quantitative data with respect to player ethnicity and socio-economic status was provided by the FA to facilitate discussions during stakeholder interviews. Both strategic and operational stakeholders were familiar with this data as it had previously been shared by the FA. Thus, incorporating this data as prompts during interviews would enable a deeper exploration of stakeholders' interpretations regarding the observed trends in player ethnicity and socio-economic data. This included anonymised player postcode ($n = 2940$) and ethnicity ($n = 2111$) data from 57 ETCs in operation during the 2022–23 season, and retrospective, anonymised player postcode data from 32 RTCs ($n = 1802$) and nine ACCs ($n = 533$) from the 2021–22 season. Postcode data was derived from their internal player registration base; ethnicity data was obtained through a demographic survey designed and distributed by the FA and Premier League (PL) which elicited a 71% response rate.

Six key strategic and operational stakeholders were identified as prospective participants. Strategic stakeholders (SS; $n = 2$) held positions in the FA Women's Technical Division and were involved with developing the new framework which underpinned the new ETC pathway. Operational stakeholders (OS; $n = 4$) were responsible for disseminating the new constructs and managed an ETC. OSs varied geographically, encompassing the North West, Midlands, East, and London/South East regions, offering varied experiences based on club infrastructure and local demographics. All stakeholders had a minimum of two years' experience within their organisation and were involved in the transition from RTC/ACC to ETC. Throughout these interviews, stakeholders emphasised the significance of ETC coaches in implementing the new TI and TD strategies that had been developed and disseminated. Coaches, therefore, were identified as a significant stakeholder group. Coaches (CS, hereafter; $n = 4$) also varied geographically, encompassing the North West, Midlands, London/South East and South West regions of England. Participant names are replaced with numbers (OS1, SS2, CS3, etc) in the following sections to ensure anonymity.

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data, and written informed consent was obtained prior to all interviews. Pilot interviews were conducted with members of the FA Women's Technical Division ($n = 3$) from the perspective of their strategic role ($n = 2$) or of an ETC manager ($n = 1$). This allowed for strategic and operational interview guides to be piloted, leading to minor refinements and removal of questions which were not aligned to the research aim. These interview guides were adapted prior to CS interviews, with input from an FA Women's Talent Technical Coach to ensure questions

were appropriate for this stakeholder group. Interview topics included: experiences within the former girls' elite talent pathway (what were the main aims or goals of the former RTC/ACC; what were some of the key successes and challenges of the former pathway from your perspective); transitioning from RTC/ACC to ETC (what were your initial thoughts when the restructure of the pathway was announced; do you believe the hybrid (grassroots) approach will be beneficial for player development); communication with other stakeholders (how do you work with other ETC staff during player recruitment; are there many opportunities to provide feedback to parents around their child's progress); perceived diversity, inclusivity, and accessibility of the ETC pathway (what were your initial thoughts when the FA shared player demographic figures following the first season; are you doing anything to ensure more players from diverse communities are accessing the ETC pathway); the future of the ETC and wider elite girls' talent pathway (how might diversifying the ETC pathway impact the next stages of the pathway and the senior game). Interviews were conducted online via Microsoft Teams by the lead researcher, generating recordings and transcripts which were shared with the research team. Interviews lasted between 39 and 87 min (Mean = 70 \pm 16 min).

Data analysis

Anonymised datasets for ETC players by ethnic group, and ETC, RTC, and ACC players by socio-economic group were shared by the FA. Ethnicity data was not collected prior to the pathways' restructure. Ethnic groups were divided into five categories based on the 2021 Census of England and Wales.³² Socio-economic groups were determined using the English Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD). IMD measures relative deprivation in small areas (i.e., streets and neighbourhoods) and ranks these areas based on several domains including income, employment, education, crime, and the quality of the local environment.³³ Small areas ($n = 32,844$) are ranked from 1 (most deprived area) to 32,844 (least deprived area) which determine the IMD decile they are grouped in, where IMD 1 represents the most deprived 10% of areas and IMD 10 represents the least deprived 10%. Descriptive statistics (frequency and percentage distributions) were calculated for the participants by ethnic and IMD groups.

A series of Chi-square (χ^2) tests were conducted to determine significance between ethnic and IMD group distributions with expected distributions obtained from Census 2021 data for females aged 8 to 16 by ethnic and IMD group.^{34,35} Cramer's V and odds ratios (OR) with 95% confidence intervals (CI) were used to measure effect size for ethnic and IMD groups, respectively.

