

The Academy System in English Professional Football: Business Value or “Following the Herd”?

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Abstract: The future of professional football lies in its youth players. An English Premier League club can invest up to £5 million in its academy each year, but what value does the club get from the financial, business and human investment in this ‘R&D’ organisation within the club? There is significant anecdotal evidence about the production of the ‘stars of tomorrow’, but what is the record of Premier League academies in reality? On the basis of the data on players produced in 23 of the 40 PL academies, this paper argues that their success in developing players is not strong, and that leading English clubs as well as the governing bodies need to evaluate the business performance of their academies more rigorously.

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Introduction

The somewhat ignominious failure of England’s World Cup challenge in South Africa in 2010 was immediately greeted in the media, like the failure to qualify for the European Championships in 2008, by complaints from journalists and pundits that the number of foreigners playing in the Premier League (PL) eroded chances at the top level for young English players. Amidst all the noise, however, a few more thoughtful commentators, such as Sir Trevor Brooking, Director of Football Development at the Football Association (FA), asked instead what had gone wrong with the English system of player development in comparison with other European countries. Part of the problem, for Brooking, lay in the quality of coaching, and what he described as the ‘win at all costs’ mentality among Premier League Academy teams, which failed to develop players’ skills and composure. Too many players, he argued, were ‘not confident enough on the ball’ (*Guardian*, 4 October 2010). ‘We have a generation of players who aren’t decision-makers’, he added in a later interview (*Guardian*, 28 October 2010).

The failure of the senior England team, complaints about the low number of English players in the Premier League, and criticism of the quality of coaching have led to a desire for change in English football. Other developments in 2010 saw the introduction of ‘home grown player’ rules for the Premier League for the 2010-11 season that closely resembled those in place for UEFA-organised club competitions since 2006-07. These restricted PL clubs to at most 17 foreign-trained players over 21 in their squads for the forthcoming season (Premier League 2010a). Provisions in the UEFA Financial Fair Play rules, to be introduced from 2012-13, offered a further incentive for the leading clubs to invest in their academies, since they permitted the costs of an academy to be excluded from the income/expenditure calculations required for clubs to demonstrate financial equilibrium (UEFA 2010). These changes, many of them externally driven, at least in the case of those clubs that compete in Europe, have put the burden on clubs to train more players themselves, but what is, in fact, the record of the Premier League academies in producing professional footballers at the top level?

The seminal document that gave rise to PL academies, *A Charter for Quality for English Football*, was produced in 1997 by Howard Wilkinson, then the Technical Director of the FA, in a timely attempt to address the growing concern in English football about the lack of quality young players coming through the ranks (Wilkinson 1997). This document prescribed what England needed to do to develop elite players for both club and country and, more specifically, argued for the establishment of academies by the PL clubs to coach and develop the top 1% of gifted young players. Premier League clubs began to upgrade their youth development programmes into academies almost immediately after the publication of *A Charter for Quality*, and many were approved in 1997-98. By the end of the 2009-10 season all but one of the PL clubs had followed the prescription and turned their existing youth development systems into Football Academies (the exception was Wigan Athletic, which retained a Centre of Excellence). For other reasons, such as legacy and aspiration, an additional 21 academies are operated by clubs in the Football League, making a total of 40 PL-accredited Football Academies at the time the fieldwork for this research was conducted.

The collective wisdom of everyone interviewed for this research was that the original intention was to have approximately a dozen academies across England. However, it is clear that clubs did not want to ‘miss out’, resulting in the licensing of 40 academies by the Premier League. Despite the departure from Wilkinson’s original plan, there was considerable consensus among the eight academy managers interviewed for this research that, regardless of the business value, much of the implementation had certainly benefitted young players throughout the game in England.

A document commissioned jointly by the FA, PL, and the Football League ten years later, *A Review of Young Player Development in Professional Football* (Lewis, 2007), largely endorsed the direction of the Charter. While not being prescriptively detailed, this review made 64 specific recommendations on topics ranging from the national leadership and coordination of youth development through the subject of coach education to the issues of club versus country and the structure of games and matches played by academy teams. However, the decade between the publication of Wilkinson’s charter and Lewis’s review saw a rapid increase in the number of non-English players at the top level of English football as well as a succession of disappointing results from the national team. As

public and press scepticism about the quality of training in English academies and the influx of foreign players grew, the Professional Footballers Association (PFA) also commissioned an analysis of ‘the nationality of Premier League players and the future of English football’, controversially entitled *Meltdown* (Taylor & Lightbown, 2007). While not specifically addressing youth football, its premise was that the number of overseas players had limited the opportunity for young English footballers to play in the Premier League and thereby reduced the volume of talent eligible to play for the England national team. In essence, therefore, it seemed that while clubs had invested in academies to produce English talent, in the end they preferred to purchase proven footballers from outside the country rather than wait for the young English players to develop.

The PL academies are, in effect, the Research, Development and Training arm of the English football industry. They require major investments of time, effort, finance, and business expertise. They give rise to the need for complex logistical operations; the recruitment of 20-30 properly qualified coaches; an extensive scouting network among junior players; responsibility for the education and welfare of young players; and the threat of potential legal liabilities for infringements of child protection and other legislation. All the top clubs thus have a significant financial and reputational investment in youth development. However, there is little evidence that clubs approach academies in the way that an orthodox business would evaluate its expenditure on research, development and training. In published club accounts the income from the transfers of academy-trained players is not separated from the net profit on transfers of players purchased from other clubs, while expenditure on the academy has normally been wrapped into the global figures for staffing, equipment, and maintenance costs. Anecdotal evidence from senior figures in leading Premier League clubs suggests that academies are seen as something that a club has to have, and the benefits obtained from the expenditure of a few million pounds a year on the academy are not carefully monitored.

The research reported in this paper, which aims to provide a platform for future studies, investigates some of the reasons why the clubs make this investment; how success is defined and measured; what impediments exist; and what the results have been. The topic of academy success is the fuel of many media debates and pub discussions. Anecdotes abound: West Ham producing key players for each side in the 2008 UEFA

Champions League final; Liverpool not having developed a top-class player since Fowler, Owen, Carragher, and Gerrard, and so on. This research attempts to take some of the anecdote out of this debate by analysing the data objectively. It shows some surprising results.

Literature

Much academic research has been devoted to the issues of player transfers and the dramatic fall-out of the Bosman legal case for European football (see, for example, Dabscheck 2004 and 2006). Other work has been published on player migration in general (Lanfranchi & Taylor 2002; Magee & Sugden 2002; Taylor 2006), but without paying particularly close attention to youth development, with a few exceptions. Bourke (2003) examined the structure of migration from community and feeder clubs in Ireland to PL academies and the motivations of the players involved. Some of the work on migration has considered that of young players from the developing world, in particular Africa. In this context Darby (2007: 149-50) addresses the economics of overseas academies, such as MimoSifcom in the Ivory Coast, stating:

...the sale of players such as Kolo Toure to Arsenal, Aruna Dindane to Anderlecht, Didier Zokora to St. Etienne, and Salomon Kalou to Feyenoord has been crucial for the economic sustainability of the academy.

However, this remains a rare exception in the treatment of youth development, where even approximate quantification of what happens in the industry is rare.

References to youth development in the many books on the English football business that appeared around the turn of the century are scarce (Conn 1997, Dobson & Goddard 2001, Banks 2002), and the situation has changed little since. Overall, work on English football tends to reflect the analysis of incoming migrant players in English football suggested by Magee & Sugden (2002: 434), who rued the disappearance of ‘the days when fans could... watch top-class football played by boys and men who grew up in the surrounding neighbourhoods’, but without examining why young English players appear unable to compete in a global market. There is certainly agreement on the difficulties of developing young players, but not just in England. While Szymanski & Kuypers (1999)

concluded, on the basis of an econometric approach, that ‘youth policies are expensive and speculative’, Giulianotti (1999) makes the point that young player selection is a very inexact science. Many players who appear promising at the age of 16 or 17 fall by the wayside by the time they are 21. Oliver Kay reported in *The Times* (28 July 2008) that only Fernando Torres has established himself professionally from a long line of ‘Golden Players’ at the Under 19 UEFA Championships.

The precise extent of this failure to turn promising teenage footballers into gifted professionals in England remains unknown. Chris Green, in *Every Boy’s Dream* (2009), reflects the commonly held view that youth development is failing in the English system in contrast to other European countries, but his approach is that of a serious journalist and the work remains based on interviews and anecdote rather than quantified research. Aside from this, the principal research in the area of youth development has been along the lines of Monk & Olsson’s (2007) analysis of government support of the scholars programme within the Premier League academies. This shows a divergent view of excessive investment at the micro level (for such a low percentage of professional contracts), yet insufficient investment at a macro level (no major championship victory since 1966). Other research papers have considered the psycho-social problems of footballers who fail to make the transition from academy to first team (Finn & McKenna 2010), the authoritarian culture of academies (Cushion & Jones 2006), and the organisational problems of linking academies and the management of the first team in clubs in western Europe (Relvas et al. 2010). Throughout this developing field, however, the concentration is on the social, health and welfare impact of youth player development rather than the business model of the academies and their quantitative success in developing players. One of the very few references to player development as part of a club’s business strategy comes in work by Gilmore and Gilson on Bolton Wanderers, who argue that the fact that home-grown players were promoted to the first team squad ‘serves as testimony to the success of the academy’s asset development program’ (2007: 422).

Although Gilmore and Gilson provide a strong argument for successful organisational and strategic change in one Premier League club, the business professionalism of football clubs has generally attracted considerable criticism. Relvas et al. comment that ‘loose (and informal) management practices appear to be an endemic part of football culture’

(2010: 181). Many authors would agree that normal business logic does not apply to the finances of football clubs and is not applied to them. Simon Kuper & Stefan Szymanski (2009), for whom youth development is not a specific focus, open their book with a telling quotation from Jean-Pierre Meersseman, the director of the Milan Lab (AC Milan) who comments:

You can drive a car without a dashboard, without any information, and that's what's happening in soccer (Kuper & Szymanski 2009: 6).

