

# Kensington Dragons Football Club

## **Football and Education**

### Part One – Background and Facts



## Introduction

The thought of becoming a professional footballer is an exciting encouragement for a young person to play football. Problems arise when dreams are dashed, or unrealistic promises made - it is only too easy to tag the magic word “Academy” onto the end of a football club’s name.

Kensington Dragons encourages boys and girls to play football and value their education. The danger is that talented young footballers are enticed to join “Academies” with promises that often do not materialise. This leaves players not only disillusioned with football, but also having neglected their education. After all, who would want to do their maths homework when the thought of earning zillions as a professional footballer beckons?

Some players may not realise that many universities and colleges have excellent sports facilities and football teams to match. It is true that most professional footballers progress through the academy route, but it also appears to be true that, on a proportional basis, footballers playing in the First Team at one of the top footballing universities have as much opportunity to play professional football – if that remains their ambition. The average 15-year-old might not realise that over a lifetime a doctor, lawyer, school head, accountant, builder, successful restaurateur etc. may earn more, and be as fulfilled as if they had played professional football – especially when football careers can be cut short by injury. Being educated and playing football can increase life chances.

This report:

- Describes a serious concern with football academies and their operation.
- Looks at the top universities in the UK for football.
- Gives examples of talented players who have combined education and playing football at the highest level.

## UK Football Academies

There are an unknown number of young players playing in nonprofessional, so called, “Academies” and of those, few are successful at trials let alone signed by professional clubs. However, we do know that there are around 12,000 boys playing with professional football academies each year in the UK. The academies of professional clubs recruit, train, and hone the skills of the nation’s most talented football players. They provide expert coaches and top-of-the-range facilities. They facilitate dreams to become a professional footballer. However, they can also reject and abandon. It has been found that less than half a per cent of professional academy players will ever make a living from the game. This dismal statistic is the point of departure of this report.

The questions we try to address are:

- What are the success rates of academies, and what problems arise from pursuing this avenue?

This report focuses on boys’ football academies because they are more developed than those for girls, but many concerns equally apply.

## The 'Major Concern' in Youth Football

Commercialised professional clubs recruit thousands of boys into intensive, four-times-a-week training from the age of eight. Hundreds of these boys are released each year, as the clubs narrow their focus on those who might have a chance of making a career in professional football and becoming a valuable financial asset. Despite the huge numbers housed in this system - 12,000 boys as of 2017 - **first-team opportunities have diminished every year since 1997** (The Guardian, 2017). In each transfer window, most Premier League clubs overlook their young graduates and instead spend multimillions of pounds on fully formed overseas stars.

The Premier League and Football League defend the professionalism of their youth processes, coaching and facilities, which have improved since the introduction in 2012 of the Elite Player Performance Plan. Both leagues stress that **boys who are taken on for the 16-18 scholarship must continue with education** – commonly this is a BTEC sports diploma – and receive a broad range of welfare provision and courses in life skills including emotional wellbeing.

Fifteen Premier League and nine Championship clubs have Category One EPPP academies and operate under-23 teams, so they report a relatively high number of 18-year-olds given initial professional contracts – 65% in 2016, according to the Premier League.

However, Gordon Taylor, chief executive of the Professional Footballers' Association, says that of the **boys who make it into the elite scholarship programme at 16, five out of six are not playing professional football at 21**. Taylor describes this as “a matter of major concern”.

## Research and Statistics from Previous Studies

- **First team opportunities for academy graduates have diminished every year since 1997** as globalisation has impacted the football player market.
- Those who make it into the Elite Scholarship programme at 16, **5 out of 6 are not playing professional football at 21 years of age**.
- **Over half of players released from academies suffer “clinical levels of psychological distress.”** Dr David Blakelock of Teesside University found in 2015 that **55% of players** in his study were suffering “clinical levels of psychological distress” 21 days after being released. Blakelock says the academy experience can narrow young boys' perspectives into an “athletic identity”, in which they see themselves almost wholly as footballers, so they can suffer “a loss of self-worth and confidence” when that is taken away.
- **A 99% drop-out rate from club academies.** Chris Platts, whose 2012 doctorate for Chester University was based on questionnaires and interviews with 303 17- and 18-year-olds in 21 clubs' academies, says **only four have professional contracts now** – a drop-out rate of 99%. His overriding concerns were that education was not taken seriously enough by many of the young men who believed they were within sight of being footballers, that despite the welfare programmes the academies were a high-pressure, “unreal” environment, and there was not enough support for players released.