Interview data were analysed using an inductive thematic analysis approach.³⁶ While thematic analysis

Table 1. Ethnicity distributions of ETC players for the 2022/23 season, and census 2021 data for the female population aged 8–16 years in England.

Ethnicity	n (%)	Census %	χ^2	V
Asian or Asian British	36 (1.7)	12.3	192.6*	
Black or Black British	29 (1.4)	6.1	77.3*	
Multiple ethnic groups	133 (6.3)	6.3	0.0	
White	1897 (89.8)	72.7	85.5*	
Other ethnic group	16 (0.8)	2.6	27.6*	
Total	2111		383.03*	0.21**

*Significant at $p < 0.01$ level; $df = 4$.

**Medium effect size.

commonly uses a storied approach, in this case there was a need to generate themes that could inform future practice, thus providing the FA with practical implications.³⁷ These themes allow for the capturing of diverse meanings in relation to a topic area, encompassing a broad variety of sub-themes which centre around a shared topic and not necessarily a shared meaning.³⁸ Potential themes were reviewed against the research aims to ensure they were relevant. As CSs were interviewed at a later date, a deductive approach was applied during analysis to consider this data in relation to existing themes. Additional themes generated from CS interviews were also considered during analyses; however, these were not included due to their lack of connections with the research aim.

Results

Quantitative analyses

In order to assess whether the implementation of the ETC pathway has influenced diversity, inclusivity, and accessibility of FA-licensed talent environments, player demographic data by ethnic and socio-economic group are presented. Frequency and percentage distributions of ETC players by ethnicity ($n = 2111$) are presented in Table 1. 10.2% of players identified as an ethnic minority, with players of multiple ethnic groups forming the largest proportion of ethnic minority players (6.3%). χ^2 analysis showed significant differences across the expected (i.e., Census 2021) and observed players identifying as White, Asian or Asian British, Black or Black British, and any other ethnic group. No significance was found in observed and expected distributions of multiple ethnic groups. Cramer's V analysis determined there was a medium effect size ($V = 0.21$) between observed and expected ethnic group distributions.

Table 2. IMD distributions for players in 57 ETCs (2022/23 season), 32 RTCs and 9 ACCs (2021/22 season).

Centre	n	IMD										OR (95% CI) IMD 10 vs. IMD 1	χ^2	P
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10			
ETC	2940	140	156	193	254	260	295	329	417	433	463	3.3 (2.7–4.0)	548.8	<0.01*
%		4.8	5.3	6.6	8.6	8.8	10.0	11.2	14.2	14.7	15.7			
RTC	1802	111	138	124	132	169	146	201	241	264	276	2.5 (2.0–3.1)	253.6	<0.01*
%		6.2	7.7	6.9	7.3	9.4	8.1	11.2	13.4	14.7	15.3			
ACC	533	11	21	35	50	50	66	61	74	77	88	8.0 (4.3–15.0)	135.4	<0.01*
%		2.1	3.9	6.6	9.4	9.4	12.4	11.4	13.9	14.4	16.5			

Table 3. Stakeholder beliefs of the ETC pathway.

Sub-themes	Representative Participant Quotations
Clarity of pathway aims	OS1: "Is this a community development programme or is it a talent programme? I think they're (FA) trying to get caught between the two and that's why I don't think it's actually hitting either at the moment."
– Purpose of the pathway (talent vs. participation)	SS2: "It's a talent ID opportunity ... in those communities with young people and their families who might find it hard and won't go through a traditional pathway."
– Long term aims	CS1: "I think there was a lack of understanding from people above me of what the Emerging Talent Centre was ... there was a real disconnect between 'are we looking for talent?' or 'are we putting on more community sessions?'"
	CS3: "I didn't know the club were necessarily going to buy into it [ETC] ... yeah, you can prepare them to play for a team, but fundamentally you're preparing them to play in whatever [grassroots] environment they're playing in."
Early successes	SS1: "We're aiming for 70 centres. This is going to open the door to so many other girls."
– Increased player numbers	SS2: "The shift to make things more localised so there's greater opportunity for girls. So girls who previously just physically could not get to, erm, a talent programme now don't have to worry about travelling 2–3 hours because now there's an ETC on their doorstep."
– Greater geographical spread of venues	OS4: "Hugely beneficial to girls and their parents because it's more flexible for them. They can access different environments."
– Flexibility of the programme	
Early concerns	SS1: "My question is, is the talent there? ... We don't know the answer to that because we've never given that opportunity."
– Lack of appropriate challenge	OS2: "There's a really big need for these centres. I think the problem is, and it's a fundamental flaw, is that you are never going to make professional footballers by having girls in once a week."
– More players may not translate to more talent	CS2: "I think an RTC model needs to be reintroduced again because the more contact time we have with talented players to challenge them will develop these skills they may not have [and will not develop in grassroots clubs]."

