

# Developing Women's Football: Elite Youth Academies in Finland

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<p>The Football Association of Finland created a new strategy for four years in 2020. One main strategic objective is growth as an athlete as the starting point for activities. To be able to achieve that objective the clubs and the players everyday life in the women's and girls' football needs to be developed.</p> <p>In this thesis the project Elite Youth Academies for girls in Finland was created and managed. The project is a Football Association of Finland strategy project which supports the development of players everyday life. The aim of the project is to develop a Finnish Academy model to support the youth player development. Lean leadership method was used to lead the project.</p> <p>The stages of the project were situation analysis, international benchmark, analysis of pilot Academies, questionnaire to the clubs, Sports Academies and Olympic Committee, creating a working group, workshops, implementation the Elite Youth Academy model to the Football Association of Finland player development pathway and plans for monitoring the Elite Youth Academies.</p> <p>The development work produced a holistic Finnish Elite Youth Academy model in women's and girls' football for 15-18-year-old players. On the basis of the development work, it was also concluded that at this stage there should be five Elite Youth Academies in Finland nationwide. The Finnish Elite Youth Academy for girls' model is based on tripartite agreement whereas a hybrid model the clubs, Football Association of Finland and the local Sport Academy develops a holistic environment together. In hybrid model the stakeholders work in a network. The network creates and manages resources, processes, and structures together in athlete talent development environment.</p> <p>This model can be used in the Football Association of Finland when developing holistic ecological Dual Carrier environments for youth players and in addition, this model can also be used in other Finnish ball sports when creating a hybrid model to support the development of young athletes.</p>	
<b>Asiasanat</b> Women's football, Academies, player development, dual carrier, network	

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# 1 Introduction

Women's Football has a short history in Finland. A women's league, "Mimmiliiga", was launched in 1971, as we approach the new 2021 season, Finnish women's football will be celebrating its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary. The first National Team game was played in 5.8.1973 in Åland islands where Finland played against Sweden. The final result was 0-0. Much has happened in whole world in Women's Football in 50 years' time.

Women's football has had a substantial growth. In 2014 the total number of registered female players was 4 801 360 (FIFA 2019, 15) In 2019 that amount grew to 13,36 million female athletes playing organized football around the world.



Figure 1. Women's football in numbers. (FIFA 2019, 7)

Finland is not a typical European sports country. Finland is one of the only countries in Europe where football is not the most popular sport, although football has more licensed players than ice hockey, ice hockey is still the most popular sport in the eyes of Finnish sports fans, sponsors, and the media. The situation has been changing ever since the men's national team "Huuhkajat" qualified for 2021 European Championships for the first time in their history. The women's national team "Helmarit" qualified for Euro 2022 in February 2021 and the European Championship final tournament will be our fourth since 2005.

In 2019, Finland had roughly 33 000 registered female- and girl players, while 27 304 out of those 33 000 registered players were under the age of 19. The growth of licensed players in women's and girl's football has been low in comparisons to other European countries. Between 2009 and 2019 the growth of licensed players has been 1,3 percent (Football Association of Finland 2020, 5). While the Netherlands for example, has seen a growth of 43,68%. The Netherlands had a total of 112 681 players in 2009 (Royal Dutch Football Association 2016, 5) while in 2019 there were 161 902 females and girls playing organized football in the Netherlands (FIFA 2019, 75).

While the number of players increases, the competition also gets tougher. As can be seen from the FIFA women's ranking diagram, Finland was placed 16<sup>th</sup> in the world in 2009 and by the end of 2020 the ranking dropped to 25<sup>th</sup>. Finland was the 17<sup>th</sup> best country at the end of 2020 in the UEFA ranking. Currently countries like Belgium (FIFA ranking 17<sup>th</sup>), Switzerland (FIFA ranking 19<sup>th</sup>) and Austria (FIFA ranking 20<sup>th</sup>) are all ahead of Finland. All these three countries were behind Finland 10 years ago.

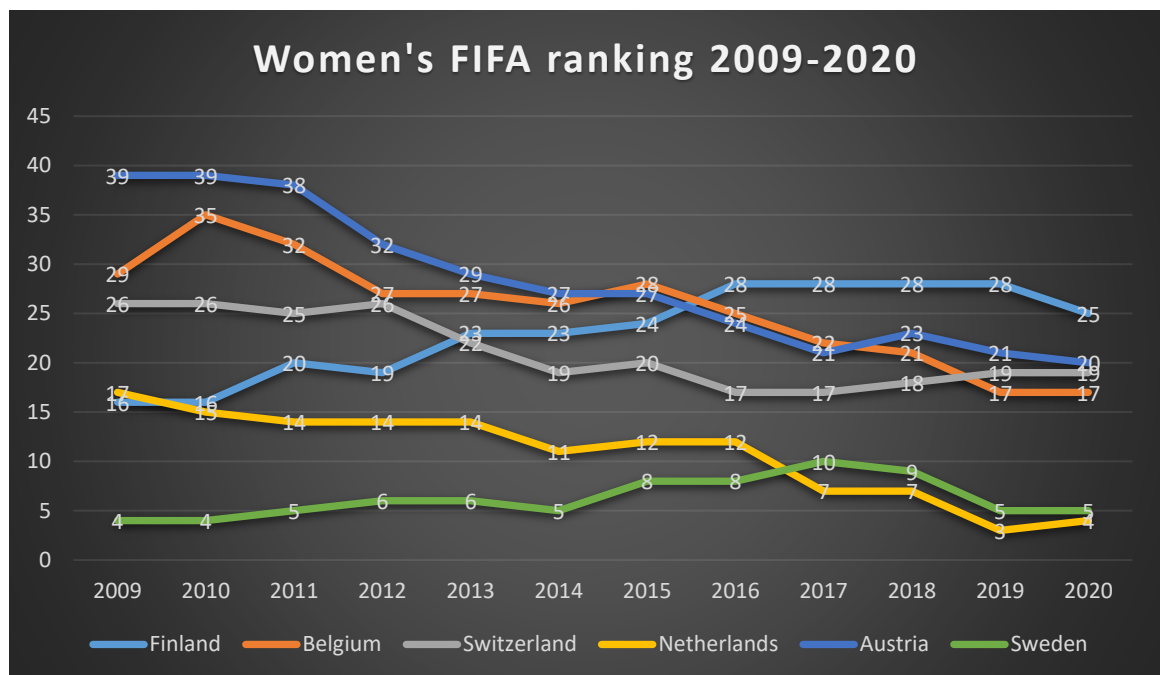


Table 1. Women's Football FIFA ranking 2009-2020.

The latest and most influential breakthrough for women's football was the 2019 World Cup. The tournament presented 24 teams from around the world and the players demonstrated how their abilities in mental skills, technical / tactical skills and their physical attributes had developed tremendously. "A dominant feature was the presence of versatile

players, including central defenders who were able to play a key role in building up attacks” (Loisel 2019, 7)

Because of the development of individual athletes, the teams could play well-organized, tactically flexible game with role variations and repeat high intensity football interactions with or without the ball.

What has happened in women’s football internationally? There are numerous reasons behind the development of the players and the women’s game, but one of the biggest reasons is the development of the structures and the daily environment. The daily environment offers the players quality training facilities, top level coaching, a competitive group of players, support services with mental, physical, nutritional, and medical experts. The players can focus on football and live like professional athletes. They also have time to recover as the players and the coaches work full time in football and the weekly rhythm can be planned to be optimal to ensure the development.

In women’s football the daily environment has developed during the last few years especially in countries like Italy, Spain, England, and France due to the men’s football club organizations have also taken the women’s team under their umbrella. These big football clubs, like Manchester City, Arsenal FC, FC Barcelona, Olympique Lyonnais, Juventus FC or AC Milan are financially superior that they can build a women’s football empire rapidly and provide a professional environment for the team with all the support services that are needed at the highest level.

The big central European clubs also have their own academies for youth players. Now mostly only in the boy’s sector with full board (housing, studying, training, and playing), but it is just a matter of time when this concept will grow also in the girls’ sector. In England, for instance, Chelsea FC has an academy for the girls, but the girls live at home and go to school in their own school district and not in the training center like the Chelsea FC boys do.

In Finland, there is also the same trend as in other European countries: the big men’s football club organizations invest resources and money in the women’s sector, however the clubs in Finland have a much smaller budget compared to the clubs in central Europe. Once the club invests in women’s football, the first priority is to build a more professional, high-performance environment around the women’s team – not in the youth player development structures. If the goal is to ensure a bright future in the women’s game, the youth development has to be a priority.

The salaries in women's football are not on the same level as on the men's side. This leads to the girls and women in football to pursue studies to ensure they have some insurance following their professional playing career. The player development structures should also offer possibilities to study for other careers in the future. How to combine elite player development and school – a dual career? How to have football as a first career and studies supporting that?

What should be done in Finland? How can smaller countries compete with the big ones in the player development? How can a country like Finland help potential players towards the international level, so they could someday play as professionals in the big European clubs and take the Finnish National Team to the World Cup? The Elite Youth Football Academies could be among the key things in the player development structure for the future in Finland.

The Finnish Olympic committee has defined the national sport academies and training centres as; "The goal of the Sports Academy and Training Centre network is to ensure that we have an internationally compatible daily training and operational environment. Talented youths can reach their full potential in sports. There are more internationally successful athletes and teams. Our actions are ethically sustainable. Education and preparing for the civil career are carried out responsibly and deliberately." (Finnish Olympic Committee 2020, 2)

Now there are 19 Sport Academies and nine Training Centres in Finland. The Olympic committee co-ordinates this network. Out of these 19 Sport Academies the Olympic committee has defined six National Sport Academies and Training Centres. Four of these six National Sport Academies are in centres of growth and two of them, Vuokatti-Ruka and Kuortane, are connected to Sports Institutes and Training Centres.