The economics of youth academies are a case in point. Morrow (2003), Rowbottom (2003) and Conn (1997) have all outlined how current business accounting methods in football clubs dilute the value of developing youth players. Players developed internally do not appear in the club accounts as intangible assets, whereas players whom the club has purchased do, and the benefits derived from a high-quality development programme thus appear in a club's financial results only when academy graduates are sold, and the income from the transfer booked. The financial benefits from developing a footballer who stays with the same club, gains an international reputation, helps to win trophies, and saves the club millions of pounds on transfer fees, such as Steven Gerrard of Liverpool, Ryan Giggs of Manchester United, or Tony Adams of Arsenal, are never recognised in a club's financial statements.

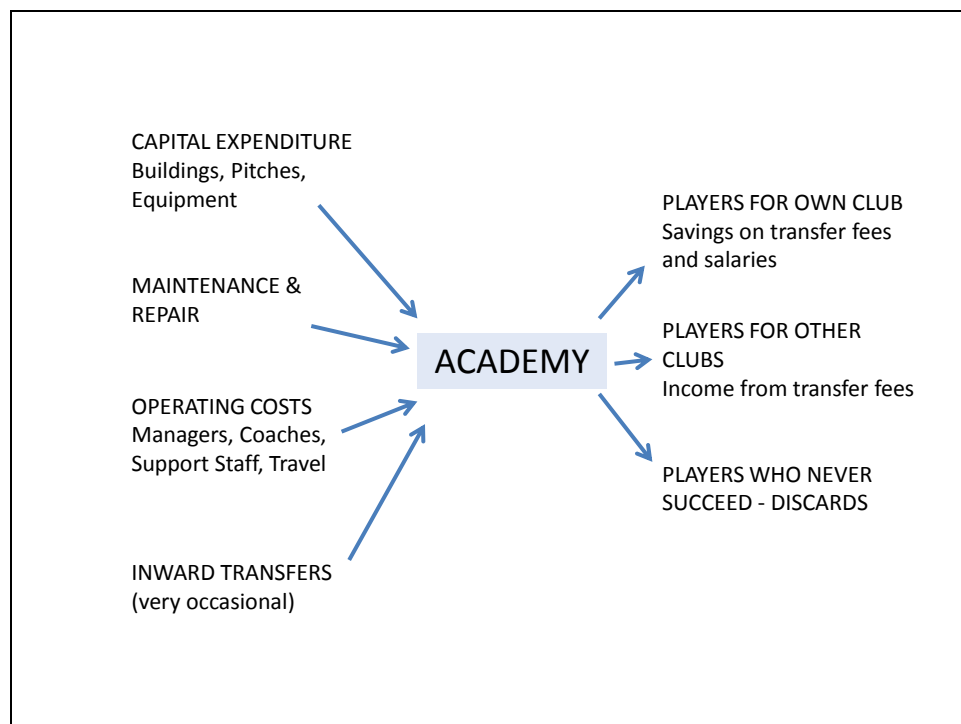
In the past it has seemed easier to quantify the value of players. Leatherdale (1997) describes how easy it was to assess the value of Alf Common, the first £1,000 player, bought by Middlesbrough in 1905. However, the flood of econometric research on the transfer market that appeared in the 1990s (see, for example, Carmichael et al. 1999, Gerrard & Dobson 2000) faded after the Bosman Judgment altered the market's assumptions and structure by giving players greater freedom to move. Still, there are times when the value and contribution of individual players does have to be measured. First, in the case of disputed transfers, a tribunal has to set the compensation payable to the 'selling club'. The growing practice of 'tapping up' young players to move from one academy to another and 'compensation' being agreed after the fact has provided a limited focus on value. The case of John Bostock's £700,000 move from Crystal Palace's academy to Tottenham Hotspur highlighted the arbitrariness of the tribunal process (*The Times*, 9 July 2008). Second, the dispute between Sheffield United and West Ham United

over the latter's deployment of Carlos Tévez in their struggle against relegation in 2006/07 also led to attempts by the law courts to put a monetary value on the contribution of an individual player to the team's performance (*Daily Telegraph*, 13 March 2009). However, both these issues highlight the problems of measuring the value of the human talent in football, and hence of evaluating the contribution of academies.

Research Questions

The business model of academies can best be considered as a series of inputs and outputs (Figure 1), some of which ought to be easily quantifiable using management accounting techniques. Others elements in the model are more difficult to calculate, in particular the savings made on transfer fees and salaries by developing players internally. How much, for example, did Manchester United save in costs and generate in additional income by being able to call on the Neville brothers, Beckham, Scholes, Giggs and Butt in the mid-1990s?

Figure 1: The Academy Business Model



Yet while certain aspects of the academy business model might not be quantifiable without access to the internal accounting data of clubs and some heroic assumptions about the cost of an appropriate replacement for a player like Giggs or Gerrard at particular points in their careers, descriptive statistics can be obtained which permit an initial evaluation of the overall success of PL academies in turning out products for the industry. This research thus poses a number of questions.

1. **How many academy graduates play for the first team?** The amount of human resource flowing through the academies is large, as young English players (and often their parents) are desperate to 'make it' in the world of professional football. But how many of these players succeed? How many get to play even one game for their beloved club, to whom they give the lion's share of their youth?
2. **What is the relationship between anecdote and fact?** Does the objective data support the conventional wisdom of anecdote and opinion surrounding youth development in individual clubs, for example, the generally positive comments in the media about the success of Manchester City and West Ham in training young English players compared with Arsenal and Liverpool?
3. **What are the reasons why a Premier League club invests in an academy?** The overall view in the literature is that clubs do not manage their affairs in the same way as an orthodox business, but rather in terms of managerial whims and short term performance (Kuper & Szymanski 2009). In particular the turnover of the key figures in the organisation, the chairman, chief executive and, especially, the first-team manager, tends to be high, leading to an absence of the long-term strategic thinking essential for youth development. If the return is difficult to quantify and turns out to be debatable in business terms, why have clubs invested in youth development, if not for business value?

The paper focuses on these issues. However, the results obviously have significance for other important questions of interest to different stakeholders. From the point of view of the parents and the players themselves, are academy graduates prepared for a life in, or

beyond, football? Very few players will be successful, but what is available to them beyond their two-year academy contract as a scholar? Does the football industry prepare these young players for their future within and beyond the game? And from the point of view of the governing bodies and the media, what do these statistics about the development of players in the English Premier League tell us about the impact of foreign imports?

This research focuses on the period from the inception of the English Premier League in the 1992/93 season to the end of the 2006/07 season, a period of 15 seasons in all. The development of youth is a continuum and the early data clearly involves youth development activity that predates both the Premier League and *A Charter for Quality*. However, many of the variables investigated by this research apply irrespective of *A Charter for Quality*. The introduction of academies was progressive, in the sense that it was only in the late 2000s that players who had spent their entire youth careers in the post-1997 system signed their first professional contracts. However, the inclusion of the early years of the Premier League in this study, predating the Bosman Judgment and the increasing employment of foreigners, also has the effect of biasing the results *towards* the successful development of players. If, despite this, the outcomes are still poor or disappointing, it would suggest that there are some long-standing and deep-rooted problems in the development of young talent in English football, as Brooking suggests.

Data and Methodology

The training system in English Premier League clubs, since the publication of *A Charter for Quality* in 1997, has been structured as follows. Clubs can recruit players from within a set travelling distance from the academy from the age of 9. Many players are weeded out between then and the time they reach 16, while new ones may be recruited. At the age of 16 (the current school-leaving age in England), the club will decide to which players it will offer a full-time academy contract as a ‘scholar’. A player will normally retain this status until the end of the season in which he is 18, but some may be released. At 17 or 18 a player may be offered a full professional contract (and may be sent out on loan to another club), or may be offered a free transfer. Many may leave the game at this point, having failed to find another club. There are clear ethical problems in gaining access to data for those in academies under the age of 16. This research concentrates on

those who receive a full-time contract after the age of 16, data for whom is in the public domain. However, it still required collection and validation.

The governing bodies, the FA, the PL, and the Football League, as well as the PFA, each had some degree of data but none covered the entire period of research. An independent search discovered an Internet subscription database at www.since1888.co.uk, created and maintained by a football statistician, Michael Joyce. This database contains information about more than 39,000 players and has been extensively used by authors, in particular for the preparation of the *Sky Sports Football Yearbook* (formerly known as ‘Rothmans’), the ‘bible’ of the industry, which has in turn frequently been used by academics, in particular econometricians, for its reliable raw data.

The first stage of the data collection was to extract the names and debut seasons for every player in each of the 40 clubs with academies (plus Wigan Athletic). Significant editing was necessary to document only players whose professional debut came in the 1992/93 season or later. Because of the labour-intensive nature of this work, a sub-set of 23 clubs was selected for the second stage of the research. There is a strong correlation between this subset and those clubs with most experience of the Premier League. This stage took the post 1992/93 debutant players and divided them into two categories: ‘transfers in’ and ‘first contract with this club’. The latter, when combined with the player’s age at contract being 18 or less, yielded the clubs’ trainees who subsequently became academy ‘scholars’. The final stage of the research comprised semi-structured interviews with eight academy managers (anonymised here for reasons of confidentiality), and in addition with Les Wheatley (then Finance Director of Liverpool FC), Sir Trevor Brooking (FA Director of Football Development) and Huw Jennings (then Director of Youth Development at the Premier League) to broaden the perspective of the research.

The subset of 23 clubs was based on the perceived need to include a balanced number of clubs from four categories:

- The 7 ‘ever present’ PL clubs.
- Early participants which appear have dropped permanently out of the Premier League such as Nottingham Forest and Sheffield Wednesday.
- Late but reasonably permanent entrants to the Premier League such as Bolton Wanderers and Wigan Athletic.

- So called ‘yoyo clubs’ which have alternated between the Premier League and what is now the Football League Championship.

To arrive at this subset six clubs which had had only one season in the Premier League in its first fifteen years were excluded: Barnsley, Bradford City, Oldham Athletic, Reading, Swindon Town, and Wolverhampton Wanderers. Watford, with only two seasons and without a tradition in the top flight, was also taken out. Of the remaining clubs seven were ever present and two (Newcastle United and Blackburn Rovers) nearly so: all these were included in the subset. Six clubs (Birmingham City, Charlton Athletic, Crystal Palace, Derby County, Leicester City, Norwich City) did not fit easily into any single one of the four categories and were also excluded. The final step was to take out four of the ‘early entrants’ (Coventry City, Ipswich Town, Queens Park Rangers, and Wimbledon), which had little apparent tradition of youth development, except perhaps for Ipswich, in order to make the categories more balanced. This also had the effect again of biasing the overall outcome *towards* those clubs that one might expect to have done relatively well, since Leeds United, Nottingham Forest and Southampton, all with good anecdotal reputations for youth development, remained in the subset. Table 1 thus shows the clubs that were included, the way in which they were categorised, and the number of players whom each debuted during the 15 years, in the Premier or Football League, whether these were incoming transfers or academy graduates.