Frequency and percentage distributions of ETC ($n = 2940$), RTC ($n = 1802$), and ACC ($n = 533$) players by IMD are presented in Table 2. All three groups found the lowest proportion of players resided in IMD 1 areas (4.8%, 6.2%, and 2.1%, respectively) whilst the largest proportion resided in IMD 10 areas (15.7%, 15.3%, and 16.5%, respectively). In all three pathways, χ^2 statistics were shown to be significant ($p < 0.01$). OR revealed that players who were within the ETC pathway were 3.3 times more likely to reside in IMD 10 areas than IMD 1.

Qualitative analyses

Three themes with multiple sub-themes were developed during thematic analyses: (a) stakeholder beliefs of the

ETC pathway (Table 3); (b) perceived facilitators to increasing inclusivity and accessibility (Table 4); (c) perceived barriers to increasing inclusivity and accessibility (Table 5). Each theme is presented separately with participant quotations to support sub-themes.

Stakeholder beliefs of the ETC pathway

Whilst all stakeholders recognised the importance of ensuring the pathway is inclusive and accessible, there were differences in what the implementation of the ETC pathway aimed to achieve. Due to the FA's prioritisation of increasing the diversity of players who progress through the talent pathway, OSs who managed former RTCs felt the ETC pathway was not part of an elite talent

Table 4. Perceived facilitators to increasing inclusivity and accessibility.

Sub-themes	Representative participant quotations
Extending organisational reach – Connectivity as a tool for reaching diverse groups – Pathway access through community engagement	OS1: "We worked closely with the foundation to set up the centre without stepping on their toes." OS3: "Our community section of the club run a lot of, erm, inner city programmes and they're in an awful lot of schools, so we're really trying to link more heavily with them to-to understand, kind of, how we can support coaches potentially identify girls who are doing really well." CS2: "We've had a couple of girls who have come from our after-school clubs run by the Premier League Primary Stars team ... it does help because the wider reach of what we do here definitely allows us to access more people than a normal club would." OS4: "Ahead of a trials period, that taster sessions awareness piece, support from local Community Trust/Foundation to link in and that might have a continual effect each season [on TI]." SS1: "Girls don't come in at the start of the year and staying for the full year, they do it in blocks ... there's an ongoing opportunity for girls to be identified." CS1: "I'm leading the scouting stuff now ... we're trying to split ourselves across as many different areas [of the city]." CS3: "We do have people that recommend players via scout ... once the season's kind of got up and running, then it might be we're just getting them in for three-to-six training sessions."
Flexible approaches to TI – Expanding access through satellite centres – Identifying revolving talent through training blocks – Broadening access through additional trial dates – Scouting across diverse environments	SS2: "I think we are really missing a trick that we don't do anything with parents ... it's the parents of the kids out of the system that you need to educate to get them in." OS4: "Whether it's a full support package, whether it's monthly instalments, we would be open to anything to support people." OS1: "If you've got problems, come and see us, open door approach." CS4: "My boss [ETC manager] has been able to put people in contact with each other [to organise car-sharing]."
Engaging and supporting parents – Tailored financial support to enable access – Addressing transport challenges	

Table 5. Perceived barriers to increasing inclusivity and accessibility.