These six National Sport Academies and Training Centres have chosen their main sports and girls' and women's football is a main sport in Helsinki, Tampere, Turku and Jyväskylä. There are also Regional Sport Academies and Local Sports Academies, however these six National Academies and Training Centres have the best resources, meaning full-time coaches, experts, and support services on staff.

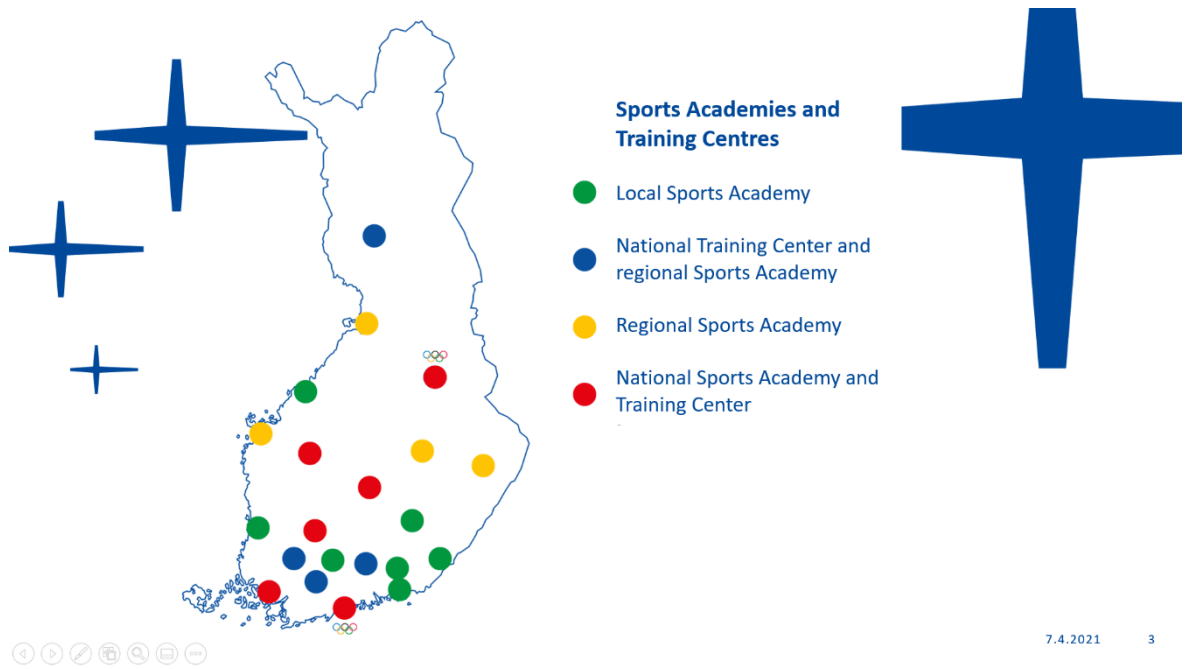


Figure 2. Finnish Olympic Committee Sports Academies and Training Centres (Finnish Olympic Committee 2020, 3)

Finnish sports teams have used the existing Sport Academy network well. The likes of women’s ice hockey, who has a U19 team in Kuortane Academy, where the players live, train, study, and play as a team. The program is led by the Finnish Ice Hockey Association. There are similar programs for volleyball in Kuortane for both boys and girls, and in basketball in Helsinki under URHEA Sports Academy. Both these programs are also led by their respective associations.

Finnish football would also benefit from the already existing Sport Academy structures. There are already high-performance environments in the Olympic Committee’s national Sport Academies and Training Centres where football could also build a holistic ecological, high performance youth player development environment for the most potential players. The Finnish Football Association’s objective is to be a FA for the clubs so also the Elite Youth Academies could be built together with clubs and in a network with the Olympic Committee.

In this thesis the Elite Youth Academy model, number of Academies and the Elite Youth Academy target group will be defined. The aim is to build a Finnish Elite Youth Academy model.



## 2 Dual Career and Holistic Athlete Career model

The theoretical frameworks in this project have been Dual Career Development environment working model, Finnish Olympic Committee's Dual Career model, An "Organizational Triangle" to Coordinate Talent Development model and Lean Leadership method.

The DCDE framework and Finnish Olympic Committee's Dual Career models will help to understand what the key environment components and their interrelations in a broader sociocultural context are. This helps in developing a holistic ecological environment for youth players in the Elite Youth Academies.

Linnér, Stambulova, Storm, Kuettel and Henriksen have studied the Dual Career Development Environment in Sweden. They have built a framework, Dual Career Development environment working model (DCDE) to describe the key environment components and their interrelations nested in a broader sociocultural context.

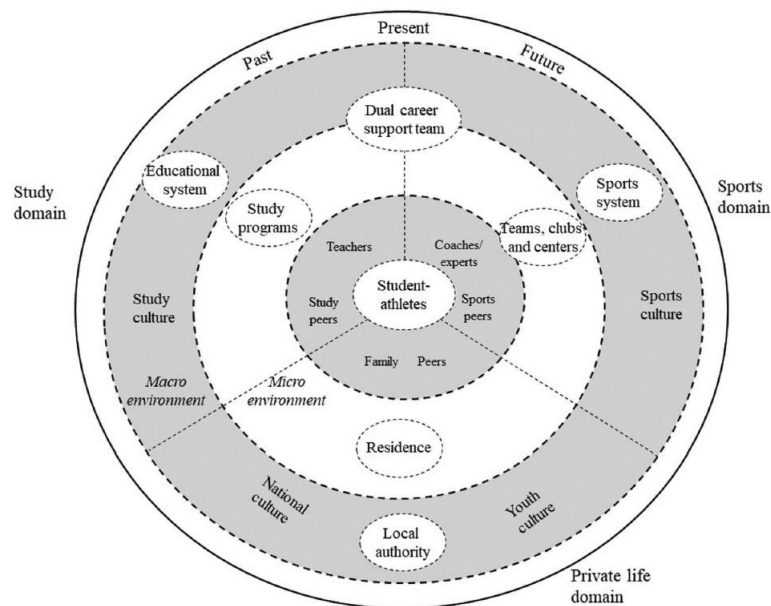


Figure 3. The Dual Career Development Environment (DCDE) working model. (Linnér, Stambulova, Storm, Kuettel & Henriksen 2020, 95-107).

The Dual career development environment (DCDE) working model is a framework for describing the key environment components and their interrelations nested in a broader sociocultural context. The model is structured into two levels (micro and macro) and three domains (sport, study, and private life) taking into account societal, sport, and educational institutions and cultures. As one of the main functions of a

DCDE is to facilitate DCs, the student athletes appear at the centre of the model surrounded by their key stakeholders in sport, studies, and private life (e.g., coaches, teachers, family, and peers). Facilitating Sports and University Study: The Case of a Dual Career Development Environment in Sweden (Linnér etc. 2020, 95-107).

As seen in picture 4. the athletes are in the centre and surrounded by many stakeholders who are supporting them in their Dual Career Development Environment. Everything is connected to the athlete's life holistically. A holistic approach takes into account different domains, the athlete's sports life, private life, and their study domain. The DCDE model also takes in account the culture of the environment and understands that the national, youth, study and sports cultures effect the Dual Career Development Environment.

The Finnish Dual Career and Holistic Athlete Career model is similar to the Swedish model from which the study was conducted. The Finnish model is also built so that it has a long-term effect to supports the athlete's development as a football player and a human being. In Finnish Dual Career model there are different phases from childhood to peak phase where the goal is to perform as well as possible and succeed as an athlete. There is also a phase when an athlete is retiring from the elite sport and needs support to that transition phase.

"The Finnish dual sports career model starts at the upper secondary level and continues all the way to the career transition after the end of a top sports career" (Olympic Committee, 2021).



Figure 4. Dual Career model in Finland. (Finnish Olympic Committee, 2020, 5).

The Finnish Athlete’s Dual Career is similar to Wylleman’s and Lavelle’s development model which also outlines a series of transitions throughout the athletes’ careers.

Age	10	15	20	25	30	35
<b>Athletic Level</b>	Initiation	Development	Mastery		Discontinuation	
<b>Psychological Level</b>	Childhood	Adolescence	Adulthood			
<b>Psychosocial Level</b>	Parents Siblings Peers	Peers Coach Parents	Partner Coach		Family (Coach)	
<b>Academic Vocational Level</b>	Primary education	Secondary education	Higher education	Vocational training Professional occupation		

Table 2. Wylleman’s and Lavelle’s development model 2004 (Cited from Alferman and Stambulova 2007, 716), (Kazandzieva 2018, 15)

“Wylleman and Lavallee (2004), for example, have proposed a developmental model that outlined a series of predictable or ‘normative’ transitions throughout the athletes’ careers. These normative transitions are part of a definite sequence of age-related biological, social, and emotional events or changes and can be said to be generally related to the socialization process, as well as the organizational nature of the setting in which individuals are involved (e.g., school, family).” (Kazandzieva, 2018, 14).

The Finnish Dual Career Development Environments, the Sports Academies aim is to offer an overall good day for the athletes which includes possibilities to combine sport and studies, personal life, quality training environment and coaching and with all this support the athlete’s balanced lifestyle and autonomy.

## Sport Academies and Training Centres

- + Support an athlete's personal development and success as an athlete
  - + Enable athletes' professional career in sports, and the combining of sport, studies and/or work
  - + Provide training and competition facilities
  - + Support a balanced lifestyle and athletes' autonomy
  - + Develop day-to-day training and coaching expertise
  - + Promote cooperation between the different operators in sport
- => Aiming towards an athlete's good day!**

7.4.2021

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Figure 5. The main goals of the Finnish Sports Academies and Training Centres. (Finnish Olympic Committee 2020, 6).