Table 1: Clubs selected for analysis

Club	Players debuted	Category	Seasons in Premier League
Arsenal	179	Ever present	15
Aston Villa	159	Ever present	15
Blackburn Rovers	198	Ever present	13
Bolton Wanderers	200	Late entrant	8
Chelsea	171	Ever present	15
Everton	164	Ever present	15
Fulham	193	Late entrant	6
Leeds United	204	Early entrant	11
Liverpool	160	Ever present	15
Manchester City	212	Yoyo club	10
Manchester United	174	Ever present	15
Middlesbrough	166	Late entrant	11
Newcastle United	179	Ever present	14
Nottingham Forest	193	Early entrant	5
Portsmouth	219	Late entrant	4
Sheffield United	271	Early entrant	2
Sheffield Wednesday	236	Early entrant	7
Southampton	193	Early entrant	12
Sunderland	212	Yoyo club	6
Tottenham Hotspur	192	Ever present	15
West Bromwich Albion	185	Yoyo club	2
West Ham United	242	Yoyo club	12
Wigan Athletic	206	Late entrant	2

Source: see text

Note: Sheffield United, West Bromwich Albion and Wigan Athletic, all with two seasons in the PL up to and including the 2006/07 season, were included for the following reasons: Sheffield United because it had given a contract to the highest number of players in all, West Bromwich Albion because it has been considered a classic ‘yoyo club’ which adapted its business model accordingly, and Wigan Athletic because it retained a Centre of Excellence rather than applying for Academy status.

For each of the 23 clubs, the academy-sourced players were separated from those transferred in from another club. Additionally, the club to which the players were subsequently transferred, if applicable, was also recorded, along with the number of league appearances (starts/substitute) at the club concerned. This includes both Premier League and, in the case of clubs that were relegated, Football League appearances, again biasing the results *towards* an over-estimation of those who succeeded in the Premier League. Domestic cups and European competitions are excluded from the figures.

Using some sample records from Arsenal as an example, the data showed the following players:

Table 2: An Example of the Database

Name	1st season	Source	Appearances	Club sold to
Bentley, David	2002	Academy	1	Blackburn
Pennant, Jermaine	1999	Notts County	12	Birmingham City
Hoyte, Justin	2002	Academy	29	N/A
Upson, Matthew	1997	Luton	34	Birmingham City
Anelka, Nicolas	1996	PSG	65	Real Madrid
Platt, David	1995	Sampdoria	88	Nottingham Forest
Cole, Ashley	1999	Academy	156	Chelsea
Bergkamp, Dennis	1995	Inter	315	N/A

Source: See text

Notes: The year of the first season is shown as 2002 for 2002-03 etc. Appearances are for Premier League matches only, including appearances as substitute, between the player's debut and the end of the 2006-07 season. Periods of loan at other clubs are not included. N/A indicates that a player was still with the club at the end of that season (Hoyte, subsequently transferred to Middlesbrough) or had retired (Bergkamp).

This example also serves to illustrate a rich seam of research which could follow. It is possible to consider an academy as a breeding ground for young players to sell on to other clubs in order to generate revenue. Both David Bentley and Ashley Cole delivered significant revenues from their transfer fees, offsetting the costs of the academy and the inward transfers of other players (reports suggest that the transfer contract with

Blackburn for Bentley included a sell-on contingency payment that eventually netted Arsenal a further £5-7 million over the undisclosed initial fee: *The Times*, 30 July 2008; *Daily Telegraph*, 31 July 2008). Whilst not an academy product as such, Nicolas Anelka's sojourn at Arsenal, whose purchase cost the club a reputed £500K and whose transfer out was reputed to be for £22 million, illustrates the potential gains (*The Independent*, 12 January 2008).

This data was subsequently cross-checked against data provided by the Premier League to ensure that the players truly were at the clubs identified and had valid contracts. Only 33 names from the Joyce database were not in the Premier League database. However, they have been retained in the analysis since they amount to less than 3% of the total, and are unlikely to bias the results significantly.

The Statistics

What makes a successful academy player?

One central theme that emerged from the interviews with academy managers is that many clubs see a (the) major objective of an academy as 'producing players for the first team', a point corroborated by Gilmore and Gilson (2007) in the case of Bolton. One of the academy managers interviewed went so far as to say that his academy had the objective to 'produce a player a season for the first team', probably one of the more precisely defined objectives discovered in talking to clubs. A sense came from the academy managers that, once a player made his debut for the first team, this was 'job done' for the academy. It is hard to argue with this sentiment from the perspective of the academy manager.

But this inward club focus begs a broader question, namely 'what constitutes success when the football club, the business as a whole, develops a player?' One of the academy managers interviewed shared a question that his chairman had asked him, 'If we're developing players to play for Carlisle, what's the point?' Is it enough for the club to declare success when an academy graduate makes his debut?

To assess the full business success of developing youth players through an academy, it is important to look significantly beyond a player's debut. To do this, the 1,228 professional footballers produced by the 23 clubs' youth development programmes have been classified into the following categories:

Zero appearances – Never given the opportunity

The club has given the academy graduate at least one professional contract and he may have had spells on loan with other clubs. But during his time as a professional on his home club's books, he has not made a single league appearance for them.

1-10 appearances – Given a chance but didn't grasp the opportunity

These players may have been loaned out to one or more clubs, but the manager has given them their opportunity, starter or substitute, in a league game. After this experience, unless they were still with the club with their chance ahead of them in summer 2007, the terminal date for the research, they will have probably been sold to another club and would not be considered a 'success' at their first club.

11-49 appearances – Premier League ability, just not at this club

These are players who have a stronger association with the club and its fans. They will have featured in the first team over probably a couple of seasons and proved themselves capable of playing to Premier League standard, but eventually the club sells them before they become fully established. Note, however, that there may be instances where players with fewer than 50 games are sold either to make ends meet or to realise the value of a promising player offered a chance at a larger club. Examples are Aaron Lennon's transfer to Tottenham Hotspur during Leeds United's 'fire sale' in 2005, or Chris Smalling's transfer to Manchester United in 2010 after just 13 league games for Fulham.

50+ appearances – ‘Home Town Legends’

These are players who establish themselves at the club where they grew up, having played regularly in the league for at least two seasons. At the top level these are the Steven Gerrards, the Michael Owens and the John Terrys of the Premier League, who may go on to make 200 or more appearances for the club. David Beckham qualifies as this type of player, but even he had to undergo a loan period at Preston North End before establishing his career with Manchester United.

One could argue that there is a certain arbitrariness about these categories, but the intent of the classifications is to recognise a pattern of youth development. Some segmentation has to be undertaken in order to identify academy ‘successes’ more rigorously. None of the eight academy managers interviewed objected strongly to these categories, and Sir Trevor Brooking went as far as to say that this was ‘a fair way of assessing them’. In analysing the data using these four categories, some interesting patterns emerge.

Long-term academy graduates

Figure 2 shows the 23 clubs, ranked in order of the total number of players (defined as academy graduates who signed their first professional contract with the club) whom they have produced through their youth development programme in the Premier League era. In addition, it compares that total with the total number of ‘Home Town Legends’ they had produced from within those ranks by the end of the 2006/07 season.

What is interesting about this first analysis is that, although Manchester United and Arsenal are at the top of the scale in terms of academy graduates whom they then signed on a full-time contract, other large clubs such as Liverpool and Chelsea, appear further down the scale, less in correlation with their historic positions in the Premier League. More revealing is the relatively small number of ‘Home Town Legends’ produced by these four clubs. The chart shows absolute numbers, with the maximum number achieved by any club being 8 (both Middlesbrough and Sunderland). Clearly the percentage of graduates who become legends by remaining in the club was very small indeed (9.6%).

It is also worth noting how dependent the largest clubs are on importing talent, especially after 2000. The so-called 'Big Four' produced just 16 'Home Town Legends' between them in the 15 seasons under study, and 5 of those were Manchester United's 'Golden Generation', minus Ryan Giggs, who debuted earlier. Arsenal produced just 1 (Ashley Cole). And the data does little to substantiate anecdotal evidence about West Ham or Manchester City producing a 'conveyor belt' of young players ready for the Premier League, a point that will be developed later.