Sub-themes	Representative Participant Quotations
Socio-cultural – Ethnicity – Religion – Socio-economic status	OS1: "It's not because they're non-white they're not getting in, it's because at the moment they're not, sounds horrible, as talented, but that's because they've not been given the opportunity and exposure to be." OS2: "White middle-class parents who can now see that football could potentially be a career for their young person ... that tends to overwhelm parents that aren't able to do that, so players from a lower socio-economic background." OS3: "They [Muslim girls] might have the elder generation within their family that don't want them to be coached by a male coach." CS1: "One girl said, 'yeah my brother goes to [community session], but I'm not allowed to go ... my mum can't fill in the form because she can't read it'. So maybe we need to translate the forms into Urdu or other languages that are maybe more accessible."
Practical – Cost – Transport – Facilities	OS2: "I think it's a fallacy in some ways that it is a working class sport now. It's not anymore, it's a middle class sport. You need a lot of money to be able to play." OS2: "We try and make the barriers to getting here as low as possible, but I guess there's always going to be barriers when you're based in the middle of nowhere ... I think we miss a lot of players because they just literally cannot get here." OS1: "By default, the ones that can travel or can do trials, they're the ones to get seen and therefore they're the ones than get selected." CS4: "If you're finishing training at 9 o'clock, there's gonna be no public transport. I think the last bus might even be like 6:30pm ... they wouldn't even be able to get there."

programme but a community participation programme. Common concerns regarding the implementation of the new pathway centred around a lack of a fixture programme, limited contact time with players, players identifying as grassroots (non-academy) players, and lack of challenging opportunities to develop players; none of the identified concerns were around the lack of diversity of the players currently within the ETC pathway. SSs and OS4 acknowledged the benefits of players accessing multiple TD environments, whereby ETC players would participate in a regular games programme with their grassroots club and fixtures throughout school holidays with the ETC. Whilst many stakeholders focused on both the positive and negative impacts of grassroots soccer in relation to elite TD environments, it was not considered in regard to inclusion and access, and whether it was a positive for TI and TD for those from under-represented groups. Furthermore, stakeholders reported limited awareness of player diversity in grassroots soccer at both local and national levels. Consequently, it was difficult to determine the participation rates of under-represented groups in grassroots soccer and assess whether their representation within the ETC pathway reflected the broader grassroots population. This uncertainty raised concerns about whether enough players from under-represented groups were engaging in grassroots soccer and gaining the exposure needed to be identified as talented.

Regarding early successes as a result of implementing the new pathway, SSs were confident that this new flexible model which allowed players to participate in grassroots soccer would ensure a holistic approach to TD, encompassing social and psychological factors they may not encounter in an ETC environment (e.g., playing in mixed or boys' grassroots teams). This increased flexibility, along with the wider geographical spread of venues, gave stakeholders confidence that ETCs would increase the breadth and depth of players and, in the longer term (five or more years), diversify future senior England women's teams.

Perceived facilitators to increasing inclusivity and accessibility

Extending ETCs' organisational reach through connecting with other soccer environments was perceived as beneficial to increasing inclusivity and accessibility during the TI and player recruitment process. These environments included inner city schools, grassroots clubs, and community sports trusts and foundations who often work in local and diverse communities. Stakeholders considered connecting with coaches and workforces in these environments to offer TI opportunities outside of the traditional trialling process and ensure players (and parents) from diverse backgrounds are aware of the opportunities available to them. Stakeholders who worked within a community sports trust or foundation perceived existing sessions (e.g.,

Premier League Kicks) to be more diverse than the ETC environment. However, stakeholders did not clarify on whether they could work with existing staff in community organisations to increase their understanding on how to make the ETC more inclusive beyond the TI process (i.e., during training sessions).

All stakeholders agreed that trials, whilst allowing for a mass number of potential players to be observed, are not an inclusive TI method and a number of ETCs now utilise scouts and coaches in other soccer environments to identify talented players. One CS who also has a scouting role at their club emphasised the importance of scouting in different areas, including community programmes, to increase the diversity of players accessing elite talent environments. Despite this, there was insufficient clarity on whether the ETC had implemented measures to ensure the environment was inclusive and accessible to players from diverse backgrounds who may have been scouted. Commonalities among stakeholders included opportunities for more players to access an ETC environment through satellite centres (additional training environments for players unable to access the primary ETC venue), additional trials, and having players attend training 'blocks' rather than full seasons. OSs are encouraged by the FA to utilise satellite centres in diverse and deprived communities to offer TI opportunities in traditionally hard-to-reach communities. Within this study, no OS or CS worked within an ETC who utilised this satellite centre approach, however some OSs and CSs expressed the desire to deliver additional sites in future seasons, particularly in diverse communities.