Kristoffer Henriksen has studied The Ecology of Talent Development in Sport and his study showed that the importance of cooperation between school and sport helped the athletes to combine studies and sport and supported their development wider. Also, the importance of the meaningful relationships with other athletes were seen as an important factor in athlete's life balance.

Coordination with school that allowed athletes simultaneously to pursue their education and their sporting ambitions minimizes the risk of one-sided development. The athletes all felt they learned to be structured in their approach to sport and life and to balance their time and energy. In the same way the environments emphasized the athletes' autonomy and this gave them the personal freedom and the chance to find their own path. Finally, all three environments laid emphasis on maintaining groups of athletes that were also friends, and no athletes mentioned team rivalry or problems in regard to having meaningful relationships. (Henriksen 2010, 165).

The Finnish Sports Academies are working together with the local schools, clubs, and municipalities, with different sport Associations are the Sports Academy Programme is coordinated by the Finnish Olympic Committee's High-Performance Unit. The network is wide and there are many different stakeholders who make the Sports Academy program and structure possible.

“A Sport Academy is not a building or an institute but a local network of different elite sport stakeholders: municipal sectors, educational institutions (upper secondary level, polytechnics, and universities), local sports clubs, national sports federations and providers of services related to sport and education. The aim is not to create some big bureaucratic organisations, but to utilise existing structures, resources and knowhow and connect them together, Tuuli Merikoski, expert in athletes’ study and career coaching explains in the survey on best European practises in Dual Career of athletes. (Kazandzieva 2018, 30).

In the Finnish model, one of the main goals is to combine sports and studies/work. The studies can also develop you as a football player as Holmes, Liden and Shin has shown in their study. Football is about interaction skills, social skills, working together as a team, logical skills, problem solving skills, mathematical skills, perception skills and learning skills. Developing these skills is linked to studying different subjects in school.

“Holmes, Liden & Shin (2013), in their study where they examined the relation between children's thinking styles, and their game preferences for and their school performance, detected a meaningful correlation between children's thinking styles and game preferences; between game preferences and academic performance; between thinking styles and academic performance; between their way of thinking and the cultural environment. Among the athletes who do team sports, participants who play football and volleyball are more successful in mathematical thinking in all sub-dimensions in terms of the scores they got from sub-dimensions of mathematical thinking scale (Onal, Inan & Bozkurt 2017, 5).

The benefits of the holistic environment in player development was also highlighted in a study which was done in a Danish football club AGF *“The environment furthermore developed players that recognize the need for a holistic lifestyle and develop psychosocial skills and competencies for life rather than just sport specific skills”* (Larsen, Alfermann, Kristoff, Henriksen & Christensen 2013, 190-206).

## **2.1 The Organizational triangle model**

Mathorne, Henriksen & Stambulova have studied An “Organizational Triangle” to Coordinate Talent Development in Danish Swimming. An Organizational Triangle framework gives this project a model of a hybrid model implemented in Scandinavian culture, where three different stakeholders work together in developing a Talent development environment.

The Danish sport system is close to the Finnish system. Their athlete development base is also in the clubs and training and playing facilities come mainly from the municipalities. In football some Danish clubs might have their own Training Centres, but many clubs at least rent facilities from the municipalities. In Football the Association arranges their own player development activities like regional camps, youth national team camps and international games and brings the international level requirements into the player and coach development. Together all these stakeholders offer an athletic-talent-development-environment.

Kristoffer Henriksen has studied ATDE (athletic-talent-development environment) and guided by that study and holistic ecological approach in talent development Mathorne, Henriksen and Stambulova have concluded a case study about the collaboration between Danish swimming federation, a municipality, and a local swimming club. Henriksen's study revealed that every ATDE environment is unique, but there are some similarities that can be found in successful ATDE environments in different nations and sports.

These features are training groups with supportive relationships, proximal role models, support of sporting goals from the wider environment, support for the development of psychosocial skills, training that allows for diversification, a focus on long-term development, a strong and coherent organizational culture, and integration of efforts (Henriksen et al., 2010b). Guided by the holistic ecological approach (HEA) in talent development (Henriksen & Stambulova, 2017; Henriksen, Stambulova, & Roessler, 2010a),

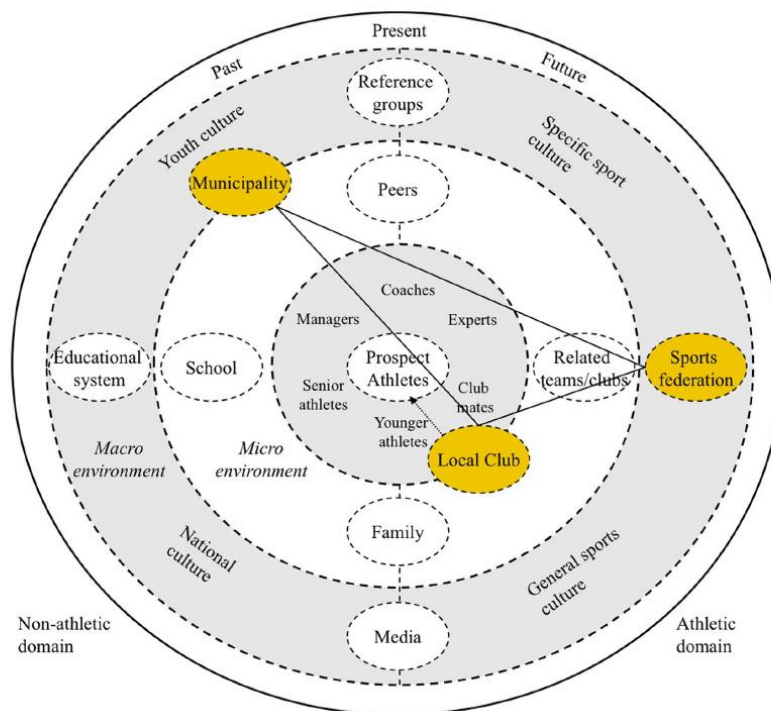


Figure 6. The modified athletic-talent-development environment model with the organizational triangle incorporated (Mathorne, Henriksen & Stambulova 2020, 12).

To keep the stakeholders committed and engaged, the co-operation should be regular. The year clock model could be used as a tool to synchronise the meetings with the school's academic year schedule. The network of these stakeholders should use these meetings to create and develop the strategy and action plan of that particular Academy. When there are regular official meetings first, people have the opportunity to get to know each other better and build trust which could lead to the informal relationships. A great example occurred in Danish swimming: *"In this case, the informal relationships and knowing each other on a personal level increased their motivation to collaborate, as explained by the federation TDC: "Because he [the municipality TDC] is a good partner and friend, I always go and talk to him when we meet at a conference or the like."* (Mathorne etc. 2020, 5).

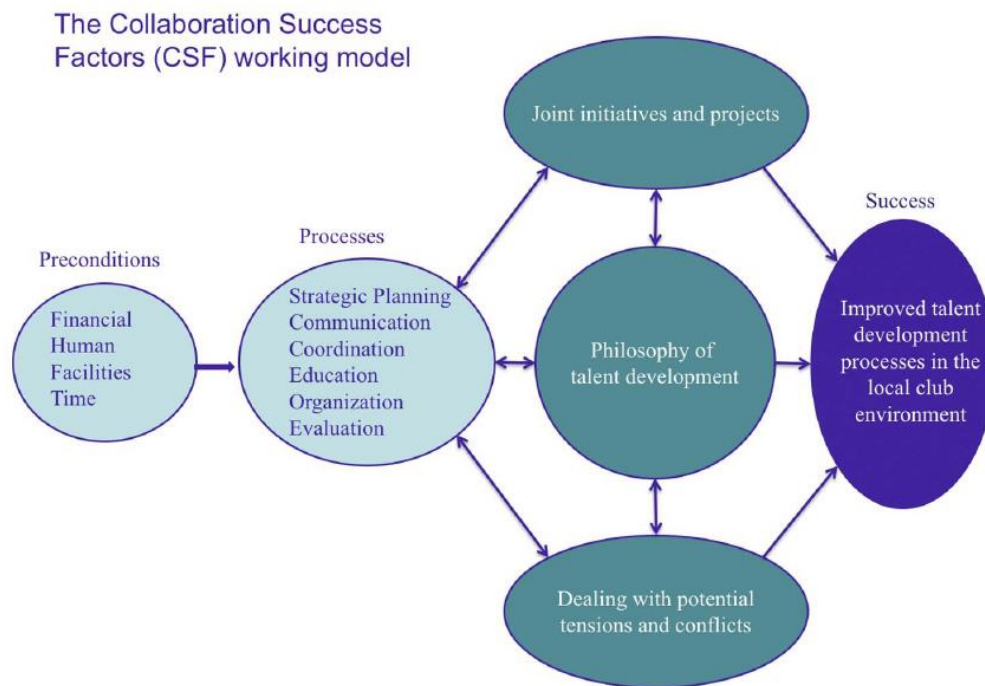


Figure 7. The collaboration success factors working model. (Mathorne etc. 2020, 3).

The key for the collaboration is that network of the three main stakeholders shares the same philosophy of talent development in the athletic-talent-development-environment. In the holistic ecological approach of talent development, the focus is on the whole environment and not just on individual players and their abilities. When the network can share the same philosophy, the processes and the preconditions can be developed together. When the stakeholders have regular meetings, and are familiar on a personal level, the dealing with the potential conflicts can be easier. *“Informal relationships were efficient, as exemplified by the club TDC when he talked about running into the federation TDC during a tournament: “We had some minor problems on the vision we had worked on together, and I could just immediately discuss it with him in the swimming center”.* (Mathorn etc. 2020, 5).

## 2.2 The Football Association of Finland

The Football Association of Finland started the largest organizational change in the history of Finnish football in the current strategy period. Founded in 1907, the organization consists of a central office and eleven district organizations. In 2016, the focus of the Football Association's current strategy was to reform coach education and improve the quality of club work to develop better players and coaches. The mission of the Football Association of Finland is “football for everyone” and the vision is that of a “successful football country –



a promoter of wellbeing”. The values are cheerfulness, reliability, success, and communality.