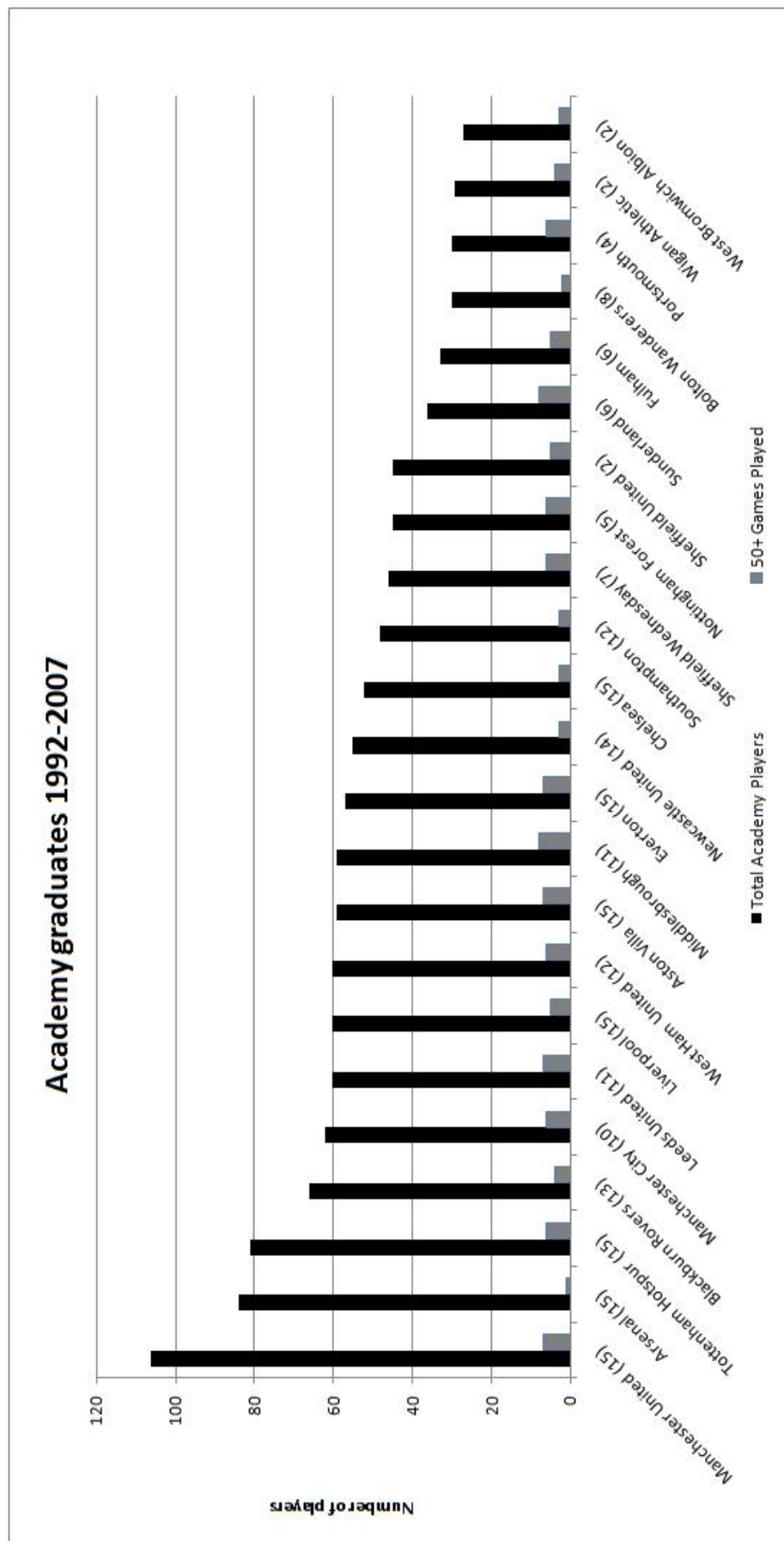


Figure 2: Total academy scholars given a professional contract by their home club

Zero appearances

Of the 1,228 academy graduates from the 23 clubs, more than 60 per cent (61.2%) of them, 752 players, never made a league appearance for the club which gave them their first contract. Figure 3 shows the breakdown of this analysis by club.

This shows a wide variation in the experience of individual clubs. At one extreme, Blackburn Rovers, 80.3 per cent of the academy graduates offered a professional contract made no appearances at all for the club in the Premier League. At the other extreme, the comparable figure for Fulham was only 30.3 per cent. For each club, the right-hand bar represents those percentages, whereas the left-hand bar represents the actual number of players in this category. In absolute terms, Manchester United had the most graduates (76) making zero appearances and Fulham the least (10).

In percentage terms, the ever present clubs are all in the top half of the ranking, probably because they can most afford to have professionals on their books who never play for the first team, though they may send them out on loan prior to transferring them or releasing them. The clubs at the lower end tend to have spent significant time outside the Premier League, which potentially gives more of their academy graduates the opportunity of appearing for the first team before promotion to the Premiership. After promotion, this experience gives the graduates a better chance of a prolonged run in the Premier League than that of a new 18-year-old debutant in a club permanently in the Premier League.

Every player represented on this chart has cost the club and its academy significant resources over several years to develop them into a footballer worth offering a professional contract. Subsequently, the club has, for whatever reason, chosen not to deploy them in the league and capitalise on their investment. Unless they were still early in their careers at the club in summer 2007 (some would undoubtedly become 'Home Town Legends' in due course, such as Gabriel Agbonlahor of Aston Villa, with 156 PL appearances by the end of the 2009/10 season), the most the club has done is to develop this player for somebody else, although it may recoup some of its investment by securing a small transfer fee.

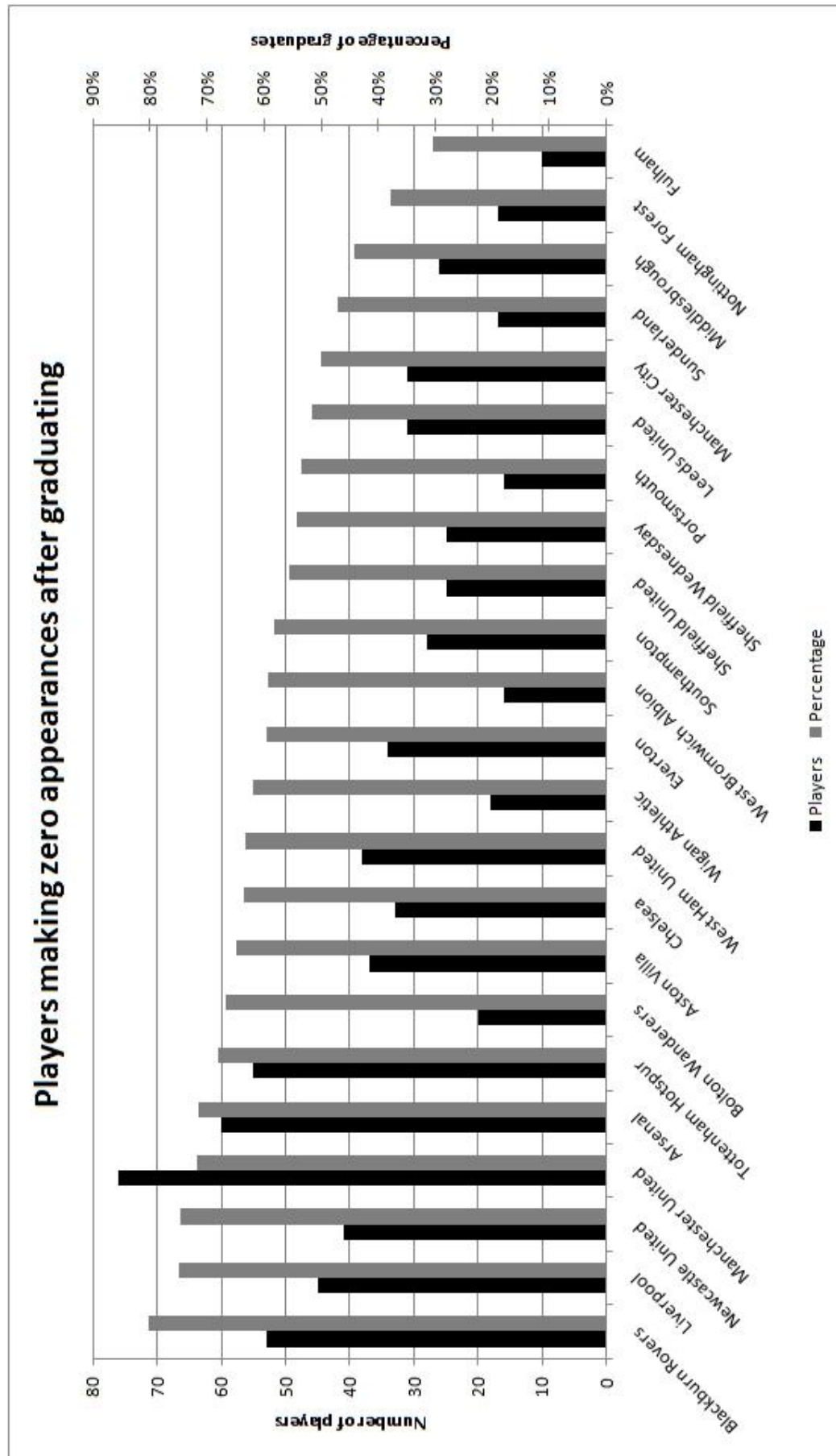


Figure 3: Players making zero appearances

Of interest in this analysis are clubs like Bolton Wanderers (66.7%, 20), Wigan Athletic (62.1%, 18) and West Bromwich Albion (59.3%, 16) with absolute numbers of players significantly below the likes of Manchester United's 76. Even though those values are low, the percentage of their total graduates is still close to the top of the scale due to the smaller nature of their operation. If developing young players to get a professional contract, only never to play them in a league match, is a sub-optimal delivery of business value, then the percentage measurement for these clubs is a truer reflection of their performance.

This data answers the first research question and shows that almost two out of every three academy graduates signed on a full-time contract do not play in a league match for the first team of the club that developed them. In terms of business value, this return on investment is not what these club owners would expect of the business ventures that amassed their fortunes and enabled them to buy the clubs in the first place. Additionally, this 'logjam' of players waiting to play for the first team exposes the problems of the PL structure, which offers few opportunities for 18-21 year-old players unless they go out on loan. The academy manager interviews confirmed this concern, and it was also addressed in the Lewis Report (2007) which made specific recommendations about the restructuring of games for the Under-21 players.

1-10 appearances

Players who make up to ten appearances have been given an opportunity to show what they can do in the league. Some players may go beyond this level at another club, but a player making fewer than ten first-team appearances for his academy club before moving on has clearly not grasped the opportunities fully enough to convince the club of his long term future.

Figure 4 shows the breakdown of those graduates for the 23 clubs, sequenced again by descending percentage. Fulham shows the highest percentage (39.4%) of all the clubs in this category and Blackburn Rovers the least (9.1%), reversing their extreme positions in Figure 3. One could argue that Fulham managers were prepared to give at least one opportunity to their graduates, while their counterparts at Blackburn Rovers would not risk it.