Supporting parents through promoting local public transport routes, carshare opportunities, and financial support packages (for ETCs which charge fees) has resulted in increasing accessibility for a number of current players. CS2 explained how their ETC was located by the soccer club's stadium which was easily accessible by various types of public transport as well as major road networks; CS3 was aware that their manager had connected parents and players from the same grassroots clubs to offer carsharing. All stakeholders acknowledged that whilst parents of players who were registered to an ETC were aware of the pathway's affordability (free of charge or capped at £120 per season), it remained important to raise awareness among parents of girls not currently engaged with the pathway (particularly those from diverse backgrounds) regarding the accessibility and cost structure of the ETC provision. In doing so, stakeholders expect there to be an increase in players from these backgrounds.

Perceived barriers to increasing inclusivity and accessibility

Barriers were divided into two sub-themes: socio-cultural and practical. Stakeholders identified several barriers that

players from ethnic minority, socio-economically deprived, and religious backgrounds may face. Ethnic minority players were perceived to have less exposure to grassroots soccer and other competitive fixtures (e.g., school soccer teams), prioritise education over sport participation, and face cultural stereotypes regarding female soccer (i.e., soccer is traditionally seen as a 'male' sport). Many of these barriers were perceived to overlap with players from religious backgrounds, particularly Muslim girls who may attend mosques or partake in Islamic studies after school. Players from socio-economically deprived backgrounds were at a disadvantage of accessing the pathway due to the financial costs and travel demands, particularly to ETCs who operate out of venues which are not easily accessible by foot or public transport. Despite this, there were no long-term initiatives in place to ensure these groups were provided with bespoke TI opportunities to accommodate their cultural, financial, and religious needs. It was also unclear whether individual ETCs had implemented measures to foster inclusive and accessible environments for existing players from culturally diverse, religious, or lower socio-economic backgrounds. A number of OSs had held events within various local community groups to promote the ETC, however many of these were one-off events which they recognised may not have had an impact on increasing diversity within their ETC. Furthermore, the lack of representation in the ETC workforce may decrease the likelihood of these players attending a centre, particularly ETCs with no female or ethnic minority coaches.

Practical barriers may prevent participants from lower socio-economic backgrounds from joining; whilst some ETCs are free of charge, others charge an annual fee to ensure financial sustainability. OSs expressed concerns around the inconsistencies in fee structures, where ETCs who charge may predominantly attract players from higher socio-economic backgrounds. They believed this may have resulted in a number of players having to choose between the ETC or grassroots soccer, despite their intention of offering this hybrid model to optimise TD. Other costs associated with youth soccer including travel, equipment, and kit were perceived as unnecessarily expensive. Challenges around facilities, more so for ETCs unaffiliated with professional soccer clubs, indicated difficulties in securing appropriate training times which may limit access for many players.

Discussion

This study aimed to investigate early perceptions of the implementation of the new ETC pathway, with emphasis on how socio-demographic factors are considered during TI and player recruitment to foster inclusive and accessible talent environments. The quantitative data offered insight into socio-demographics of ETC players registered within the first season, highlighting that socio-economic groups

and many ethnic minority groups were not representative of the national population. The FA had previously disseminated this data to operational stakeholders, who subsequently shared it with coaches within their respective ETCs. Therefore, incorporating this data within the qualitative interviews allowed for the exploration of perceptions of these socio-demographic factors. Consequently, this data facilitated an understanding of how these factors may influence CS's approaches to TI, OS's approaches to cultivating inclusive environments, and SS's approaches to strategic changes to the ETC pathway with regards to increasing diversity, inclusion and access.

Qualitative findings offered a unique view from a sample of key stakeholders ($n = 10$) working within the girl's elite soccer talent pathway. Stakeholder beliefs of the pathway were categorised into three sub-themes: (a) clarity of pathway aims; (b) early successes; (c) early concerns. Three factors were perceived to facilitate inclusivity and accessibility within ETC environments for new and existing players: (a) extending organisational reach; (b) flexible approaches to TI; (c) engaging and supporting parents. Barriers were perceived to be a result of two primary factors: (a) socio-cultural barriers; (b) practical barriers. Practical implications which stakeholders may wish to consider are also suggested throughout this section.

Player ethnicity and socio-economic data

Despite the FA's aim of increasing the diversity players who progress through the talent system, the limited number of ethnic minority players within the ETCs' first season is not representative of the national population data, which found that 27.3% of females aged 8–16 years identify as an ethnic minority.³⁴ All ethnic minority groups, excluding players who identifying as having multiple ethnic groups, are significantly under-represented when compared to the national population (see Table 1); whilst those identifying as White are significantly over-represented.

