

Theses of Doctoral (PhD) Dissertation

Talent Development Programmes at the Hungarian Football Academies

An Educational-Pedagogical Survey of the Academies in Comparison of the Institutions in the Capital City and in the Provinces

Dávid Rábai

Thesis Supervisor: Dr. Imre Fenyő



UNIVERSITY OF DEBRECEN
Doctoral School in the Humanities
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Statement of Purpose and Description of the Subject

Articles published in domestic and international literature completely agree that football academies have become an important means of promoting the development of talented young players in the recent years. Football academies are not be considered as vocational training institutions of sportsmen, but as a means of finding the most talented players (Barnat et al. 2011). A number of experts claim that one of the possible ways for the emergence of Hungarian football is leading through the academies that bring up players of international standards first for domestic clubs, and then for the international football world.

Authors of international and Hungarian articles contain several approaches to the role of football academies, also mentioning the functions of the academies in talent development. The surveys partly address the importance of the social background of the athletes, partly their relationships with their coaches, and partly the possible career paths of the young players. Most of the research projects, however, are not extended to the regional embeddedness of the football academies, although the pools from which these academies select their students probably show a considerable regional variety. We concentrated our research on the comparison of the recruitment systems and talent development schemes of the academies in the capital city and the provinces.

The importance of social background has been pointed out by several authors (e. g. Bourke 2003, Tóth and Dóczi 2017), since the manifestation of talent requires the advantageous social and environmental conditions. Nesti and Sulley (2015) argue that family background, and the participation of the parents in the development work, play an important role in the work carried out with the students of the academies. The contribution of a family to the start of the career of a young athlete has an effect not only on the individual, but also on the success of an institution. An indispensable foundation stone of talent development of sporting children is the powerful family background and the presence of supportive parents.

When we focussed on the differences in the social background in the capital city and in the provinces, we relied on the research findings of the project titled Magyar Ifjúság [Hungarian Youth] of 2016. The parents of the students coming from villages usually have lower qualifications than those of the youngsters from the cities. As for cultural capital, approximately ten percent of the students belong to the group oriented towards high culture, and they mostly live in Budapest. Those who have a lower cultural capital and prefer lighter entertainment tend to live in the provinces (Szabó and Hires-László 2018). Articles in the

reated special literature claim that young people in the capital city do more sports than their peers who live in the provinces (Fekete and Tibori 2016).

Another branch of research projects dealing with football academies concentrates on the importance of the relationship between the coaches and their players. The researches have found, among others, that talent development plays an extremely important role in building confidence between the coaches and their players, and in the personality development activities of the coaches. Some researchers mention that, in the opinion of the players, a coach is supposed to be a good teacher, and at the same time, an example, an idol, who is capable of guiding and instructing them in all aspects of life (Harasztiné 2002, Christensen 2009, Clarke and Harwood 2014). The authors of some of the articles also point out that the connection between coach and player should not be restricted to professional issues, but young athletes should have an opportunity to contact their coaches with the problems of their private life (Révész et al., 2013, Csáki et al., 2013).

In addition to what has been outlined above, the research projects were extended to the vision the young sportsmen have about their future and their possibilities that open up when they have left the academies. The findings included the influence of the parents, who may hinder or even prevent the professional career of their own children. A sense of uncertainty on the side of the parents is also mentioned, as the parents often cannot be sure that their children will have a real professional football career (Harwood et al. 2010). In international literature we may read about several programmes and career opportunities that are found in different countries, and the purpose of all those programmes is to support young footballers and offer them a chance to launch their sports career. These articles show the usual practice in different countries (e. g. England, Ireland, the Netherlands). The writings show in what proportions the graduates of the academies are employed, and what opportunities are awaiting them (e. g. Van Hoecke et al. 2012).

As for the differences between the capital city and the provinces, the articles clearly indicated that close to two thirds of the young people in the provinces opted to go to vocational schools after primary education, and the possibilities of further education are meagre for children living in villages, so the gap between students in the capital and those in the provinces is becoming wider. The students coming from a rural-provincial environment tend to lag behind (Kovách 2012). Several articles in related literature deal with the image that young sportsmen have about their future, mentioning that children in a rural-provincial environment usually have a more negative view of their future perspectives (Bihari 2019).

When a foreign career is discussed, it is usually the students in the provinces who plan a career abroad. The same applies to the students living in county towns and smaller towns. Almost three quarters of the young athletes who are planning to abroad intend to do so for financial reasons. The proportion of students who intend to go aboard is the lowest in the capital city (Tóth and Dóczi 2017).