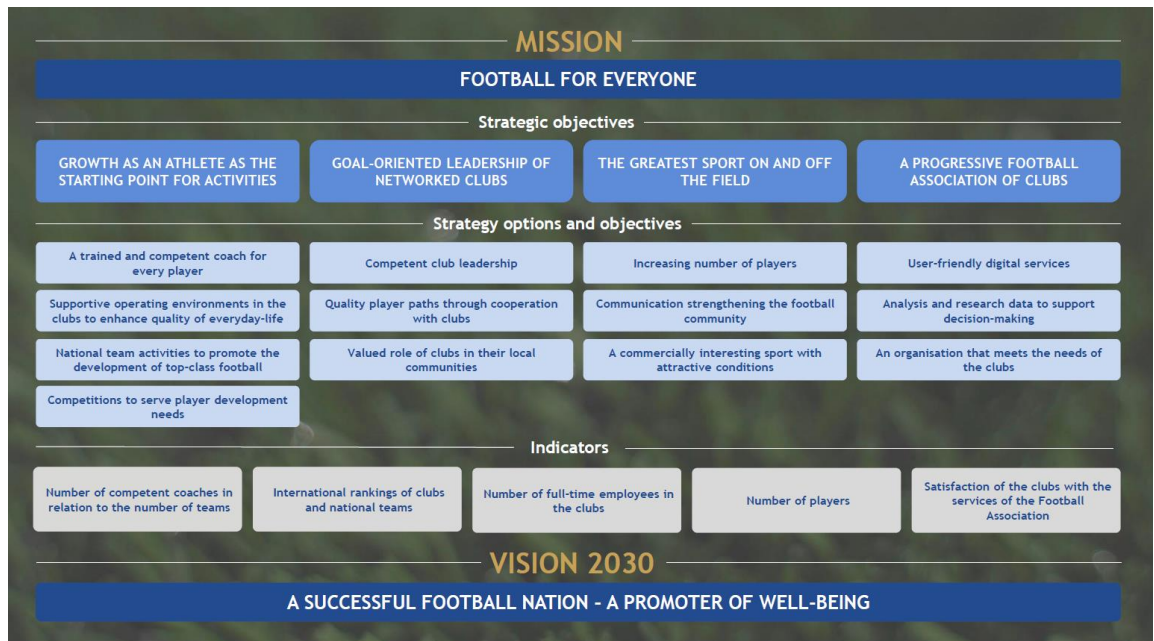


Figure 8. Finnish football and futsal strategy 2020-2024 (The Football Association of Finland 2020, 2).



Figure 9. Finnish football in numbers. (The Football Association of Finland 2020, 13).

As seen in the figure 9. football effects many people’s lives in Finland and football’s value to the Finnish society is immense.

The FA's organization is divided into four departments: technical department, competitions and referees, club development and sales and marketing. The general secretary leads the entire organization and the management group of the football association, which consists of four departments' directors. The biggest incoming cash flow comes from the international football federations FIFA, UEFA and the state. The Football Association's annual budget is 30 million euros, and there are 130 employees across the organization.

There are different projects in different departments to support The Football Association of Finland strategy choices. In the technical department the main strategy objective is the growth of an athlete as the starting point for activities. The goals for the objective are a trained and competent coach for every player, supportive operating environments in the clubs to enhance quality of everyday life, national team activities to promote the development of top-class football and competitions to serve player development needs.

In the goal of "supportive operating environments in the clubs to enhance quality of everyday life" there is a special project to reach that goal. The project is called: "We will build Academy environments for 16–20-year-olds". "By Academy environments are meant operating environments in which, among others, attending school, the diverse competence of the coaching team, a network of other experts and the conditions are all arranged to meet the needs of top-class sport". (The Football Association of Finland 2020, 35).

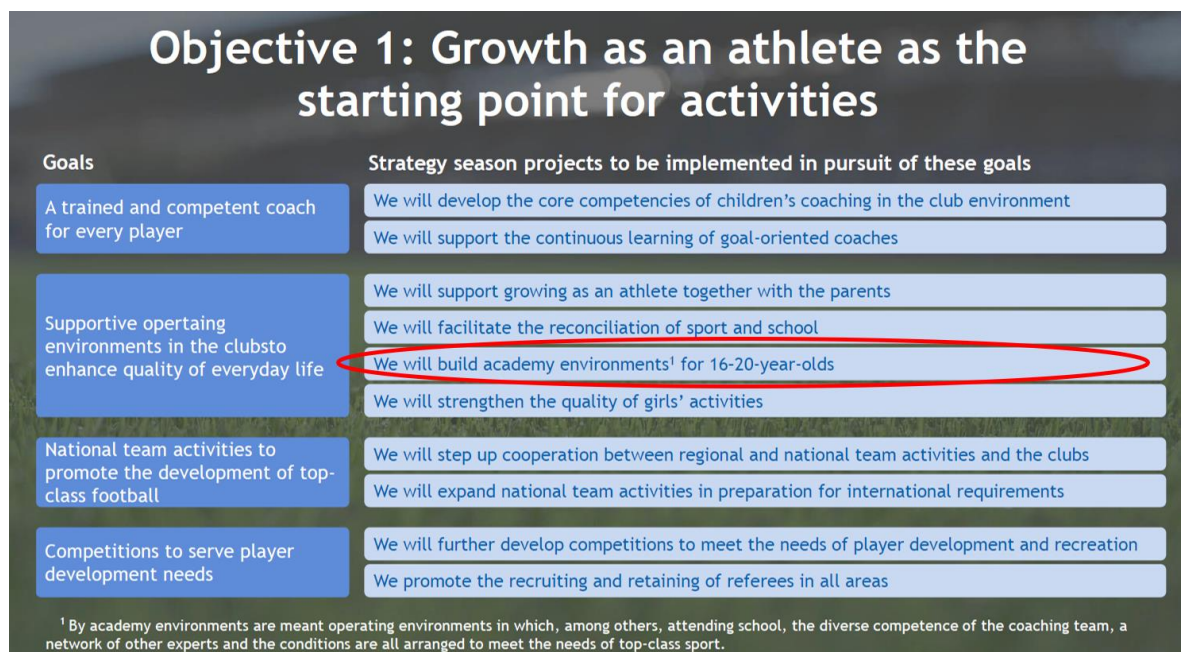


Figure 10. Objective 1: Growth as an athlete as the starting point of activities. (The Football Association of Finland 2020, 35).

The operating field for Finnish football is wide. The base for everything are the clubs. There are a total of 878 member clubs. The member clubs' profiles are different: there are clubs that are more focused on grass roots football, clubs who are more focused on hobby football, clubs that are focused on elite football and anything in between. The core is still the same for all the clubs – the players should be in centre of it all.



Figure 11. The operating field for Finnish football and futsal. (The Football Association of Finland 2020, 15).

Working in today's sport environment is about working in networks. The Football Association of Finland has already an existing Elite Youth Academy model on the boy's side and it is also built and operated in a network. The Union of European Football Associations, UEFA chose in 2019 Finland to be one of the four European countries who receive financial support. UEFA is funding two Elite Youth Academies for 16–19-year-old boys with a support package of 200 000 € per year in 2020-2024. UEFA is also following the development of the Elite Youth Academies several times during a year and the leader of this program is visiting the Finnish Elite Youth Academies five times a year.

These two boy's Elite Youth Academies are connected to a club and the Dual Career environment is offered together with the local Sports Academy. In Helsinki, the Academy is in Käpylän Pallo (KäPa) and the local cooperation Sports Academy is URHEA. In Rovaniemi the Elite Youth Academy is in Rovaniemen Palloseura (RoPS) and the local cooperation Sports Academy is Lapland's Sports Academy. The Football Association of

Finland is the owner of the Elite Youth Academy project in Finland and the project leader is the Football Associations boy's side Head of Performance. (The Football Association of Finland 2019)

### 2.3 Lean leadership

The Lean leadership is based on Toyota motor corporation leadership style. Some of the key things in Lean leadership are long term philosophy, continuous improvement (plan-do-check-act), raising new leaders by developing people, and going to the site yourself to be able to understand the process (Liker 2006, 37-41). Kristoffer Henriksen's study about athletic-talent-development-environment highlighted the importance of long-term philosophy.

The first principle of Toyota motor corporation way is "make decisions with long-term philosophy but also on the expenses of short-term financial targets" (Liker 2006, 37).

Another key principle of Lean leadership method is continuous improvement. The continuous improvement means systematic progression based on so called PDCA-cycle.

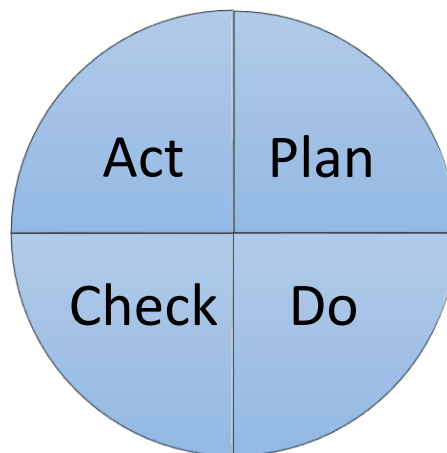


Figure 12. PDCA-cycle. (Modified from Planet Lean 2015).

The Lean leadership has the principal "learning is more important than performing". This means that instead of thinking that one should avoid mistakes they should think that the mistakes are necessary for the learning process. It also encourages the idea to try different ways of such as trying different solutions rather than just sticking on the original plan (Torkkola 2015, 108-122).

In Lean leadership method the role of the director is more of a coaching role. The idea is that the director is coaching the personnel, the principals of the process, and organizing

the possibility for learning and the development while the employees find the best answers and solutions to the challenges (Torkkola 2015, 221-225).