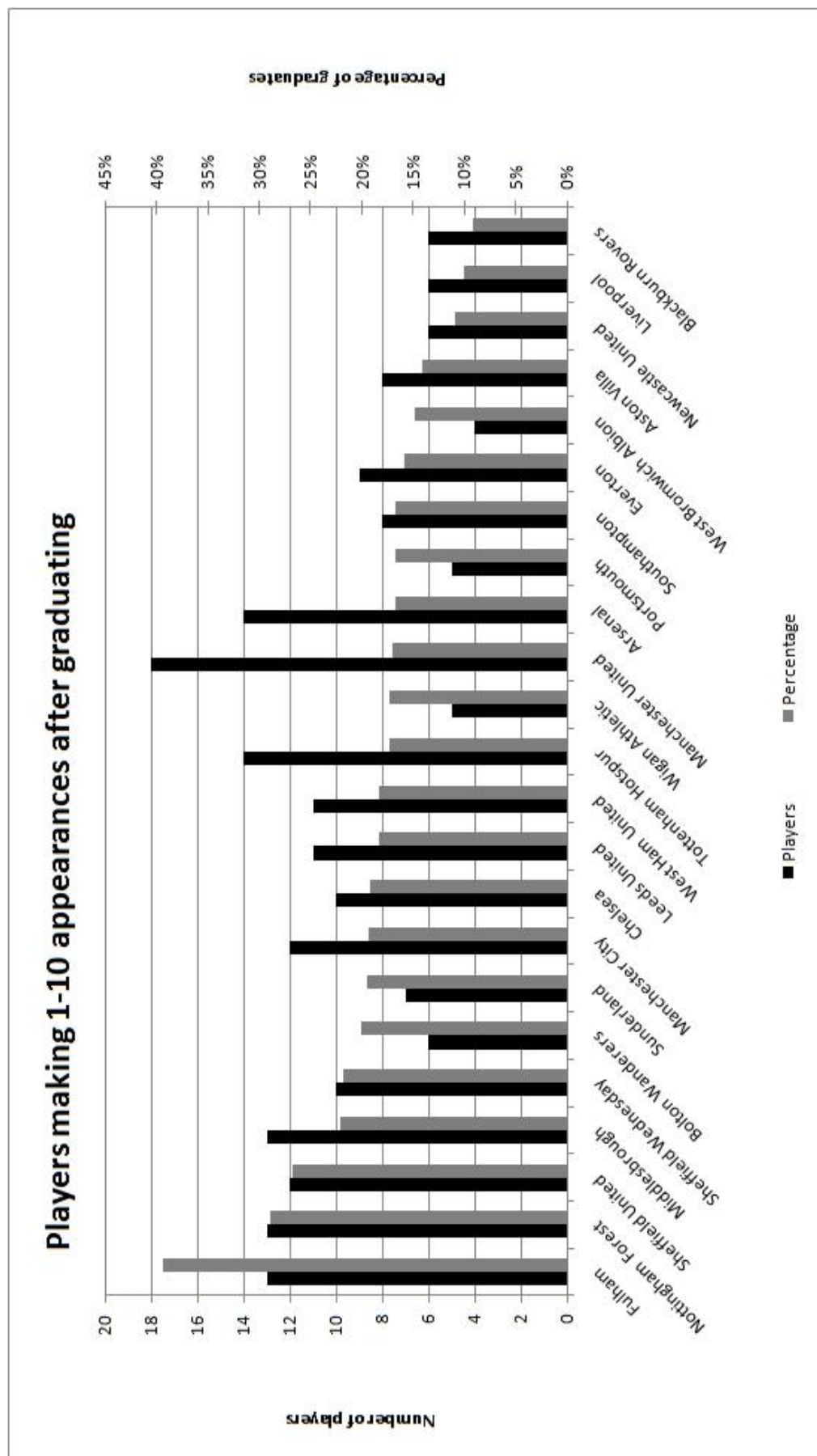


Figure 4: Players making between 1 and 10 appearances

Some of the large clubs -- Manchester United (18), Arsenal (14), Tottenham Hotspur (14) and Manchester City (12) -- stand out as offering this opportunity to a relatively large number of graduates, but as a percentage of their graduate output all these clubs are in the 'middle of the pack' in terms of performance in this category. Moreover, it should be remembered that a player could come into this category as a result of a few short substitute appearances and never start a game.

In terms of the business value of these academy graduates, these 1-10 appearance players are not the reason clubs invest in their academy. Clearly such a player may have a potential transfer value, but interviews confirmed that no accounting is done in clubs to offset academy expenditures against revenue from transfers. These '1-10' players represent an investment that has not matured. A business analogy would be a pharmaceutical company producing new drugs which do not pass clinical trials, although one can be sure that its accounting systems, unlike those of football clubs, would be sophisticated enough to evaluate this properly.¹

11-49 appearances

These players have proved their ability to perform at the highest level, for the most part in the Premier League, but not sufficiently well or consistently enough at their home clubs to establish themselves for more than a couple of seasons. Figure 5 shows the 23 clubs and their performance for this category of player, sequenced again by descending percentage of total graduates.

Manchester City (21.0%) show the largest percentage of this type of player with Blackburn Rovers (4.6%) showing the least. This group of players possesses undoubted ability but they are generally transferred to other clubs, often generating revenue for the club that produced them. With the exception of Everton and Chelsea, the ever-present clubs in the Premier League are all in the bottom half of this table, illustrating, perhaps, that they have less need to generate this type of transfer revenue than the other clubs. Significantly, many of the clubs at the top of this table, such as Manchester City, Nottingham Forest, Southampton, and Leeds United, are those which carried excessive

¹ The parallel with pharmaceuticals has been suggested by John Bowler, a senior executive of ICI Pharmaceuticals (now AstraZeneca) before becoming chairman of Crewe.

levels of debt during the period, often inducing the eventual catastrophe of relegation and/or administration. Interviews with academy managers at Leeds and Nottingham Forest made reference to a number of players each had to sell (Aaron Lennon, James Milner, at Leeds, Jermaine Jenas at Forest).

Players with 11-49 appearances have proven that they have Premier League ability and often play more than 50 games for the club that buys them (Kieran Richardson, 41 PL games for Manchester United, 78 for Sunderland by the end of the 2009-10 season is such a case). Clubs do not account for these transfer fees explicitly when evaluating their academies, but some clubs beyond this research, such as Crewe Alexandra, do have a reputation of running their academy as a ‘selling club’.²

50+ appearances

Expanding further on the data shown in Figure 2 above, Figure 6 shows the 23 clubs’ production of ‘Home Town Legends’, again sequenced by descending percentage of graduates. This chart shows Sunderland (22.2%) with the highest percentage of their graduates reaching this status and Arsenal (1.2%) with the lowest. If one considers that the production of this type of player as the ultimate measure of success of a club’s youth development, then the performance in this category could be considered the true measure of the business value derived by the club, since players of this level take the place of inward transfers the club would otherwise have to make and at the same time enhance their own transfer value.

² Crewe Alexandra is the one club out of the 40 which has a Premier League Academy but has never played in the Premier League. This reflects the prestige of the club’s long-standing youth development programme during the period in which Dario Gradi was the manager, which produced international players such as David Platt, Neil Lennon, Danny Murphy, and Dean Ashton.