It is clear from both the domestic and international literature that the social background, the relationship between coach and player and the vision of the future of the players are dominant elements in the talent development programmes of football academies. The findings of the research projects suggest that the social situation of the young athletes and the attitude of their families (particularly that of their parents) to sport has a decisive influence in the talent development of young members of football academies. The coach-player relationship should not be restricted to the professional instruction in sports, but also the talent development of the players. It is indispensable that players may rely on their coaches not only in issues related to the sports, but also in discussing and solving personal problems. The role of the parents also has a powerful influence on the vision and ideas the students have about their future.

The main objective of our doctoral dissertation is, based upon the main points and findings of international professional literature, to provide a comprehensive insight into the characteristics and peculiarities of the talent development work of the football academies included in our observations, concentrating especially upon educational-pedagogical and sports-educational issues. Since the football academies in the provinces and in the capital city constituted the basic population for our research, we wished to achieve conclusions regarding the possible similarities and differences in the capital city-provinces dichotomy, from the main aspects of our survey. Furthermore, we intended to map the legal background of the academies and the characteristics of recruiting players and coaches to the academies. Since we assumed that the educational-pedagogical work of the academies is an indispensable component of the talent development work of the academies, we intended to examine the section responsible for educational activities. As part of that direction of our research, we included the quality and standards of the educational programmes and facilities of the academies. The relevance of that work was reinforced by findings Double Pass, an independent auditing company from Belgium. The documents available to us did not draw up a very bright picture, since the auditions conducted so far (2013, 2016 and 2019) revealed serious shortcomings in the educational and social work of some of the academies. We

therefore found it imperative to closely inspect the educational-pedagogical documentation of the institutions. The importance of this examination is underpinned by the fact that the academies do not only perform sports instruction but also regular, curricular education. It is thus important to know how these functions are fulfilled at these institutions.

Further objectives of our research include the examination of the social background, interactions of the young footballers learning and developing at the academies, their experience in connection with their own respective academy, their satisfaction with the institution, their vision of their own future and, last no least, their relationship with their coaches. Our overall goal is conducting a research project of high professional and scholarly standards about the world of football academies in Hungary the findings of which will be useful as a starting point for further research both for education and sports studies.

An Outline of the Methods Applied

Our research was composed of quantitative and qualitative methods. Data gathering was performed in the form of personal field work on location at all the six academies in the period from January to May 2019.

In the quantitative phase we handed out a paper-based questionnaire that we developed for that specific purpose to the members of the academies to complete. The coaches supervised the completion of the questionnaires. We were also present when the students of some of the academies supplied their answers to the questions, whereas some academies returned the questionnaires to us by mail. Once all the questionnaires have been collected, the data gathered at the different bases of replacement were loaded into a data base and analysed according to specific research aspects. For the statistical analysis, SPSS 21 mathematical statistical software package was applied. For our analyses, $p<0,05$ level of significance has been regarded as decisive.

Several methods have been used for the statistical analyses, most frequently the cross-table analysis, with which we examined the recruitment of the members of the academies, their social background, the quality of their relationship with their coaches and their ambitions for the future. In addition to that, we used logistic regression analysis in order to learn about the way young people selected an institution, and what factors influenced them in their decisions (in the provinces and in the capital city). In the course of the logistic regression analysis, we identified the academies in the provinces and in the capital city (3 in the provinces and 3 in the capital) as a dependent two-variable, in which the value of 0 was

attached to the academies in the provinces, and the value of 1 to those in the capital city. Two settlement types were assigned as reference categories. In our regression analysis, we transcoded every category into a two-value variable, and that is how the settlement categories (0=farm, village; 1=towns) were generated. Also, a similar method was used for grade point average (0=below grade point average 4; 1=at least GPA 4 and above), attending another academy before (1=yes; 2=no), highest qualifications of the mother and the father (0=8 elementary to secondary; 1=college to advanced academic degree), envisioning a career abroad in the future (1=yes; 2=no) and a former sports career of one of the parents or an elder sibling (1=yes, 2=no). For studying the social background of the members of the football academies, we created indexes. A two-value variable was established for surveying the objective financial situation (0 or 1) of the families of footballers as well. The index contains the assets the family of a young footballer possesses, and in this way we are able map the differences between the financial situation of students coming from the provinces and those who live in the capital city. The variables that are used to measure the consumption of cultural capital are also based upon a binary system (0 or 1). In this way it was possible to create the variables suitable for measuring the consumption of cultural capital, and identify the differences between students in the provinces and those in the capital in terms of cultural habits and customs.