### 3 The aim of the Elite Youth Academy project

Key performance indicators for the Football Association and for the technical department include the numbers of top coaches and players in Finland and abroad in top leagues, national team results and the number of the educated coaches. The number of football players and facilities are naturally the key performance indicators of the Football Association as well. These indicators are strongly involved in the strategy period 2020-24.

The aim of this project is to produce a Finnish Elite Youth Academy model. As can be seen from these topics, the Elite Youth Academy project provides excellent support for the key performance indicators. The results of the project can be directly attributed to FA of Finland's strategy's key performance indicators – the success of the national teams in the future, as well as the number of players in the main European leagues. In addition, combining studies and sport is perceived as very valuable in Finnish society, so this would at the same time strengthen the social image of football in the country.

#### QUALITY PLAYER PATHS THROUGH COOPERATION WITH CLUBS

We will build Academy Environments for 16-20-year old's

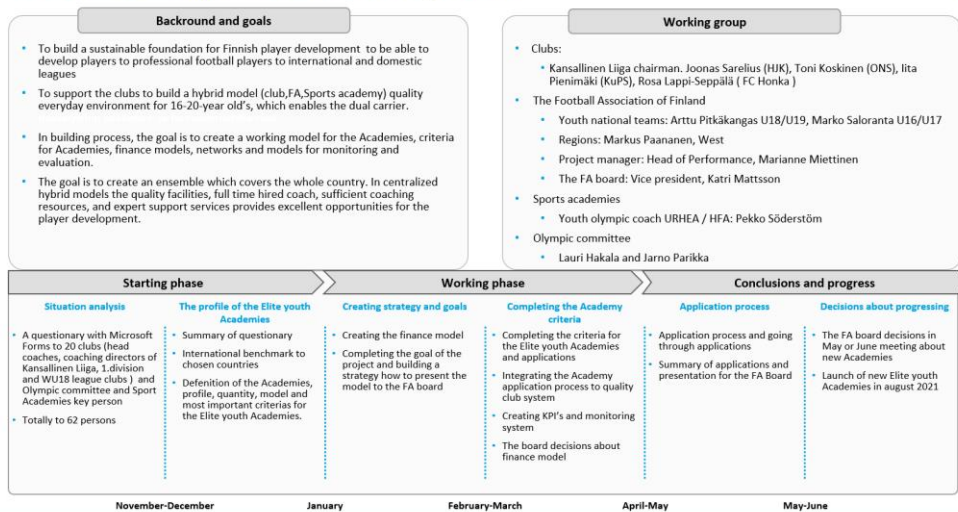


Figure 13. The goal and the progress of the Elite Youth Academies project.

## 4 The stages of the Elite Youth Academy project

The Elite Youth Academies project was led by using Lean leadership method. The PDCA-cycle was used to be able to be agile and improve the project continuously.

The stages of the Elite Youth Academies project were situational analysis, making a strategy, implementation, and monitoring.



Figure 14. The development process of The Elite Youth Academies for girls. (Modified from the Lean PDCA-cycle)

In this project, the planning phase included the situational analysis, including the quality club system analysis and analysis of the cooperation between the clubs and Sports Academies in player development and Dual Career opportunities. Also, the experiences of the pilot phase Academies were used in the situational analysis phase. The results of the questionnaire to the clubs, Sport Academies, and the Olympic committee were used. The international benchmarking to Austria, Belgium, Netherlands, France, Sweden, and Switzerland was also part of the situation analysis.

In the planning phase there were brainstorming meetings with key persons. Based on all the chosen analysis there was a possibility to do the first decisions about the Elite Youth Academy model.

In the do -phase the new Elite Youth Academies for girls will be launched. This will happen after the Football Association of Finland board has made the decisions about the funding. During this phase there needs to be an analysis about what is done well, what needs to be developed, what to keep and what to discontinue. Furthermore, the planning stage phase needs to be achieved quickly. All the challenges, weaknesses, and strengths cannot be seen without trial. During the implementation phase problems can arise that were not foreseen in the planning phase. When this kind of leadership style is used there is a great possibility to be effective, develop different support processes and be quick and agile to adjust to those processes, if needed.

In the check -stage the results are evaluated. To be able to do this, the monitoring and key performance indicators need to be clear in the do-phase. In this project the evaluation of the results should be done every year, but as the goal is to develop youth players into adult players, the results of the player development in the Elite Youth Academies can be seen after four to five years from the start.

In the act -stage the needed adjustments are made to one or more processes in the Academy environments. Since the plan is to have several Elite youth Academies around the country the Academies will have some differences also based on the location, the main club's structure and on the players' level and development phase. So, there needs to be some similarity between the five Academies in the processes timetable, but all the Academies also need to have their own PDCA-cycle to be able to be agile in their development.

In Lean leadership continuous development means that the organization evaluates what can be improved to allow constant efficiency on a daily basis. A Lean organization is never ready, it strives to develop all the time to be even more "Leanish" and better than before (Suuronen 2020, 5).

#### **4.1 Situation analysis**

The latest situation analysis about the level of the clubs was done in the Football Association of Finland in the autumn of 2020. The situation analysis consisted of an analysis of the main club's player development situation and structures. The main analysis tool used was the Football Associations quality club system. The quality club system tool analyzed the club's level in government, sports activities and in communications and marketing. Out of these three areas came the club's total level from one (the lowest) to five (the highest). This situation analysis was used in this project. The situational analysis about the cooperation between the clubs and Sport Academies was done by the Head of Performance and U19 national team head coach.



The result was astounding. There are only three clubs out of 10 that are on level five, out of those clubs the male side is on level five, but on the female side those clubs do not fulfill all level five requirements. For example, the full-time hired coaching staff requirement is filled on the male side, yet not on the female side. Other clubs are on level four (one club), level three (two clubs). On level two in the quality club system there are two Kansallinen Liiga teams, and there are two clubs who are not at all in this evaluation system.

In Finland there are around 33 000 registered female football players. Out of that number 27 304 are youth players. In 2019 the number of licensed players in girls born between 2006 and 2000 was 8 847. In Elite Youth Academy project situational analysis, there was a need to do an analysis of how many players there are in an age group and how many of those players are on regional and national team level. This needed to be done to be able to decide what would be the best suitable number of Academies with available resources.

### 27 304 registered girl players in Finland in 2019

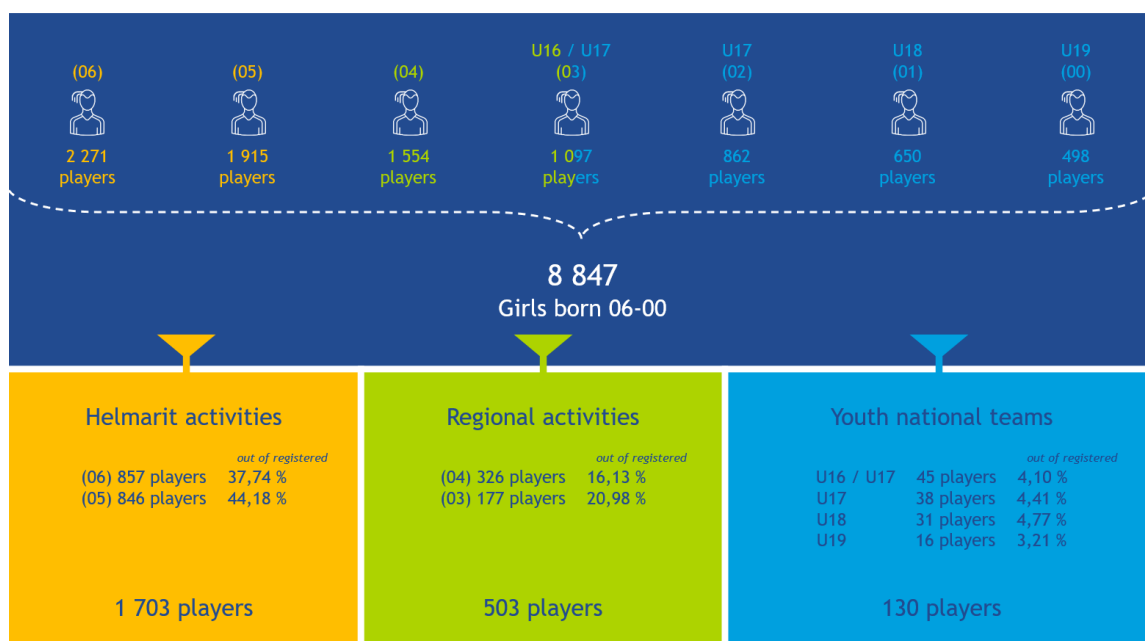


Table 3. Registered girl players in Finland in 2019 (The Football Association of Finland 2020, 6).

In every youth national team age group there is a so-called long list and a short list. On the long list there are 30-40 players from that age group. Players who would be potential international level players. On a regional level in the FA of Finland activities there are still around 20% of the players, so the long list is longer there, but it gets shorter on national team level like the number of licensed players in those age groups. It is important to give possibilities to many players because there is no knowledge of how the development of a

14-year-old will be and if they will attain international level status. The pathways to the top can be so different. The players develop at different rates and so many things affect the development so the doors should not be closed from those who might not be ready yet but have the passion for development and football.

“If Initial ability and final ability are not highly correlated where do tomorrow’s champions come from? If tomorrow’s champions are not born, they must be made. How then are they made? They are made with hours: a lot of them, and the quality of them. They are made from players (a large pool of them, because we do not know who will develop), and they are made from coaches (a large pool of them to work with many different age groups) (Gold Medal Squared 2011)

Based on the calculations the analysis indicated that it would be suitable to have five Elite youth Academies around the country. In every Academy there would be around 20 positions for potential players between 15 to 18 years of age and that would mean that the 25 potential players in each national team age group would have the possibility to develop in these holistic ecological environments. In older age group the best players would step into the Kansallinen Liiga squads when they are 19 years old, so there would be more positions for younger players. Altogether Finland could offer an Elite Youth Academy environment for 125 youth national team players nationwide. In 2019 the girls’ youth national teams had 130 different players in national team activities, so almost every youth national team player would have the possibility to be in an Academy environment.