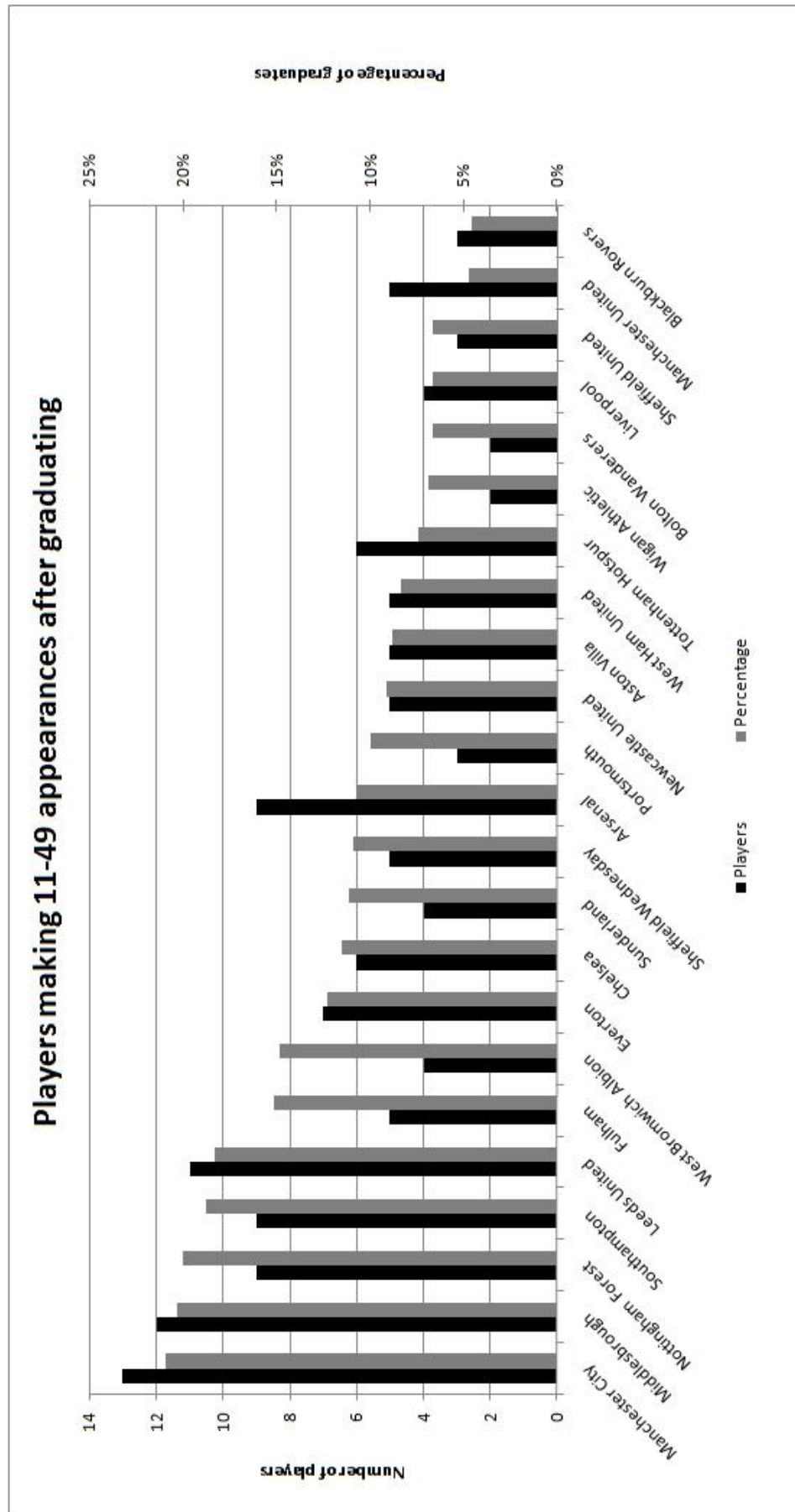


Figure 5: Players making between 11 and 49 appearances

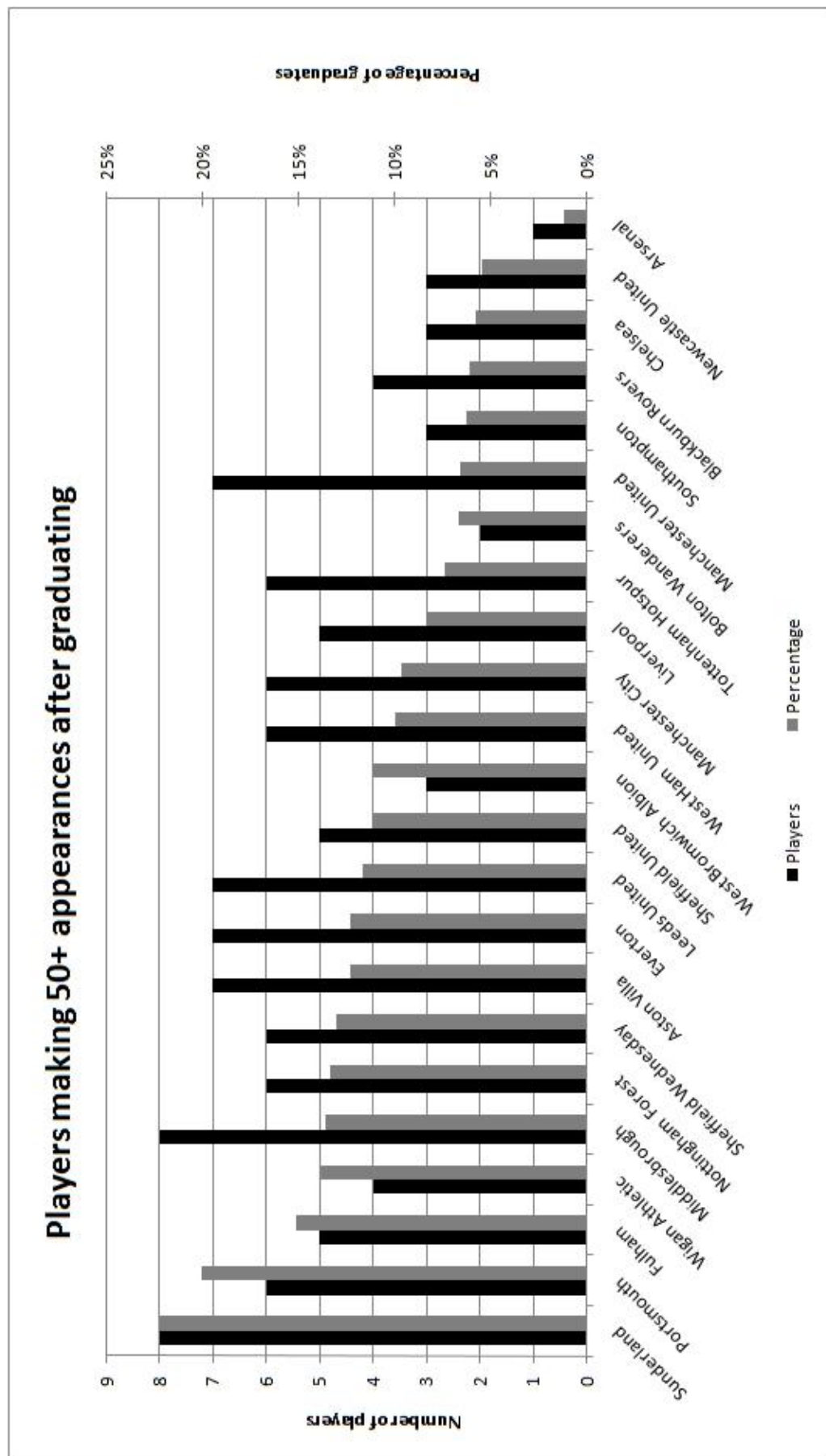


Figure 6: Players making 50 or more appearances

The absolute numbers are worth noting. Both Sunderland and Middlesbrough share the accolade of the highest number of players (8) which the 23 clubs had produced at this level before 2007. Middlesbrough equalled Sunderland's performance from a larger total operation, which explains their lower percentage (13.6%). Also noticeable is that the ever present clubs are mainly in the bottom half of this ranking, suggesting that some time spent out of the Premier League improves a club's performance against this key measure. The exceptions, Aston Villa and Everton, are both clubs with a reputation for careful control of costs and limited funds for transfers, putting pressure on them to develop their own players.

As expected from the anecdotal evidence, Everton, Aston Villa and Leeds United produced a high number of players in this category (7), but appeared in the middle in percentage terms. West Ham United and Manchester City produced 6 'Home Town Legends' in the PL era, but when viewed as a percentage of the academy graduates to whom they offered contracts, their performance was less remarkable. This analysis, of course, leaves aside the issue of quality: Hammers fans would certainly have a case to make that 4 of their 6 graduates (Michael Carrick, Joe Cole, Rio Ferdinand and Frank Lampard) graced the 2008 Champions League Final.

It is worth commenting also on the 'Big Four' clubs of the 2000s, as well as the two main aspirants to that status, Tottenham Hotspur and Manchester City. All appear in the bottom half of the table in percentage terms, though Spurs have produced six 'Home Town Legends' and Manchester City seven in the PL era. Manchester City, it might be noted, produced three more players in this category between 2007 and 2010 (Stephen Ireland, Micah Richards, and Nedum Onahua). Manchester United's figures are distorted by the 'Golden Generation' that came to prominence in the 1995-96 season. Liverpool's five such players all made their debut before 2000, while Arsenal's sole representative is Ashley Cole, with 156 PL appearances between his debut in 2000 and transfer to Chelsea in 2006. This offers at least *prima facie* evidence for the argument that the combination of the increasing income of PL clubs that have competed regularly in the UEFA Champions' League, together with freedom of movement for footballers in a globalised labour market, have made it more difficult for young English players there to break through and become 'Home Town Legends', though it does not explain Arsenal's poor performance in the period before Arsène Wenger arrived as manager in 1996.

Overall, this data shows that the productivity of all Premier League clubs' academies is not high. Time spent outside the top division does appear to focus the mind of a club to produce 'more of their own', and to give players experience that they can transfer into the Premier League, but the absolute numbers remain low. These players really are the goal of all academies and it seems to be extremely hard to produce them within the Premier League structure.

Total appearances

If we combine the figures, finally, to show the number of graduates making at least one appearance, we can obtain an indication of the extent to which clubs are at least prepared to offer their academy graduates an opportunity to make their debut, even if it is for five minutes as a substitute in a dead match at the end of the season. Table 2 shows these figures (with the ever-present teams italicised).

Table 2: Number of league debuts per season

Club	Academy graduates given league debut	Seasons in PL up to 2006/07	Graduates debuted per active PL season
Middlesbrough	33	11	3.0
Manchester City	31	10	3.1
<i>Manchester United</i>	<i>30</i>	<i>15</i>	<i>2.0</i>
Leeds United	29	11	2.6
Nottingham Forest	28	5	5.6
<i>Tottenham Hotspur</i>	<i>26</i>	<i>15</i>	<i>1.7</i>
<i>Arsenal</i>	<i>24</i>	<i>15</i>	<i>1.6</i>
Fulham	23	6	3.8
<i>Everton</i>	<i>23</i>	<i>15</i>	<i>1.5</i>
West Ham United	22	12	1.8
Sheffield Wednesday	21	7	3.0
Southampton	20	12	1.7
<i>Aston Villa</i>	<i>20</i>	<i>15</i>	<i>1.3</i>
Sunderland	19	6	3.2
<i>Chelsea</i>	<i>19</i>	<i>15</i>	<i>1.3</i>
<i>Liverpool</i>	<i>15</i>	<i>15</i>	<i>1.0</i>
Newcastle United	14	14	1.0
Blackburn Rovers	13	13	1.0
Bolton Wanderers	10	8	1.3

Source: See text

Note: The table excludes four teams in the data subset with fewer than five seasons in the Premier League before 2006-07: Portsmouth, Sheffield United, West Bromwich Albion, Wigan Athletic.

This table tests what some academy directors see as their main objective, producing a player a year for the first team, and shows that all the Premier League clubs with longer experience at the top level have achieved this, but in some cases only just. Overall, however, in combination with the earlier figures, this table shows the lack of academy graduates coming through to make even one appearance in the first team, let alone making 10 or more appearances or becoming ‘Home Town Legends’. Of the top five clubs in the table only Manchester United did not suffer serious financial constraints at some point in this period, hinting that there might be an inverse correlation between financial stability and giving a chance to young players. At the other end of the scale the evident failure of large clubs like Liverpool and Newcastle to achieve much beyond the modest objective of ‘one academy graduate a year’ is both an indictment of their strategic and operational management and a cause perhaps of the financial difficulties both were facing by the end of the decade. The experience of Bolton Wanderers, viewed in this context, is completely at odds with the emphasis that Gilmore and Gilson (2007) place on the role of the academy in the club’s strategic management.

Clearly, while academy managers may achieve what many see as their remit, many of the graduates do not match up to the first team manager’s requirements. There is a disjuncture between having a successful academy, measured in these terms, and being successful in the Premier League. Moreover, the vast majority of the youth players with whom an academy manager works (at least two out of three, even leaving aside those never offered a professional contract at all) *never* play in the first team. Almost all of the remainder make fewer than 10 appearances for the first team, including those as a substitute. This apparent dichotomy between the objectives of the first team and those of the academy is hard to explain, but the longevity and experience of the academy manager may play a role, David Parnaby, for example, has been in his job at Middlesbrough for more than 10 years.

Analysis

The first part of this section provides some answers to the research questions with which this paper commenced. We then move on to consider some of the implications.

How many academy graduates play for the first team?

Viewing the data as a whole and recognising that the production of a 'Home Town Legend' is the ultimate success of the academy process, only 118 of the 1,228 academy graduates reached this status with their academy clubs, fewer than 10%. Perhaps of more concern, both in business and personal terms, are the 752, or over 61%, of the contracted professionals who never made a league appearance for their home club. This is a significant investment by the club in human resource development that has brought no contribution on the pitch, and hence, in terms of generating income through additional merit payments, sponsorship, or merchandising, no financial return whatsoever. It is possible that the club may obtain some transfer income, but this is likely to be minimal since the player has not established a reputation before either going out on loan or, ultimately, moving from their academy club. Such players were much more likely to be released as free agents.