In the qualitative part of our survey, we analysed the documents of the football academies related to their educational programmes, and also conducted interviews with the coaches working at the academies and the heads of their educational-social departments. During the interviews with the coaches, the questions asked included how talented they find today's young footballers, what the main motivating factors are for the members of the academies and why they have chosen an academy-level replacement training institution. We also intended to find out that whether, in the opinion of the coaches, the children consciously prepared for a professional football career, and to what extent was it their own choice, or their parents'. We wondered whether the coaches notice it when a student has some problem, and how common this experience is in their practice. Do the children apply to their coaches for help, and if they do, what are the most common problems because of which they need help? Who may the coaches apply for help when they encounter some problem, is there any formal scheme of cooperation between the coaches and other teachers of the boarding school? We also asked the coaches whether they find the ambitions of their students regarding a foreign career, and are the students of our academies capable of competing with their foreign

counterparts? We made efforts to formulate the questions to be asked the coaches in a way that those questions are, at least in certain subjects, comparable with the questions asked the students.

We asked the heads of the educational-social departments of the academies about the reasons why they decided to work at the academy, and asked them to describe the life, characteristics and work at their respective sections at the academy, including the pedagogical programmes that they follow. We also requested them to point out the areas that are in need of improvement within their sections.

A List of the Findings in a Breakdown According to our Hypotheses

Our first hypothesis was that the academies also treated regular education as a priority, in addition to football training, and to that end, they had established professional connections with institutions of secondary education. Our preliminary assumption was also that the educational-pedagogical programmes of the academies were of high standards and elaborate, and the academies placed great emphasis on operating their educational-pedagogical sections. These hypotheses were only partially verified by our research findings.

In the course of our examinations we found that the football academies basically attribute due significance to general education (the differences are caused by the differences between the open and closed types of institutions), since personality development constitutes a major part of their sense of mission, and they are also in a partnership with several institutions of education (or, in the case of a closed academy, the teaching of the students takes place in the training centre itself) in order to provide the students with adequate school education, in addition to their football training. It turns out, among others, from the interviews conducted with the heads of the educational-social sections of the institutions, that they take into consideration the distances between home-school-training centre, and that is how they attempt to find the best school for their students. On the other hand, the examination revealed that the quality of the educational-pedagogical programmes were of extremely low quality. The programmes are far behind the requirements of both form and content and are, at the same time, rather heterogeneous, as there appears to be no standardization. The availability of the educational-pedagogical programmes is strongly limited, which is indicated by the fact that only 6 institutions, out of the 19 football academies of Hungary, made available their relevant documents. The interviews conducted with the heads of the educational-social sections of the institutions also suggest that the heads of the sections themselves are aware of

the shortcomings. They also find it necessary to start workshops that would serve as forums to discuss professional issues. In the lack of such discussion forums, each academy practically created its own educational-social section, the way they pleased. All this was convincingly reinforced by the 2016 and 2019 audits of Double Pass. The experts of the Belgian company pointed out, among others, the lack of communication as one of the major discrepancies in the work of the educational-social section.

We therefore concluded that, despite the initiatives and the formal existence of educational-social sections at the academies, there is still a wide range of problems in the area that needs to be remedied as soon as possible.

In our second hypothesis we supposed that the majority of the young player became football academy members by their own choice, their selection of an institution was significantly influenced by the prospects of a future career as footballers, and the elder siblings and/or parents also pursued football as their main sport. According to our preliminary hypothesis, there was a considerable difference between the social background of the athletes from the provinces and those from the capital city. Similarly, we believed that similar differences existed between them in their subjective and objective financial situations and the cultural capital. According to our presupposition, the football academists were not overtly religious in general, and the players from the provinces tended to be more religious. This hypothesis proved to be partially right.