An analysis of the total of played minutes in Kansallinen Liiga in 2016-2020 and how many minutes 14-31 year old players have played was recorded. This analysis was done by the Football Association of Finland. The analysis indicated that 37,4 % of played minutes were played by 20-year-old players and almost 25 % of the played minutes in Kansallinen liiga were played by 19-year-old players. That meant that re-assessment of the agegroup from the original Football Association of Finland project thinking “ We will build Academy environments for 16-20-year-olds” was needed. The percentage for 18-year-olds was 8,9 % and for 17-year-olds the percentage of played minutes in Kansallinen Liiga in 2020 was 3,9 %.

#### **4.2 International benchmark**

The international benchmark has been recorded since 2015. The Football Association of Finland delegation visited the Elite Youth Academy in France in 2015, The Elite Youth Academy in Netherlands in 2016 and the National Centre of Women Football in Austria in 2018. During the situational analysis phase there was a Microsoft Team’s meetings with

the Belgium Elite Youth Academy staff, Switzerland Elite Youth Academy staff and with the Swedish Football Associations Football in Schools manager.

In many countries the Elite Youth academies are not connected to the clubs. For example, in Belgium, the Women's Football Academy for 15–18-year-old girls is led by the Football Association of Belgium and it is located in Leuven. The other central European Elite Youth Academies for girls are also led by the Football Associations and are often implemented together with the national Olympic Committee. These academies are usually located in an Olympic Training Centre, like it is in Austria or France.

## National Centre of Women Football Infrastructure – Sportzentrum NÖ

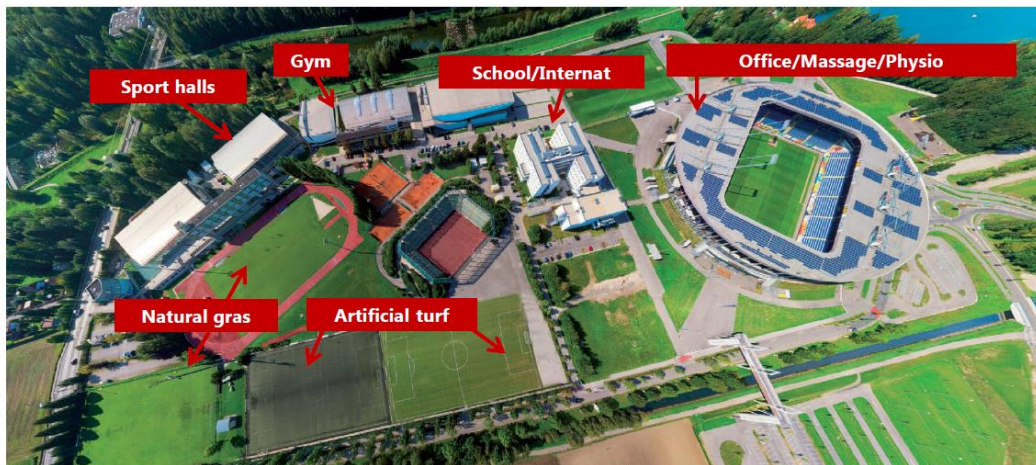


Figure 15. National Center of Women Football in Austria (The Football Association of Austria ÖFB 2018, 11)

The Scandinavian sport structure relies on clubs while the school system is slightly different from that of central Europe. In Finland, Denmark, Sweden, and Norway the children do not go to boarding schools at the age of 14, because they start high school at the age of 16. The Finnish families also used to raise children in a home environment as long as they are at least 16-years old. The distances are also shorter in Belgium, in the Netherlands and in Austria than for instance in Sweden, Norway and in Finland.

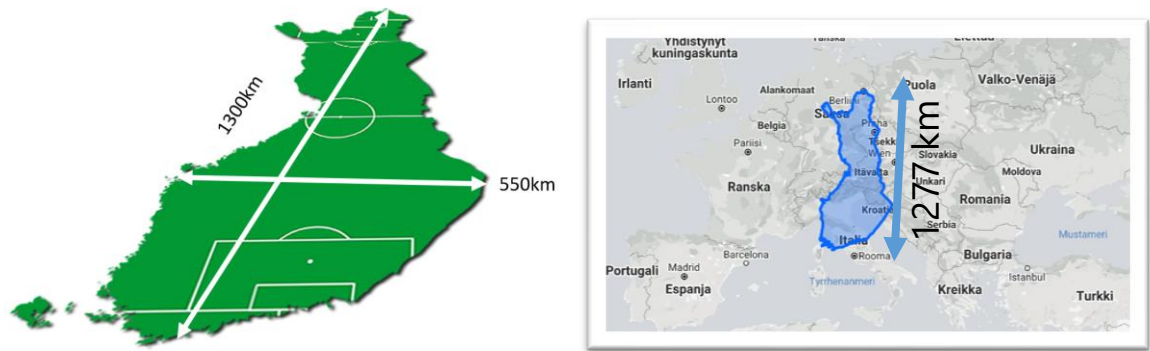


Figure 16. Geographical size of Finland compared to central Europe. (Modified with <https://thetruesize.com>).

The clubs and the players are spread in a much wider area in the Nordic countries than in central Europe.

In central European models, the school and football are connected to each other. Everything happens in the same environment and the holistic approach is ensured with experts support in nutrition, mental coaching, career coaching and medical services.

In the Netherlands, the Academy group played as a team in the boy's league. The Austrian Academy was planning to do the same with the younger players. In France, Belgium and in Switzerland the players came to the Academy on Sundays and went back to the clubs on Friday where they played games in their club team during the weekend.

The Swedish model was close to the current Finnish Sports High School model. The players trained three times a week in the mornings as a group, but the morning and the evening were not always connected as one coaching process. The responsibility of the player development was mainly in the clubs.

### 4.3 Pilot Academies

In the pilot phase there was three pilot Elite Youth Academies in Finland. One in the south, one in the east and one in the west. This pilot phase was used to gather information about the different Academy models and these experiences were used in the situational analysis.

The Helsinki Football Academy (HFA) pilot started in 2019. The HFA Academy was led by the Football Association of Finland and operated together with the Metropolitan Area Sports Academy URHEA. The athletes studied in Mäkelänrinne Sports High School. In

this Academy model there was no cooperation club. The players transferred to this Academy from different parts of Finland and came from many different clubs. 10 of the players were from capital area and 11 players had moved to this Academy from other parts of the country. These 21 players formed an own Academy team and trained together as a team during the whole week and played in the U15 boys league.

In the HFA coaching staff there were three full time coaches and one part time coach. The funding of the coaches' salaries came from the Football Association of Finland, The Finnish Olympic Committee, and the Sports Academy URHEA. The head coach and the first assistant coach were hired by the Football Association of Finland. The Sports Academy offered all the expert services such as nutrition specialist, medical services and mental coaching process. The Sports Academy and Mäkelänrinne Sports High School also offered Dual Career support for the players so they could combine football and studies in best possible way.

The main goal of this pilot Academy model was to offer the players better daily and weekly rhythm in school and trainings. Thanks to the full time hired coaches, the Academy team could train later in the mornings and earlier in the afternoons. This gave players some freetime in the evenings so they could do their school work and recover from their trainings.

The second pilot Elite Youth Academy was launched in Tampere in the autumn 2019. This model was built together with the local club Ilves, the local Sports Academy Tampere Sports Academy and the Football Association of Finland. The difference to the HFA model was that the Tampere Football Academy, TFA, was operated and lead in a network of three different stakeholders, in a hybrid model.

All the players except one came to this Academy group from the same club, Ilves. The head coach of the Academy group was the club's talent coach. His salary was supported by the Football Association of Finland. The Finnish Football Association also directed the regional coach's working hours to the Academy 2.5 days a week. He was an assistant coach and was in charge of the network and cooperation between the club, Sports Academy, and the Football Association of Finland. His salary was paid by the FA. The Football Association of Finland also supported financially the goalkeeper coach's salary. The club was responsible of the training facilities, physiotherapy, part of the coaching salaries and offering an assistant coach to certain training sessions. The Tampere Sports Academy offered the expert services to the Academy players such as physical tests, mental coaching, physical coaching, and nutrition specialist's support.

The 15 players trained with the Academy group during the school week in the mornings and also in some afternoons. The rest of the time they trained and played for different teams at the club. The head coach of the Academy was following their games, but he did not work as a head coach at the club games.

The third pilot Elite Youth Academy was launched in the East, in Jyväskylä in November 2020. The model was copied from Tampere Football Academy and was built together with the areas main club Jyväskylän Pallokerho, the Jyväskylä Sports Academy and the Football Association of Finland.

#### **4.4 Questionnaire**

A questionnaire was produced as part of the situation analysis. To get the opinion of the club coaches and coaching directors, Sport Academy directors and key persons in the Olympic Committee, a Microsoft Forms questionnaire was created and sent to 62 persons. The goal was to use the knowledge of even more experts in this project and hear their opinion about how many Elite Youth Academies there should be in Finland, what model the Academies should have (ran by the FA, only club Academies or a hybrid model in co-operation with a club, The Football Association of Finland and Sports Academy). The questionnaire also had a question concerning the Academy profile and the main goals for the Academies and a question about the roles of the different stakeholders in different Academy models. The club coaches and coaching directors and the Sport Academy directors were seen as the best persons to share their knowledge about the clubs or Sports Academy's role in the Elite Youth Academy model.