The lack of clarity on the ethnic minority representation in youth female grassroots soccer renders it inconclusive as to whether ETC data is representative of the grassroots population, thus Census data was used as comparison. The paucity of quantitative research with regard to ethnic minority representation in female soccer and other elite sport pathways highlights the need for researchers to continue investigating this topic across various nations and sports. Furthermore, the FA did not collect ethnicity data for players within the former RTC and ACC pathways, therefore it is unclear as to whether the ETC pathway has resulted in an immediate increase in ethnic minority players within the elite pathway. Despite the lack of available data from grassroots soccer populations, other sports' elite female talent pathways, and other nations' elite soccer talent pathways to contextualise these findings, this

data establishes a relevant benchmark the FA can strategically progress on a season-by-season basis.

Player socio-economic status data indicated significant differences when compared to national census data. The expected distribution indicates a relatively even distribution of the female population aged 8–16 years across the ten IMD groups, however the disproportionate representation of ETC players from higher socio-economic backgrounds (IMDs 8–10) replicates that of the former RTC and ACC pathways (see Table 2).³⁵ This suggests no immediate changes in the socio-economic status of players accessing the FA elite talent pathway, however the rationale for this over-representation of players from higher socio-economic backgrounds remains unclear at present. It is well documented that girls from lower socio-economic backgrounds have significantly lower participation rates in sports (including soccer) which require a financial membership^{39,40}; the present study contributes novel evidence to this topic from an elite soccer pathway perspective. It is undetermined whether this is similar for female soccer pathways in other nations or other elite sport pathways, however researchers may wish to consider investigating this topic to ensure elite soccer pathways are inclusive and accessible irrespective of a players' socio-economic background.

Stakeholder beliefs of the ETC pathway

Each stakeholder group held different views of the aims of the ETC pathway. Despite OSs supporting the FA's decision in restructuring the girls' talent pathway to ensure greater access for more potential players as a primary mechanism to increase the pool of talented players, there were differences in what stakeholders perceived the ETCs will achieve. A lack of stakeholder coherence and understanding of the purpose of elite pathways is not uncommon among stakeholders,⁴¹ particularly as new pathways are implemented and are within their infancy. The FA may consider working with various stakeholders to redefine the pathway aims based on the experiences of those operating individual ETC environments, offering a more transparent process when restructures occur.

This lack of coherence may be due to ETCs not being characterised as academy environments, which traditionally focus on TD and are based on male youth soccer structures.⁴² ETCs were implemented to provide TI opportunities (i.e., opportunities to enter an FA-licensed talent environment) to a wider pool of talented players, primarily grassroots soccer players who are building their competitive experience and may benefit from additional training sessions at an FA-licensed centre. With respect to game exposure, players receive most of their competitive game exposure through their grassroots teams; ETCs offer a minimum of one game every six weeks against other ETCs, club-funded academy squads, or local (mixed, boys or girls') grassroots teams to try and ensure players

gain exposure to a wide array of opposing teams. Whilst SSs viewed ETCs as an addition to grassroots soccer, OSs who were involved with the former RTC pathway had reservations on whether grassroots soccer was optimal for player development. This is similar to previous research where rugby league academy coaches perceived a lack of appropriate challenge at pre-academy (grassroots) level as a barrier to optimising long-term development in players who enter academy environments later than their teammates.⁴³ In contrast, various stakeholders (head coaches, sporting directors) across seven elite European women's soccer clubs highlighted grassroots soccer leagues as the origin of the most talented female players within their clubs, preferring players to play in these leagues for as long as possible.⁴ Organisational and structural changes, such as the decision for players to participate in grassroots clubs, are often met with ambivalence by stakeholders.⁴⁴ Whilst the ETC pathway is in its infancy, it remains a challenge when determining whether grassroots soccer is effective for elite female youth soccer development, therefore practitioners may wish to reconsider the role of grassroots soccer in this context in the future. Additionally, SSs may wish to understand this topic from the perspective of grassroots soccer coaches to gain insight into their understanding and beliefs regarding the new female elite soccer talent pathway.

Despite the inconsistency in stakeholder beliefs regarding grassroots soccer, there were several factors which stakeholders perceived as successes when evaluating the implementation of the new pathway. Increasing the geographical coverage of the elite talent pathway across England was vital in ensuring more players had access to the pathway, thus creating a larger talent pool and minimising any chances of missing future elite players.⁴⁵ Previous research has determined that entry into elite (male) soccer programmes is unequal and favours players within close proximity to talent centres.⁴⁶ Whilst it is yet to be determined whether this is the same in youth female soccer, stakeholders may wish to map the areas in which current ETC players reside in order to assess these inequalities in the female game in England.