Almost the entire population of the members of the academies (89%) told us that going to the academy was their own choice, but their selection of the specific institution was, according to our analysis, not primarily motivated by their future professional career, but rather by the fact that they had been members at other academies earlier had done sports ($p=0,000$). The results also suggested that one of the parents or siblings of the majority of the academists had done sports earlier, and most of them had been football players. In that respect, there is a considerable difference between the provinces and the capital ($p=0,032$), as in the capital we find a much higher number of young players whose parents/siblings had done sports before, than in the provinces. On the other hand, we were unable to detect considerable differences in terms of social background, subjective and objective financial situation or the cultural capital between academy members from the provinces and the capital city. There were, however, significant differences in terms of home settlement ($p=0,000$), as 35% of the footballers at the capital city live in Budapest, but only 1% of the students of the academies in the provinces live in the capital. It is remarkable that the students attending the

academies of the central region amount to 42% of all the academy members, that is, nearly half of the students study at the institutions of the capital city. It means that 11,500 students, in the age range of 10-19 years, go to the academies of Budapest, which raises the question how proportionally the academies were arranged nationwide. In terms of religiousness, it was found that 54% of the academy members interviewed regarded themselves as religious, following the teachings of the church, or are religious privately, outside the church. The difference between the members of the academies is significant ($p=0,048$) on behalf of the students from the provinces.

*We formulated two presuppositions for our **third hypothesis**. As per the first (a), both the players from the provinces and from the capital are satisfied with the skills and qualifications of their coaches, they find the work with them satisfactory. Furthermore, the players from both backgrounds are satisfied with their own learning efficiency. In the opinion of the players, the coaches pay due attention to their results, and in that respect there is no considerable difference between the young players from the provinces and the capital city. Most of them report that the coaches primarily motivate, praise and punish them mostly verbally. There is no noteworthy difference between the two academy groups in terms of dealing with the private problems of the players either. Most students tend to turn to their parents when they have some problem both in the provinces and in the capital city, and the coaches are less popular in that respect. Our assumption that the players of both the academies in the provinces and in the capital city spend most of their free time with their friends, was only partially verified by our findings.*

Our results reflect that a very high proportion of the players (97%) of both the academies in the provinces and in the capital city are satisfied with the professional skills and qualifications of their coaches, and 56% of them find the work with their coaches very good. In connection with the learning efficiency of the students, however, we detected a major difference ($p=0,007$) between the two academy groups. Students of the academies in the provinces are apparently more satisfied with the progress of their studies than their counterparts in the capital. Similarly, we detected considerable differences ($p=0,000$) in the way the students regarded the attitude of their coaches to monitoring their learning efficiency. In that respect, the students in the capital city are a lot more dissatisfied with their coaches. As the players report, the coaches primarily motivate them (96 %) and reward them (89 %) verbally. In that, no major difference was detected between the two groups. Punishment was found to be different, however. Remarkable differences were found in the methods of punishment

between the two academy groups. At the academies in the capital, verbal punishment ($p=0,005$), and extra training (0,002), as well as the prohibition of the travel to home ($p=0,014$) are primarily used, whereas in the provinces the students are prohibited to go out of the institution on a leave ($p=0,000$).

According to our research findings, the students in the capital city appear to struggle more problems than their colleagues in the provinces. The difference is significant ($p=0,000$). Similarly considerable are the differences in home sickness ($p=0,001$), exhaustion, tiredness ($p=0,025$) that apparently all characterize students in the capital city to a larger extent. Our hypothesis that students mostly approach their parents in the case of a problem (80%) was verified. There are, however, differences between the two groups of academies when the students do turn to their coaches ($p=0,019$), since 20% of the footballers in the capital city expect help and guidance in such cases, only 12% of those in the provinces expect the same. Altogether, the coaches are in the third place, as only 16% of all the young players identified them as the person they would approach for guidance and assistance. The members of the football academies tend to spend their free time with their friends both at the institutions in the capital city and in the provinces (31 and 25% respectively). In terms of spending free time, there is a considerable difference between the students of the two academy groups ($p=0,050$).

According to the second (b) presupposition of our hypothesis, the coaches usually consider their young footballers as capable and talented, and they find most of the problems in the motivation of the students. According to the presupposition, the members of the academies do not always come to the institutions because they themselves want to, but they are often strongly influenced by their parents. We believed that the students often contact their coaches in connection with problems in their private life, and when the coaches themselves are in need of help, they may approach the educational-social sections of their institutions. These presuppositions were partially confirmed by our findings.

In the opinion of the coaches, the young players today are talented indeed, but the respondents pointed out the serious shortcomings in their motivation. According to the views of the experts, parents do not have a powerful influence on the choice of the students. The coaches believe that it is mostly the individual decision of the students. The coaches do not believe that they are in a particularly close relationship with their students; when the stuents contact them in connection with some sort of a problem, that is usually a professional and not

a personal one. When the coaches encounter some problem, they may, in turn, apply to the educational-social section; that is how the formal connections function within the institutions.