## Sports at Higher Education Institutions

Students at a higher-education institute, such as a college or university, can join an array of sports clubs and societies. Football is the most popular sport played in the UK. Competitive leagues are organised by the **British University and College Sports (BUCS)** with over 500 teams entered into the football programme.

These matches are organised into a Wednesday league and a Cup tournament. For London-based students, there is also the **London Universities Sports Leagues (LUSL)** that offers league and knockout competitions for men's and women's teams.

Over the years, certain universities have dominated and have thus cultivated a reputation for sporting excellence. This attracts talent to their institutions, increasing their quality, which in turn attracts the attention of League and Non-League scouts.

The success of universities such as Loughborough, who in 2019 celebrated their 40<sup>th</sup> consecutive BUCS crown, epitomises how sporting development can be achieved alongside educational development. On the international stage, BUCS enters men's and women's teams into the World University Summer Games and European University competitions.



### Case Study 1

Rodrigo played more minutes than any other player in Pep Guardiola's Manchester City side in the 2020/21 season.

During this time, he studied for a degree in Management and Business Administration.

While at Villarreal and playing in La Liga, he studied Business Studies and Economics at the University of Castellon, even staying in the student accommodation and often being seen around campus carrying out 'domestic' duties – laundry!

## Top Universities for Football

Many universities have superb facilities and play football at a high standard.

### Loughborough University

In the last four years, Loughborough have made top 3 and have won the Championship twice. They were crowned **'2020 University of the Year'** at the *WhatUni Student Choice Awards* - **winner in both the 'University Facilities' and 'Sports and Societies' categories.** Several alumni are have gone on to play in professional teams such as Barnsley and MK Dons, and have even in the past won England caps. For Women's Football, the performance programme is led by UEFA B Licensed Coach Issy Martin with the squad competing in the top division of BUCS university football.

*"Loughborough Students Football Club offers many competitive opportunities, the first team play in the non-league at Step 5 (United Counties North Premier Division), FA Cup and Vase as well as the British Universities and Colleges Sport (BUCS) Northern Premier League. In addition to these fixtures LSFC play several high-profile games against professional clubs including Manchester United, Liverpool and England U18's."*

Performance Football, Loughborough University website (2021)

Loughborough boasts world class facilities on campus from preseason and throughout the year as well as access to a multi-disciplinary team of strength and conditioning coaches, physiotherapists, performance analysts and nutritionists. Players within the programme can also receive lifestyle support and are eligible to apply for scholarships.

		Overall						Home					Away					GD	PTS
		P	W	D	L	F	A	W	D	L	F	A	W	D	L	F	A		
1	Long Eaton United	34	28	5	1	106	20	15	1	1	57	11	13	4	0	49	9	+86	89
2	Gresley Rovers	34	27	5	2	91	31	14	3	0	42	15	13	2	2	49	16	+60	86
3	Anstey Nomads	34	23	6	5	95	33	12	3	2	46	12	11	3	3	49	21	+62	75
4	Loughborough Students	34	21	5	8	90	35	12	2	3	50	14	9	3	5	40	21	+55	68
5	Deeping Rangers	34	16	5	13	53	56	8	3	6	24	23	8	2	7	29	33	-3	53

**United Counties Premier Division North (Step 5), 2021**

### University of Sterling

This college are consistent top-5 finishers. Footballers represent the University in the semi-professional Scottish Lowland Football League and the Scottish Cup. Home fixtures for these competitions are played at the Falkirk Stadium. Additionally, students compete in the BUCS Premier League North, the British Universities Championships, the Queen's Park Shield, and the Scottish universities and colleges cup.

## Russell Group Universities

**Birmingham, Bristol and Durham** all belong to the prestigious Russell Group which are the UK's world-class, research-intensive institutions. They consistently perform well in BUCS competitions.

## BUCS Trophy

BUCS also has a Trophy competition in which the men's first teams for **Manchester Metropolitan, Essex and Gloucestershire** have all excelled, with **Leeds and St Mary's** first teams doing similarly well for women's football.

Divock Origi, Liverpool striker and Belgian international, is launching a new scholarship in partnership with the University of Liverpool.

The Divock Origi Scholarship will initially be offered to two students from the city of Liverpool, who will begin an undergraduate course at the university in September 2021.