Perceived facilitators to increasing inclusivity and accessibility

A number of benefits were associated with extending an ETC's organisational reach to enhance TI opportunities. Connectivity within and across organisations, including club communities or foundations, external community organisations, and schools were mentioned by all stakeholders as potential environments for both TI and promoting ETCs. Football in the Community (FitC), Community Sports Trusts and Foundations, who oversee community participation provisions including Premier League Kicks

and FA Wildcats, were launched to build greater connections across soccer clubs and local communities, focusing on promoting inclusion through sport.⁴⁷ OSs may consider working with the community programmes ran by their affiliated club as this may aid in ETCs diversifying their respective talent pools. Evidence suggests that male PL Kicks participants may be identified as talented and offered trials to elite soccer academies⁴⁸; despite the lack of research on this topic in female soccer, one CS in the present study discussed the progression of players from community programmes into the ETC. Identifying players in environments which are often overlooked by coaches and scouts presents the ETC pathway with a unique opportunity to work with organisations to target players from under-represented backgrounds, whilst also establishing greater connectivity with various organisations to ensure bespoke TI and scouting opportunities are available for players.³ Furthermore, learning from organisations which are already deemed inclusive and accessible may only further benefit ETCs in their aim of increasing the diversity of players within the pathway.⁴⁹

The current lack of research- and practice-based evidence regarding the most appropriate methods of identifying talented young female players renders it inconclusive whether open trials are an effective recruitment strategy.⁵⁰ The lack of scouts in girls' soccer results in players attending mass open trial events. CSs outlined that it is common for ETCs to host one single trial event or multiple trials in the same locations, and the high volume of aspiring players who attend trials limits the effectiveness of TI in these environments. Successes in delivering trials in the male game are likely to have driven TI decisions in the female game, however the expansion of the talent pool and increased professionalisation of female soccer prompts a need for more effective, flexible, and comprehensive methods of TI in girls and women's soccer in order to maximise recruitment.⁵¹

Additionally, CSs emphasised the lack of diversity at these trials, suggesting that players who were involved with the former RTC/ACC pathway, or had connections with players who were part of the pathway, were the majority of attendees. It is uncertain as to why this may be, however ensuring trial dates are promoted on social media, through schools and grassroots teams, and within local communities is crucial to increasing the awareness of opportunities to enter the pathway to both parents and potential players. One CS reflected on how their organisation advertised trials on their website, but the expression of interest form captured applicants for both the ETC and club-funded academy, highlighting that OSs may be required to consider a different approach to reach a wider, more diverse group of potential players. Discussing the most effective way of disseminating information regarding trials, or the ETC pathway as a whole, with parents who are not familiar with the pathway may prove beneficial to

individual ETCs to become more representative of their local and the national population.

Perceived barriers to increasing inclusivity and accessibility

Socio-cultural barriers in regard to TI and sustaining participation within the ETC pathway were centred around ethnic minority and lower socio-economic status groups. All stakeholders were unsurprised by the low ethnic minority player population within the ETC pathway (Table 2), and recognised that further work is needed to ensure ETCs are representative of their local populations. The historical exclusion of girls from under-represented groups from organised sport may have contributed to enduring social inequalities, which may aid in explaining the limited representation of these groups within the ETC pathway.⁵² Although limited, studies have shown that sport participation benefits from a broader and more diverse social network.⁵³ Players from under-represented backgrounds may benefit from connecting with players with higher social and sporting capital (e.g., existing ETC players) to educate others from their respective communities and remove any stigmas around sport and female soccer participation.⁵⁴ There is some evidence in professional male soccer that greater (ancestral and cultural) diversity enhances both club and national teams' performances,^{55,56} yet it remains inconclusive as to whether these findings are transferable to female soccer. Nonetheless, implementing strategies which target players from under-represented groups to access the ETC pathway may encourage more girls from diverse communities to participate in soccer at any level, educate parents on the elite soccer pathway, and allow individual ETCs to learn and adapt their environments based on the needs of their local communities.