The questionnaire also posed the question if the Academy group should play as an own team and if so in what league. The respondents answered questions on what the most important criteria for the Elite Youth Academies are and how should the quality of academies' activities be monitored and measured. The questionnaire had a total of 10 questions plus a possibility for open comments. The responses were anonymous. A total of 31 responses were received so the response percentage was 50%. The questions can be found in the appendix number 1.

The most important answers at this point of the project were about Academy model, how many academies there should be in Finland, and what are the main goals for the Elite Youth Academies. The answers indicated that the hybrid model where the club, Football Association of Finland and Sport Academy build and operate the Elite Youth Academy together as a tripartite model got the most support.

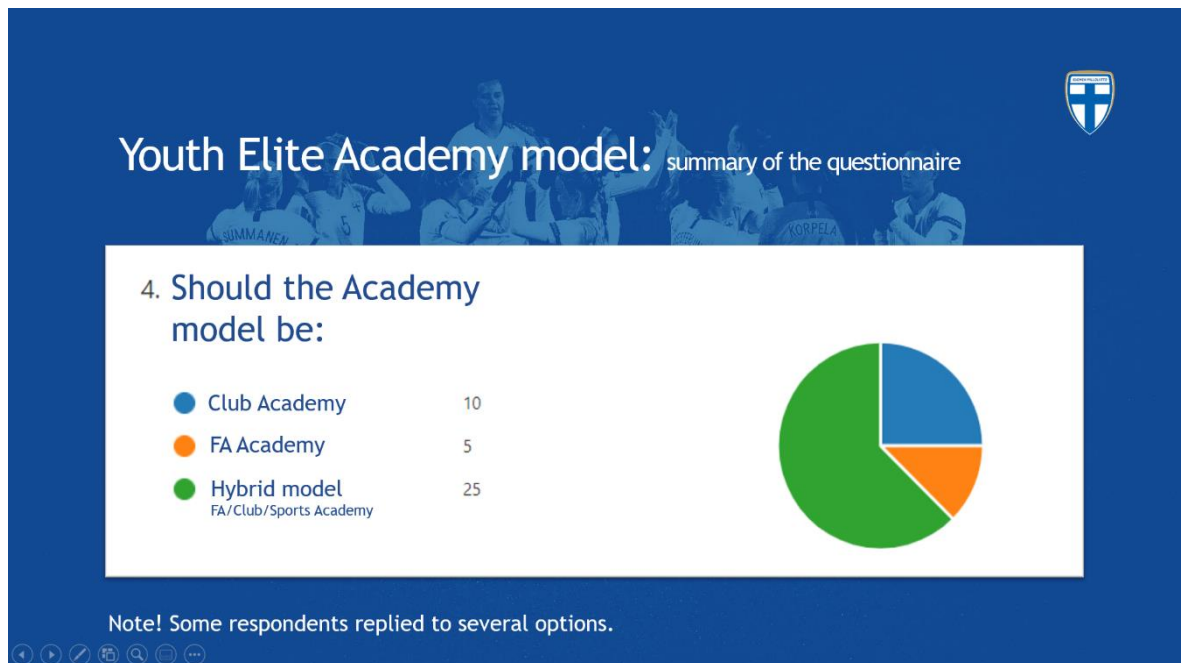


Figure 17. Summary of the questionnaire about the Elite Youth Academy model.

The respondents also felt that four to six Academies would be a suitable amount at this point. In the question of what the Academy's three main goals should be there was for instance this comment: "1. The possibility to offer a flexible elite player's daily life by combining training and studying, so that there is also time for recovery in addition to a large amount of training. 2. To create a good team of experts to support top players. 3. To produce players for the A-national team and professional football fields".

After the whole situation analysis there was knowledge what was the level of player development and the athlete-talent-development-environments in the main clubs and in their cooperation Sports Academies at the moment. What were the strengths, the biggest challenges, risks, and limitations in these environments?

The main findings in the situational analysis were:

- The daily and the weekly rhythm is not optimal in all the top-level clubs for developing elite level players. Combining school and training is not on optimal level.
- In the pilot Elite Youth Academies, the daily and weekly rhythm was better for young players when training sessions were later in the morning and in the afternoons, they had more time for schoolwork and recovery.
- The clubs on the women's side are not strong enough to build a better high-performance environment on their own.
- The pilot phase has shown that a hybrid model develops the club's structure and knowledge of the coaches also in the earlier development phase, so hybrid model is also club development tool.
- The best age group for the Elite Youth Academies is 15–18 years.

- In the pilot phase there was three Academies, but Finland needs more academies to be able to offer the 25-30 potential youth national team players from every age group between 15–18-year-old players a quality everyday environment nationwide.
- The international benchmark showed that it is important to build holistic ecological athlete-talent-development-environments already for youth players to be able to offer a long-term development process and Dual Career possibility.

#### **4.5 Working group**

In the beginning of the project the Academy working group was built. In the working group there was experts with different skills and backgrounds. The clubs' perspective to the working group brought Kansallinen Liiga Chairman Mr. Joonas Sarelius (Helsingin Jalkapalloklubi), Mr. Toni Koskinen (Oulu Nice Soccer), Ms. Iita Pienimäki (Kuopion Palloseura) and Mrs. Rosa Lappi-Seppälä (FC Honka).

The Football Association of Finland representatives were Mr. Arttu Pitkäkangas, U18/U19 national teams Head Coach, Mr. Marko Saloranta, U16/U17 national teams Head Coach, Mr. Markus Paananen, Regional Coach West, Mrs. Marianne Miettinen, Head of Performance and the Football Association of Finland board member, Vice President Mrs. Katri Mattsson.

The Sports Academies representative was Mr. Pekko Söderstöm, Youth Olympic Coach from URHEA and Helsinki Football Academy and the Finnish Olympic Committee representatives were Mr. Lauri Hakala, High Performance manager for Team Sports and Mr. Jarno Parikka, expert in the Olympic Committee's sports academy program.

The working group was planned to have four meetings during the building phase and meetings were planned to be synchronized with the FA of Finland board meetings. In that way the working group could produce material to the board to support their decisions about the model, amount of the Academies and financial model.





## Working group meetings



Figure 18. Workshops and the objectives of the meetings.

### 4.6 Structure of workshops and group work

The workshops were held in Microsoft Teams environment because of Covid-19. The meetings were led by Football Association of Finland's Head of Performance. The agenda and material were sent to the participants one week before the meetings. The structure was always the same: first the Head of Performance introduced the agenda and the goal for the meeting. Then the participants were divided into four small groups and each group had one to two tasks to fulfill. The last 45 minutes of the meetings, the small groups presented their outcomes of their groupwork. The Head of Performance collected the produced material from each group and sent the summary to the participants a few days following the meeting.

The Lean Leadership philosophy was used in working group meetings by trusting the experts' knowledge in their own area. The Head of Performance job was to guide, coach, empower and encourage the working group participants to bring their own ideas into the totality. By choosing the discussed topics and asking questions from the experts the Head of Performance could get valuable information from the participants and use their experience in development phase.

In the first workshop, on the 12<sup>th</sup> of January, the Football Association of Finland's Head of Performance presented the goals of the project, review of the timetable and results of the situation analysis. The participants were then divided into small groups where they discussed about the results of the situation analysis and about what Academy model should

be used: Club Academy, FA Academy, or a hybrid model where the Club, Football Association of Finland and the Sports Academy implement the academy model together with a tripartite agreement. The small groups also discussed the roles of different stakeholders in a hybrid model. They shared their ideas about the number of academies - how many Elite Youth Academies for girls there should be in Finland and in which age group.

After the small group discussions, the small groups presented their outcomes to the whole working group.

In the second working group meeting the main task was to build the base for the Elite Youth Academy criteria. This criteria approach was holistic: what kind of environment is optimal for athlete-talent-development-environment for youth players. Linnér, Stambulova, Storm, Kuettel & Henriksen's The Dual Career Development Environment (DCDE) working model was used as a framework and sent to the participants in pre material.

The Football Association of Finland's Head of Performance divided the participants into the small groups based on their expertise in certain areas.

The first small group produced criterion in the required human resources in the Academy's steering group, the management of the Academy and internal and external communication. The participants in that group had expertise in this area since their roles were the 1<sup>st</sup> vice president of the Football Association, head of coaching in a big club and Olympic Committee's specialist.

### Human resources and management ( Katri, Joonas ja Jarmo )



	Criteria	Other observations
Strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Who are part of the strategy process?</li> <li style="padding-left: 20px;">- How long strategy?</li> <li style="padding-left: 20px;">- Monitoring?</li> </ul>	
Academy Director	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Role?</li> <li>- Responsibilities?</li> </ul>	
Academy Head Coach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Role in management / strategy?</li> </ul>	
The club's Board of Directors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Role in management?</li> </ul>	
Sports Academy Director	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Role in management?</li> <li>- Other responsibilities?</li> </ul>	
Communications Officer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Role?</li> <li>- Communication plan?</li> <li>- Other responsibilities?</li> </ul>	

Figure 19. Criterion in human resources and in management.

The second small group produced criterion in sporting activities and player development. Their task was for instance to think about what different coaching roles there should be to support the players' development and what coaching education level the coaches should have. They also defined what experts the Sport Academy should bring to Elite Youth Academy entity. The participants for this small group were chosen based on their strengths and expertise. Their roles were regional / Tampere Football Academy coach, junior coaching director of a big club and a U16/U17 youth national team coach.

### Coaching Staff ( Markus, Marko, Iita )



	Criteria	Other observations
Head Coach	- Coach education criterion? - Responsibilities?	
Academy coach / Regional coach	- Coach education criterion? - How often in the trainings? - Other responsibilities?	
Assistant coach ( club coach )	- Coach education criterion? - How often in the trainings? - Other responsibilities?	
Fitness coach	- Coach education criterion? - How often in the trainings?	
Goalkeeper coach	- Coach education criterion? - How often in the trainings?	
Physiotherapist	- Role? Injury prevention? - How often in the trainings?	
Mental coach	- How often in the trainings / meetings? - Role?	
Nutrition specialist	- How often in meetings? - Role?	
Video analyst (videoanalysis)	- Trainings or games or both? - Game analysis?	
Individual coach	- Kicking technics, etc.?	
Kit manager	- How often in the trainings? Role?	