Professor Gavin Brown, pro-vice-chancellor for education: "Divock is an inspiring figure for young people in our city and his support will help us in our aim to nurture local talent and potential."



## Other Footballing Universities of Note

### Cardiff Metropolitan University

Cardiff Metropolitan has seven Cardiff-based football teams taking part in BUCS competitions, plus a football team for computing and business studies undergraduates at its London School of Commerce which plays in BUCS's London league.

Its first and second women's teams have notched up good achievements in BUCS leagues, the Welsh National Premier League and the Welsh Women's Challenge Cup competition over the past ten years. It also has two men's and one women's futsal teams.

### Durham University

Durham has five football teams and men's and women's futsal teams. In recent years, two players have been offered professional terms. Jonny Giles, who graduated at the end of the 2014/15 season, signed to Oxford United and Ben Dudzinski will play for Hartlepool United for the 2016/17 season.

## Hartpury College

Hartpury College specialises in degree courses and other qualifications in sports and animal, land and equine studies. It is an associate faculty of the University of the West of England (UWE) and is based in the Cotswolds in rural Gloucestershire. It has four football teams and teams for futsal. From 2007 to 2014 Hartpury College was the BUCS National Men's Premier League title holder. This winning streak was broken in 2015 by the University of South Wales.

Its students have played professionally all over the world for teams in America, Australia, Ghana, Sweden, Russia and Thailand. It has strong links with regional clubs including Cheltenham Town, Forest Green Rovers, Hereford FC, Swindon Town, Bristol Rovers, Newport County, Weston-Super-Mare, Gloucester City, Bristol City and Exeter City.

## Leeds Beckett University

Leeds Beckett FC has four men's football teams and three women's football teams plus two men's and two women's futsal teams, which, like the football teams, take part in BUCS competitions. The university also provides opportunities for students to take football coaching courses in addition to a degree, and runs programmes on which students can coach local school children.

## Northumbria University

Northumbria University is based in Newcastle upon Tyne. Its football club – Team Northumbria as it's now known – was founded in 1999 as Northumbria University FC. It quickly worked its way up the Northern Football Alliance and then the Northern League. It has five football teams and six futsal teams.

## University of South Wales (USW)

USW's first men's football team has gone from BUCS second league in 2009/2010 to BUCS Premier South Champions in 2015/2016. USW broke Hartpury College's eight-year stranglehold on the BUCS Men's Championship by winning the top spot in 2015/2016. It has first and second men's teams and two women's teams, plus first and second men's futsal teams.

[BUCS Top-Tier Football League Tables](#)  
(Last full season recorded)

**Men's**

BUCS Football 2018-19 - Premier North - Men's									
Premier North		BUCS Points	Results	Fixtures					
BUCS Football 2018-19 - Premier North									
Updated: 29/08/2019 23:15				P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
1	Northumbria 1st	10	9	0	1	14	27		
2	Nottingham Trent 1st	10	5	1	4	1	16		
3	Birmingham 1st	10	4	1	5	0	13		
4	Stirling 1st	10	4	1	5	-2	13		
5	Loughborough 1st	10	4	1	5	-3	13		
6	Durham 1st	10	2	0	8	-10	6		

BUCS Football 2018-19 - Premier South - Men's									
Premier South		BUCS Points	Results	Fixtures					
BUCS Football 2018-19 - Premier South									
Updated: 29/08/2019 23:15				P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
1	USW 1st	10	6	4	0	11	22		
2	Hartpury 1st	10	5	2	3	5	17		
3	Cardiff Met 1st	10	4	4	2	5	16		
4	Swansea 1st	10	3	2	5	-6	11		
5	Bath 1st	10	2	3	5	-3	9		
6	Exeter 1st	10	1	3	6	-12	6		



## Women's

BUCS Football 2018-19 - Premier North - Women's									
Premier North		BUCS Points	Results	Fixtures					
BUCS Football 2018-19 - Premier North									
Updated: 29/08/2019 23:15				P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
1	Northumbria 1st	10	10	0	0	47	30		
2	Durham 1st	10	4	3	3	11	15		
3	Leeds Beckett 1st	10	4	2	4	-14	14		
4	Loughborough 1st	10	4	1	5	-5	13		
5	Stirling 1st	10	2	2	6	-15	8		
6	Birmingham 1st	10	1	2	7	-24	5		