The lack of ethnic minority representation within the ETC pathway may be due to their lack of exposure to grassroots soccer, prioritising education, religious influence, and cultural stereotypes.^{23,57,58} All stakeholders within the present study highlighted these as barriers which ethnic minority girls may face when attempting to enter the elite pathway. Communities with migration histories may have a lack of sporting capital due to the beliefs and norms set by older generations. Stakeholders, however, have the potential to drive positive change within these communities by educating parents, resulting in changing beliefs and norms set by older generations, thus increasing young girls' exposure to TI and TD opportunities.⁴⁸ Stakeholders may benefit from engaging with parents from these communities through workshops or information evenings to understand how the ETC pathway can become more inclusive to players from various cultures, religions, and traditions.⁵⁹

Alongside cultural barriers, practical barriers were widely recognised among players from lower socio-

economic backgrounds. Financial implications of girls' soccer were considered a barrier to the ETC pathway by all stakeholders in this study, with OS2 recognising that their ETC has a higher ratio of players from high socio-economic backgrounds and greater access to disposable income, which reaffirms the socio-economic background of ETC players on a national level (Table 2). This is consistent with previous research which has determined that participation in organised sport is greater among young people from higher socio-economic backgrounds and greater household income due to the costs associated with competitive youth sport.^{24,60} All stakeholders were familiar with the socio-economic player data shared within this study, however their shared expression of disappointment was rendered a predictable outcome based on their past experiences working in elite girls' soccer. In order to ensure the ETC pathway is accessible to players from lower socio-economic backgrounds, OSs may wish to consider using facilities within areas of higher deprivation. Despite higher quality facilities often being located in affluent, suburban areas away from inner city areas,^{61,62} many ETCs have established partnerships with local colleges and universities which may be accessible to a wider pool of players. These facilities are often on public transport routes, and many schools and colleges are existing sites for FA Wildcats and PL Kicks sessions. Stakeholders may wish to consider the impact of creating partnerships with local schools, colleges and universities with facilities (i.e., artificial grass pitches) to engage players from under-represented backgrounds.

Limitations

This study represents perceptions following the implementation of the new ETC pathway; as ETCs continue to evolve, stakeholder perceptions may shift accordingly. The introduction of Women's Super League Football, an independent company overseeing the women's professional game in England (Barclays Women's Super League and Women's Super League 2) from 2024, also has the potential reshape the elite talent pathway. Participants are limited to two FA Women's Technical Division staff, four ETC managers, and four coaches, all with prior experience in FA-licensed centres, thus limiting the generalisability of these findings. Qualitative data collection revealed that stakeholders had greater consideration for socio-demographic factors linked to access and logistics (e.g., travel, costs); factors more closely aligned to diversity (i.e., ethnicity) appeared secondary to logistical concerns and were not explicitly considered by stakeholders in their decision-making or operational delivery processes. This suggests that for a number of stakeholders, these factors are not currently embedded within the operationalisation of the pathway. Interview guides may have benefitted from separating discussions of diversity and accessibility to explore

perceptions in isolation. The paucity of TI research in female soccer resulted in numerous comparisons and findings from male soccer, however it is currently unclear whether these results are applicable to the female game. Furthermore, perceptions of parents, who are one of the most proximal stakeholders to impact TD and entry into TD environments,⁹ and players themselves were not considered within the present study; their perceptions of the ETC pathway, particularly perceived feelings of exclusion of players from under-represented groups, may be a topic of consideration for future research.⁶³

Conclusion

Novel insights into perceptions of the new FA girls' ETC pathway revealed conflicting stakeholder beliefs of the pathways' purpose, resulting in challenges regarding the implementation of the ETC pathway. With respect to diversity, inclusion and access, various facilitators to increasing inclusivity and accessibility were identified. Addressing these socio-cultural and practical barriers remains crucial in order for players from under-represented groups to have access to TI opportunities and sustain their engagement within the ETC pathway. Evidence-based strategies are needed to overcome these perceived barriers and promote diversity in future elite squads.

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Consent to participate

Written informed consent to participate in this study was granted by all participants involved in interviews via email. All participants provided consent to conduct the study, record the interview via Microsoft Teams, and for any quotations to be used within the study. Participant information including their name, job role at the FA (if applicable) and ETC they were employed with (if applicable) remain anonymous.

Consent for publication

Written informed consent for publication of this study was provided by all participants involved in interviews.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Ethical considerations

This study received gatekeeper approval from the FA for the use of quantitative, demographic player data on October 18, 2023. As this data was anonymised and retrospective, individual participant consent was not required. Participant data will not be shared with third parties. This study was approved by the University of the


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