358 players from the database of 1,228 players (29%) played between 1 and 49 games for their academy club, and represent some success for the academy, but they illustrate the dichotomy between the management and coaching of the first team and the academies. They may be players good enough to play professionally (in the Premier League or lower divisions), but they do not meet the requirements of the first team for which they have been patiently groomed. The academy managers have developed these players for a chance in the first team, but they have generally fallen short when given their opportunity. This may be indicative of a broader problem in English, and indeed European, football identified by Relvas et al. (2010), who comment on the physical, organisational, and psychological distance that frequently exists between the youth team and the first team, and the frustration felt by the academy manager as a result. 'Typically the first-team manager seems to operate aside from the youth development process of young players', they comment. 'This apparent gap... acts as a deterrent to the player's

progression to the first team' (Relvas et al. 2010: 181). This may become even more problematic in cases where there is a frequent turnover of first team managers.

The data does show that some clubs, notably Fulham, Nottingham Forest, Middlesbrough and Sunderland, were reluctant to develop professionals and not play them once, giving many more academy graduates the opportunity to prove themselves before rejecting them. Other clubs, especially Blackburn Rovers, Liverpool and Newcastle United, adopted an arguably more conservative approach by giving relatively few academy graduates the 1-10 game opportunity and allowing many more to leave the club without an appearance to their name. The approach of giving academy graduates the chance of up to 10 games appears to be more prevalent in clubs that have spent time outside the Premier League or faced serious financial difficulties. The more conservative approach of allowing players to leave without an appearance tends to be adopted by more of the ever present clubs, implying they can afford this expense much more than clubs spending time in the lower divisions.

What is the relationship between anecdote and fact?

The anecdotes available within the industry about the development of players, where they come from, what makes them the players they are, and so on, are many and varied. What this research shows is that the facts are very different. This is possibly illustrated best by the data for Arsenal. In the Premier League era, their manager for much of this period, Arsène Wenger, has developed a reputation for being a manager prepared to invest in youth and back that youth talent by playing it in the first team, especially since the break-up of the 'Invincibles' team of 2003-04. There is no doubting Wenger's practice, and the backing he has from senior football administrators for doing this, but this 'reputation' has extended to Arsenal being a club that develops youth players. The data shows this was not the case, at least in the first fifteen years of the Premier League; indeed Arsenal's performance over the period in question could be judged the worst of all the clubs analysed, with just Ashley Cole developing into a 'Home Town Legend' for the club, at least before his acrimonious departure. Arsenal's strategy, rather, has been to purchase young players cheaply from other clubs and then develop them in the first-team squad, most successfully in the cases of Nicolas Anelka and Cesc Fàbregas, in much the same way as Liverpool did in the 1970s.

Exploring other prevalent anecdotes, West Ham United is often viewed almost as a production line of youth development. There may be a quality argument in terms of the output from the West Ham academy which is not evaluated here, but the objective data does not support the anecdote. West Ham is very much ‘in the middle of the pack’ when compared with others. Manchester City is also a club which earns plaudits for the way it runs its academy and its reputation as a club is one of doing the right things for their youth players. This may well be true, but the objective measurement of the output of its academy over the period of this research does not support the anecdote, although it did produce three more players who achieved Home Town Legend status between 2007 and 2010.

The case of Middlesbrough as a club which is committed to bleeding young talent in the first team is supported by the data, however, and it should be noted that it produced four more ‘Home Town Legends’ before its relegation from the Premier League in 2009. The club’s annual skirmishes with relegation, however, tend to support the argument that this policy of youth development does not bring the kind of business value to the club that it needs, namely surviving comfortably in the Premier League each season.

Surprisingly, the data shows Sunderland, Middlesbrough’s close neighbour, to be a relatively good developer of home town legends. This is possibly explained by Sunderland’s position as something of a ‘yo-yo’ club, oscillating between the top two divisions in England, and forced to turn to internal resources at the academy as opposed to paying large transfer fees in the market. Anecdotes about Sunderland’s reputation do not abound, at least not beyond the North East, and this proves somewhat the reverse of the other stories in the industry. Sunderland’s undersung position is refreshing, but again shows perception and anecdote to be widely different from the facts.

Overall, senior figures in the football industry are constantly quoted about youth being ‘the future of the game’, but the data from this research shows that the output of the Premier League clubs’ own youth development has been inefficient and that the youth, in general, comes from the development work of other people. While Arsène Wenger has had great success with purchasing teenage players cheaply and bleeding many of them early in the Arsenal first team, it appears that, when it comes to securing Premier League

players, the majority of clubs prefer to take the fruits of others' labours in coaching teenagers rather than trusting that their own academy will provide.

What are the reasons why a Premier League club invests in an academy?

It is currently impossible to measure the Return on Investment in a club's academy in conventional financial terms. No reliable figures for the capital and operating costs of the Premier League clubs' academies are in the public domain, and it is probable that the clubs themselves have, at best, a hazy idea of them. UEFA's Financial Fair Play provisions may correct this, at least for the leading clubs. On the other side of the coin, it is extremely difficult to estimate the replacement cost (transfer fee, agent commission and player's salary) of the asset (the player) that the club has developed in-house, while the reliability of publicly stated transfer fees for academy graduates who move elsewhere after a few games, always dubious in any case, is further problematic because many such transfers involve contingency payments that might be triggered by appearances, goals, trophies won, international caps, or onward transfers. However, if we accept a figure of £3-£5 million a year for the costs of operating an academy, one hazarded in interviews and endorsed by the PL chairman, Sir David Richards (*Daily Telegraph*, 21 June 2008), it is doubtful that many clubs cover their operating costs, let alone the amortisation, depreciation and interest charges on their capital investment. Why, then, did clubs rush to invest in academies following the adoption of Wilkinson's *A Charter for Quality*, and then keep them going?

One reason may lie in a comment made regularly in the interviews for this research that the English football community exhibits a herd mentality in many of the things it does. This is illustrated here by the Premier League's response to the FA's *A Charter for Quality*, where an anticipated dozen academies turned into 40 of them across the country. With the exception of Wigan Athletic (and more recently Blackpool), every one of the current and former Premier League members has elected to build an academy.

The simplest conclusion is that once youth academies were perceived as 'the next great thing', clubs believed that if they did not have one they would miss out on securing talent. As one author has commented, football is like an 'arms race', in that the prizes or

fear of being left behind are such that all participants have to keep spending because their rivals do (Franck 2010). Although the data shows that none of the Premier League academies are fantastic production lines of players, it does show a certain parity among the clubs and therefore, if they have ‘paid to play in the game’, the fact that a club has an academy gives it the same status and bargaining position as its fellow clubs. No club has been willing to remove or downgrade its academy, and eliminate its associated costs, largely because all the other clubs were not prepared to make that decision, just as in an arms race among states. Moreover, the threat of poor performance, relegation, and the consequent financial difficulties probably enhances the potential importance of the academy as a source of income in the minds of club executives, as Southampton showed with their transfers of Theo Walcott and Gareth Bale.

A second, but more recent, reason may lie in UEFA rulings, at least for those clubs likely to participate in UEFA competitions. First, the guidelines for youth development, which are a pre-requisite for a club competing in the UEFA competitions, ensure that a club has an ‘academy-like’ entity within its organisation. It is surely no coincidence that Portsmouth’s Centre of Excellence received its Academy status around the time that the club won the FA Cup and qualified for the UEFA Cup for the first time in its history in 2008. Second, the home-grown players rules initially introduced by UEFA and subsequently by the Premier League put a premium on player development, though they still permit clubs such as Arsenal to claim players imported from other countries at 17 or 18 as home-grown. However, these arguments do not hold for the academies that exist in the lower reaches of the English professional league structure and the ‘herd mentality’ or ‘arms race’ arguments still remain a more plausible explanation of the reasons why Premier League clubs invested in their academies before agreement on the PL home-grown player rules in 2009.

Are academy graduates prepared for a life in, or beyond, football?

One of the further implications of this research is that only a small proportion of those who enter Premier League academies have a chance of obtaining a professional contract, let alone appearing in the first team. For many young players their career as a top footballer is potentially over at 16 or 18 and, as this paper has shown, fewer than 10% of those who turn professional actually play more than 50 matches for their home team.

The reality, represented by just the 1,228 contracted professionals of this study, is that over 61% of academy graduates do not make it as professionals at their home club. Some of these players do move onto other clubs, mainly in the lower divisions, and they can make a professional living in football. Others may turn to coaching. This underlines the significance of research such as that of Brown & Potrac (2009) on the implications of the failure that will hit so many young people, and hence the importance of the academies, governing bodies, and the PFA having the structures in place to prepare young players for a life outside the professional game.

This research has also shown that the infrastructure of games and leagues behind the Premier League first team is insufficient to develop players beyond the age of 18 when most obtain their first professional contract. Recognising that young men change significantly, both physically and emotionally/intellectually, between the age of 18 and full adulthood in their early 20s, it is clear that the environment of reserve team training and football does not prepare more than a small minority of these professionals for a life in the game. This leads to the question of whether there are deeper structural problems in English football that lead those clubs under pressure to perform at the top level or simply stay in the Premier League to prefer foreign players.

Do foreign imports impact the development of youth players?

The PFA's *Meltdown* report documented the influx of foreign players in the Premier League since the Bosman Judgment and argued that this has reduced the number of opportunities for young English footballers to play at the top level. The extent to which this is true can be discerned from the figures from the database used here on the opportunities given to players and what they made of them. Figure 7 shows the number of appearances academy graduates had made for their 'home' club by the end of the 2009-10 season, according to the season of their league debut. For the sake of comparability the data originally collected for the last four seasons in the chart have been augmented with up to date information to the end of the 2009-10 season, thus giving players at least three additional seasons to achieve the status of 'Home Town Legend', and therefore including new 'Home Town Legends' such as Micah Richards at Manchester City who had only achieved 41 appearances by the end of the 2006-07 season.