BUCS Football 2018-19 - Premier South - Women's									
Premier South		BUCS Points	Results	Fixtures					
BUCS Football 2018-19 - Premier South									
Updated: 29/08/2019 23:15				P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
1	Cardiff Met 1st	9	8	1	0	21	25		
2	Hertfordshire 1st	10	6	2	2	10	20		
3	Bath 1st	10	6	0	4	3	18		
4	Portsmouth 1st	10	2	2	6	-11	8		
5	Cardiff 1st	9	2	1	6	-13	7		
6	Chichester 1st	10	2	0	8	-10	6		

## Professional Footballers with Higher Education Degrees

### **Socrates**

Completed a doctorate in Medicine during his playing career, and practised medicine after his retirement from the game in 1989 before also earning a PhD.

### **Juan Mata**

Juan Mata became one of the world's most universally popular footballers when he announced his Common Goal initiative back in 2017.

During his time at Valencia and Chelsea, he earned two degrees from Madrid's Universidad Camilo Jose Cela - one in Marketing, and one in sports Science.

### **Shaka Hislop**

Trinidad and Tobago goalkeeper Hislop was an important part of Sir Bobby Robson's Newcastle side in the late nineties, also representing Reading, West Ham, Portsmouth, and FC Dallas.

As a youngster, Hislop earned a scholarship to play college soccer at Howard University in the United States, where he eventually graduated with honours with a degree in Mechanical Engineering.

### **Steve Palmer**

Former Ipswich, Watford, QPR and MK Dons defender Steve Palmer carved out a solid career, making more than 500 appearances across the English leagues.

He did so with a degree in Computer Software design from the University of Cambridge under his belt, one of a select few Oxbridge alumni to turn out in the professional game. During his studies, he appeared in a first-class cricket match for the university team

### **Iain Dowie**

Now 54, Iain Dowie made over 400 appearances across a 13-year career as a forward, winning 59 caps for the Republic of Ireland.

As a youngster, though, his football career looked to be over before it had begun when he was released by Southampton. He went to the University of Hertfordshire, earned a Master's in Engineering, and got a job at British Aerospace.

Playing in non-league, he was spotted by Luton Town, where he decided to focus on football full-time.

### **Duncan Watmore**

Sunderland winger Duncan Watmore was afforded time off from training to study for an Economics degree as he first broke through into the first team on Wearside.

Having initially started at the University of Manchester while playing at non-league side Altrincham, Watmore transferred to the University of Newcastle after making the move to the Northeast.

## Conclusion

There is a prevailing problem in the youth football system that jeopardises the mental state of the very high percentage of young players who are released from academies. These players suffer from a loss of identity and self-worth, often falling into depression or sometimes worse. Closer attention is now being paid to 'the ones that don't make it'. Charlton Athletic have, for example, begun counselling and support sessions to aid the mental health of their academy players and help them deal with the possibility of being released.

Ambitious footballers should consider another option: football programmes at higher education. This report has demonstrated the high calibre of football at many universities which also provide the opportunity to gain qualifications, and begins Kensington Dragons' investigation into the topic.

---

## Sources

British Universities and Colleges Sport [online] Available at: <https://www.bucs.org.uk/>

Goal, 2021: Footballers with degrees: Kompany, Mata & 10 players who went to university [online] Available at: <https://www.goal.com/en-gb/lists/footballers-with-degrees-kompany-mata-10-players-who-went-to/196q7i1qbyhjs1n124xafcdc80#cs36f0b6e8bd08be1e>

The Guardian, 2017. Football's Biggest Issue: The Struggle Facing Boys Rejected by Academies [online] Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2017/oct/06/football-biggest-issue-boys-rejected-academies>

Insider, 2017. The Shocking Statistic [online] Available at: <https://www.businessinsider.com/michael-calvin-shocking-statistic-why-children-football-academies-will-never-succeed-soccer-sport-2017-6?r=US&IR=T>

Non-League Matters, 2022 [online] Available at: <https://www.nonleaguematters.co.uk/divisions/300/>

Sky News, 2021. Youth football: What happens to those who don't 'make it'? [online] Available at: <https://news.sky.com/story/youth-football-what-happens-to-those-who-dont-make-it-12226577>

Target Careers, 2021: Top Universities for Football [online] Available at: <https://targetcareers.co.uk/uni/top-unis-for-your-lifestyle/313603-top-universities-for-football>