We divided our fourth hypothesis into two presuppositions as well. The first (a) assumption was that the majority of the students of the academies in the provinces and in the capital city do not intend to give up football when they have finished their studies at their respective institution. As for further qualifications, the students of the academies both in the provinces and in the capital city have a good chance of acquiring GCSE, but it is the academists in the capital city who see a higher chance of acquiring a college or university degree. As for the chances of a professional football career, in our assumption the academists in the capital are considerably more confident than their colleagues in the provinces. We did not believe that the academists in either the capital or in the provinces were planning to change club and continue their career at a different academy. On the other hand, we supposed that almost every football academist was entertaining the idea of a career abroad, and we did not suppose a considerable difference between the capital and the provinces in that respect. Our presupposition that the players both in the capital city and in the provinces intended to embark on a career abroad because of the much higher income was partially verified by our findings.

A high proportion of our respondents (97%) does not plan to give up football. As for obtaining qualifications, members of both academy groups see little chance of obtaining vocational qualification, but they see a secondary school graduation as a realistic option. They are not that optimistic about a college or university degree although, contrary to our original assumption, there was no big difference between the capital city and the provinces in that respect. In connection with a professional career, the academists from Budapest, in accordance with our presupposition, are a lot more optimistic. Nearly half of our respondents from the capital city (42%) believe that they have a fairly high chance of becoming a professional player, whereas 33% of them see a good chance for the same. Football academists in the provinces appear to be much less confident, as only 26% of them can see a fairly high chance, and 36% of them can only see a relative chance. In compliance with our preliminary assumption, the majority of the young footballers would like to change an academy as far as it is up to them neither in the provinces, nor in the capital. 30% of them, however, would do that, and the 64% of them identified a higher chance of a professional career as a reason for that. Besides, better infrastructural conditions also played a role in the potential change of academy ($p=0,021$), as the football academists from the provinces find

this as a plausible reason for leaving their present institution. This is also illustrated by the example of two future academies that are planned to have a powerful infrastructural basis. As far as a potential future career is concerned, the answers verified our presupposition, as almost all the respondents (94 %) would like to work abroad in the future, and even higher is the proportion among the academists in the capital ($p=0,047$). Contrary to our preliminary assumption, the respondent did not explain that with the higher income, but with the better opportunities of professional development. That was the case with the academies of both the provinces and the capital (48-48 %).

The second (b) part of our hypothesis was connected to the reports of the coaches: the coaches believe that the players long to start a foreign career, motivated primarily by the higher pay, but they also tend to set up too ambitious goals and too early when they eventually go abroad. As the coaches also pointed out that the motivation of the students, and their entire mentality, largely depends upon the family background, that is, how supportive the parents are in the choice of their children, was fully verified by our results.

An analysis of the interviews with the coaches suggests that the majority of the young academists would like to go abroad, especially because of the higher income, but it often happens too early in the life of the players. The coaches believe that the players find themselves in the foreign leagues too early, when they are still immature, and first they should establish their career in the Hungarian championship instead. All in all, the coaches find serious shortcomings in the mental situation of the young Hungarian players, and they identify that as the factor in which the Hungarian academists lag behind their foreign counterparts. They also point out that it is largely determined by the influence of the parents.

We generally believe that our dissertation achieved its original goal, since it was possible to survey the talent development, primarily educational and sports pedagogical activities of the football academies, and our research findings point out the problems and issues identified in their work that require re-consideration and re-interpretation. A novelty of the thesis is that, through our comparative approach, we contrasted the activities of the academies in the provinces with those in the capital city, thus emphasizing the major similarities and differences in their talent development work. The restraint of the research is that the research is not representative, so it cannot be generalized for the entire population of academists.

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List of publications related to the dissertation

Hungarian book chapters (1)

1. Fenyő, I., **Rábai, D.**: A sporttehetség-gondozás jogszabályi környezete: a sportakadémiák Magyarországon.
In: Értékteremtő testnevelés : tanulmányok a testnevelés és a sportolás szerepéiről a Kárpát-medencei fiatalok életében. Szerk.: Kovács Klára, Debreceni Egyetemi Kiadó, Debrecen, 65-88, 2016. ISBN: 9789633185971

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2. **Rábai, D.**: Edző-játékos kapcsolat jellemzői a fővárosi és vidéki labdarúgó akadémiákon.
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