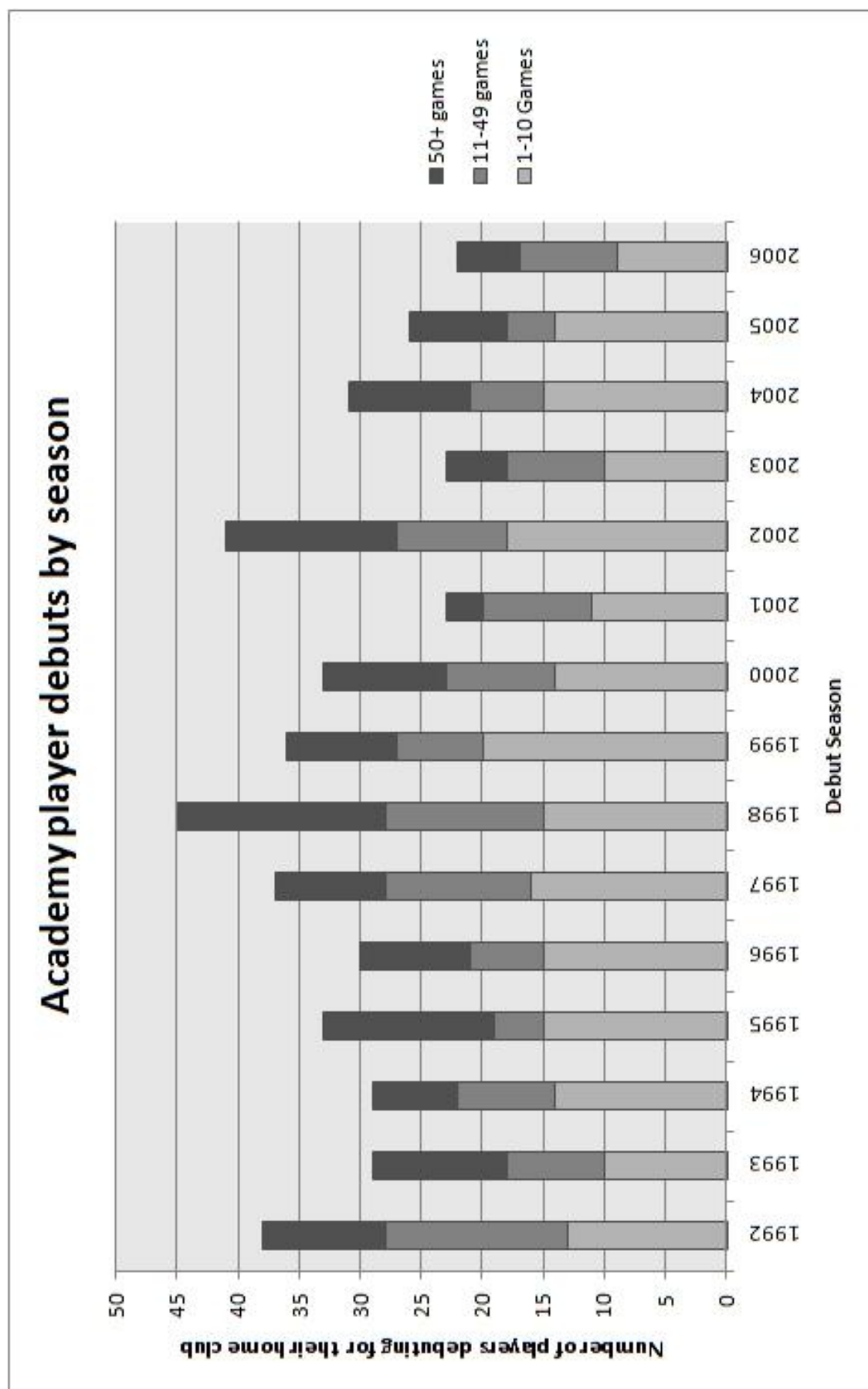


Figure 7: Debuts of academy players and eventual appearances for home club

Season-by-season data is volatile, as the chart shows: it is difficult to know the reasons for the peak in 2002-03, for example. What the diagram does clearly show is that the problem does not lie in lack of opportunity, since there is no clear trend in the numbers playing up to 50 matches. However, 8 of the 13 players who debuted in 2005/06 and 2006/07 and subsequently reached the level of Home Town Legend, including Newcastle United's Andy Carroll, had gained experience when their clubs were playing outside the Premier League, and this was a higher proportion than in the earlier years. Overall this sample of 23 clubs produced on average just over one player every two years who made more than 10 appearances before moving on. This disappointing outcome may be partly due to the influx of foreign players. It is clear that the four seasons with the lowest number of league debuts all occur after 2000. However, it may also be due to the structure of junior and youth coaching in place before 1997-98 when many centres of excellence were upgraded to PL academies, as well as the ongoing problems of transition between the academy and the first-team squad in dysfunctional organisations, as Relvas et al. would suggest.

It is doubtful that a monocausal explanation for the relatively poor performance of PL academies in producing professional footballers in England will suffice: the influx of foreign players; the quality of coaching in academies; their culture; the difficulties a late teenager has in making the transition to becoming an elite sportsman; and the organisational failings of football clubs all have a part to play. One further argument should give us pause before blaming it all on Bosman, the commercialisation and globalisation of football, and the labour market preferences of top clubs. The approach in the PFA's *Meltdown* report does not consider the possibility that just as young foreign players can migrate to England to play, so too should young players from England be competent enough in footballing and sociocultural terms to play in other countries' leagues. In principle this ought to provide an outlet for English footballers who do not succeed at their home clubs. The reality, however, for reasons beyond the scope of this research, is that young English players do not travel and settle well in other countries and the number going abroad is minimal. This raises important issues about the technical skills, education and social skills that young players acquire in academies. If the academies were truly successful in their task of human capital formation there should be a comparable outflow of talent to other leagues, notably in Europe. However, with a few exceptions (Bothroyd – Perugia, Kazim-Richards – Fenerbahçe, Derbyshire –

Olympiakos), such a flow does not exist. The insularity that the PFA report exhibits may in fact reflect a broader problem of English football and social culture. Although it is doubtless true that certain PL clubs such as Chelsea, Arsenal and Manchester United do engage in a global search for 17 and 18-year-old talent that eats into opportunities for their own academy graduates by forcing them to compete with the best in their age group at international level, the relative failure of the 40 PL academies to produce 'Home Town Legends' across the board has been a persistent problem, not one due solely to a growing influx of foreign players in the major clubs after 2000, and the lack of out-migration of English players is a telling indictment.

Concluding Remarks

In the 15 years of the Premier League studied here, the data shows that the PL academies and their predecessors have produced very few Gerrards, Scholes and Terrys. Between 1992-93 and 2006-07 they developed only 118 'Home Town Legends' (50+ games for their academy club) from a population of 1,228 academy graduates offered professional contracts and over 4,000 players debuted in the 23 clubs studied. All academies are striving to unearth this type of player, but they are rare, and the quantification of their value remains undocumented. Occasionally, a monetary value can be placed on a 'Home Town Legend'. For example, Wayne Rooney made 67 Premier League appearances for Everton, before being sold to Manchester United in 2004 for fees, staged over multiple years, in the region of £25 million. It remains unknown what Rooney's value would ultimately have been to the promising Everton team he left behind, which would doubtless have been able to exploit further the matchday, media and commercial income associated with a star home-grown player, just as Liverpool have done so successfully with Steven Gerrard since his debut in 1998/99.

It is, however, evident that Premier League clubs do not take the time to quantify the value they get from their academies. The academy represents the Research and Development arm of these businesses and they each consume a few million pounds in annual running costs but, unlike most large corporations, they are not treated as a cost/profit centre accountable to senior management. Indeed, since academy graduates who become first team players do not appear on the balance sheet, the standard financial

accounting conventions with regard to club assets almost encourage the clubs not to calculate the value of what they have developed.

Business value therefore remains unknown, anecdotes abound with little hard data to support them, and it becomes harder to understand why a club has a Premier League academy beyond the herd or ‘arms race’ mentality that prevails in the industry and the national and international rules that enforce it. More than 61% of the academy graduates given professional contracts never play for their home town club, incurring significant training costs for minimal return. The current structure of teams/games for the critical ages between 18 and 21 in England seems to prevent progress unless a player goes out on a successful loan. For many clubs, such as those positioned at the bottom of Table 2, like Liverpool, Blackburn and Newcastle, the ‘solution’ appears to be to buy players, often from cheaper, overseas locations, at a later age when it is more obvious that they will make the grade in the Premier League. Others, like Arsenal and Manchester United, scour the world for excellent prospects in their late teenage years, and put them directly into the first-team squad. Some, like Chelsea, try to do both.

A Charter for Quality was concerned about English clubs and the English national team. It was produced at a time when English football was still extremely insular with few foreign players, and often still resting on the memories of the European Cup victories achieved by four different clubs before the Heysel tragedy enforced a ban on English clubs competing in Europe. This paper shows how little it achieved by devolving elite player development to clubs. Although the precise return on the investment made by Premier League clubs is impossible to measure, this research does show how few players came through the PL clubs’ academies to make more than fifty appearances for their home clubs, and how many disappeared without ever performing at this level. At least among the top thinkers in the game the failures of the national team, the influx of foreign players, and the contrast with the apparent success of the French, Spanish and German national teams as a result of the restructuring of their youth development systems seem, belatedly, to be leading to a reconsideration of the English structure, in particular the quality of coaching, and hence the decision, at the end of 2010, to complete the National Football Centre near Burton on Trent (Football Association 2010). What is unclear is the extent to which this attention to international best practice has trickled down into the

PL academies themselves, especially as they are often separate from the senior squad facilities, and this represents a challenge for the leaders of the English game.

This paper has been able to avoid ‘soft’ research techniques and anecdote and focus on hard data, that of the history of the first 15 years of the English Premier League. Where practical research decisions have been made on which data to include, for example the selection of the subset of 23 clubs for detailed analysis, they have been made with a view to improving the likelihood of a positive outcome. The conclusions, however, have not been positive. At the level of the national team the system of youth development adopted in the Premier League era appears to have failed, in contrast with France, Germany, and Spain. However, it appears that it is not just at the national level that this has happened. Most of the first-team and squad players in the Premier League are no longer playing for the club that initially trained them as teenagers, and it is not clear that the clubs that have PL academies ever recoup their investments in physical and human resources, except perhaps for brief periods of time. Moreover, while many products of PL academies do move to lower divisions of the English leagues, few English players can survive, let alone prosper, overseas. What this paper highlights is the need for further research to understand why. Investigation by specialists from other disciplines on topics such as club/academy processes, the problems of making the transition from promising teenager to star player, the apparent success of youth development programmes in other countries, and the systems adopted in other sports such as those played in the United States, would allow one to be more prescriptive about new and different approaches to developing young players, but this will take time. What this paper has done is to identify, and for the first time quantify, the scale of the problem in English football.

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