Figure 20. Coaching staff and specialist's criterion.

The third small group produced material for the criteria in facilities and in international co-operation. They defined what the football training facilities should be, what the other training facilities such as rehabilitative training or facilities for strength training. They also defined what the international co-operation model should look like for an individual player and for the whole Academy group. In this group there was an expert from the Olympic Committee who has coached in many different countries and seen the international level and requirements in those countries, especially in volleyball. The other participants were U15 national team head coach / Helsinki Football Academy head coach and Women's league club head coach who has also played as a professional in Italy.

## Facilities ( Pekko, Rosa, Lauri )



	Criteria	Other observations
Training facilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- How many times a week a full size pitch?</li> <li>- Own training pitch – same pitch everytime?</li> <li>- Distance from the school?</li> </ul>	
Other training facilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Gym?</li> <li>- Cross training area?</li> <li>- Rehab training facilities?</li> <li>- Meeting rooms?</li> </ul>	
Accommodation facilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Where?</li> <li>- Distance from the school?</li> <li>- Who is responsible?</li> <li>- Dining possibilities?</li> </ul>	

Figure 21. Criteria for facilities.

The topic of the fourth small group was the criteria of the academy player. In this group the participants were the U18/U19 youth national team head coach and a talent coach of a big youth club.

## Academy Player Criteria ( Arttu and Toni )



	Criteria	Other observations
Qualification for upper secondary education?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- How to support and follow the motivation for Dual Carrier?</li> <li>- Who is responsible?</li> <li>- Diffent study possibilities (upper secondary school, vocational school)</li> </ul>	
Five basic requirements (Swedis model)?	Sweden: Football capabilities, mental capabilities, social capacity, organizational capacity, Dual Career motivation?	
International benchmark? Monitoring?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- National team activities and benchmarking against opponent countries same age players?</li> <li>- International cooperation?</li> </ul>	

Figure 22. Academy player profile and criteria.

The project manager visited every small group during their tasks and asked questions to help participants discuss the given topics. The small groups presented their ideas to the whole working group and the Head of Performance and the other participants asked questions during their presentations. The Head of Performance made notes and collected the material from every group, made a summary and sent it to the participants few days after the meeting.

#### 4.7 Implementation to the player development pathway

The Elite Youth Academies will be implemented into the player pathways of selected clubs and into the Football Association's player development activities. The Academies will support the players development towards to Kansallinen Liiga and international leagues and to the women's A-national team together with clubs and youth national team activities.

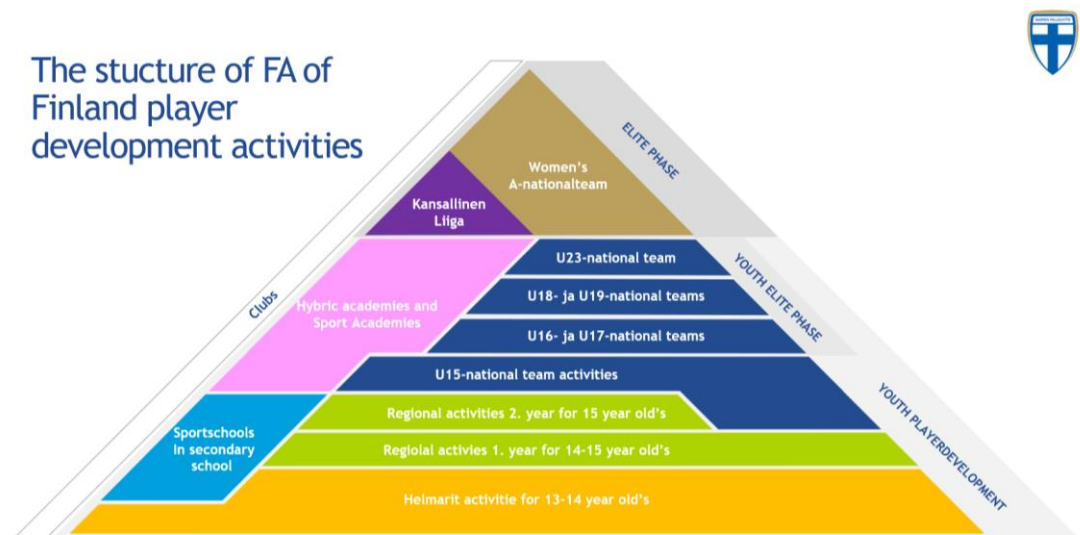


Figure 23. Player development activities in the FA of Finland (The Football Association of Finland 2020, 9).

The implementation will begin immediately after the application phase, when the Elite Youth Academies have been selected.

#### 4.8 Monitoring

After the Academies are launched the Lean PDCA-cycle will be continuous and the Academies are monitored quarterly based on the key performance indicators. The evaluation is done by the Football Association of Finland Academies steering group. The steering group will be nominated latest in August of 2021.

## 5 Finnish Elite Youth Academy model as a result of the project

Based on the situation analysis and on the working group, the Football Association of Finland's Head of Performance could present the FA Board the need and the result of Elite Youth Academies project.

**Why do we need Elite Youth Academies?**

**International competition**  
The competition is getting harder in women's football. Centralized, FA lead academies in central Europe since 2011. We need to be able to start the a holistic talent development environment earlier.

**Resource effectivity**  
Small recourses in Finnish sport – centralized system will benefit us when sharing the cost of resources and sharing knowledge with other sports.

**Development of the high-performance environments in the clubs**  
With hybrid model we can support the main clubs development in top-class sport requirements and support their playerdevelopment structures.

**Elite player development in every region**  
Possibility to develop elite player environments in whole country

Figure 24. Arguments for the development of Elite Youth Academies.

**We develop Elite Youth Academy environments -strategy project summary and desired effectiveness**

**1 Goals**

- We build five hybrid Academies nationwide, which operate in accordance with High-Performance objectives and criteria.
- To get from 15-18 year old players 25 the most potential players from every agegroup to high-performance environments.

**2 Actions**

- Development of the Academy operating model and criteria.
- Building a funding model and the necessary cooperation networks
- Establishment and quality control of planned academies

**3 Desired effectiveness**

- Football as the first career:** Environments that prepare for elite sport and dual careers across Finland, bringing together more potential players in their age groups to develop together in a high-performance competence center and coaching environment
- Player's high-quality everyday life:** The Academy enables a holistic life to the athletes when they live, train and go to school in high-quality conditions where training, recovery, studying and other life are balanced.
- Expertise:** Thanks to a full-time Academy coach, adequate coaching resourcing and a collaborative, competent network of experts, the coaching environment offers excellent development opportunities.

Figure 25. Goals, actions, and desired effectiveness of the project.

## **5.1 Number of Elite Youth Academies for girls**

Based on the analysis and international benchmark, Finnish school system and culture the working group came to the result, that there should be five academies nationwide.

In international benchmark was found that in Austria there is only one national academy, likewise in Belgium and in Switzerland. But the geographical size of those countries is smaller than that of Finland. In in a geographically larger country like France, there is one National Women's Football Academy in Paris, and six Regional Academies in different parts of the country. The FA of Finland should also build a concept where there is one National Elite Youth Academy in an area where there is the largest population, number of licensed players, amount of national team players and a National Sports Academy and Training Centre. To be able to ensure the quality of player development in the whole country and have more youth players in these holistic player development environments the FA of Finland should also have regional Elite Youth Academies nationwide at least one in every region.

## **5.2 The Elite Youth Academy model**

The working group came to conclusion that the Finnish Academy model should be a hybrid model where the three stakeholders, the main Club or in the National Academy several smaller clubs, Football Association of Finland and the Sport Academy will lead, build, operate, finance, monitor and develop the Academy together. This way the small resources could be used more effectively. The ownership of the national Academy should be in the National Academy in Sport Academy URHEA and in The Football Association of Finland and in the regional hybrid Elite Youth Academies the ownership should be in the main Club. So, the final decision maker and financial responsible is the owner of the Elite Youth Academy, the one where players are registered as members.

The roles of the three stakeholders need to be defined clearly so the tripartite agreement works in best possible way. The Lean Leadership PDCA-cycle should be used constantly in the hybrid model so that the player development process and the Dual Carrier athlete-talent-development-environment can be developed agilely. Regular meetings, at least quarterly, would ensure that the Check phase of the PDCA-cycle is gone through four times a year. After that comes the Do phase again and then once a year the three stakeholders should plan again the next year plan.



Figure 26. The working group definition of main roles of the stakeholders.

Mathorne, Henriksen & Stambulova's The collaboration success factors working model should be used as a framework in the tripartite agreement. The three stakeholders need to share a vision of a common athlete-talent-development-environment. The Football Association's Elite Youth Academy criteria will also guide the Academy's strategy work and the discussions about preconditions and processes.

## 5.2 Target group

As the situation analysis indicated, almost 25 % of the played minutes in Kansallinen liiga were played by 19-year-old players. So, it would be best to offer the younger players, under 19-years-old's, these environments. The Elite Youth Academies would work with a long-term development philosophy, so the young players could develop in peace before they take the step to the senior level, to Kansallinen Liiga squads as 19-years old.

The international benchmark showed that in Central Europe the girls go to Academy environments when they are 14-years old. If Finland will continue the way as done so far the players go to Dual Career environments, secondary education schools, when they are 16-years-old and the Central European players are already two years ahead in the holistic player development pathway. So, the best agegroup in Finland in Elite Youth Academies would be 15-18-years old girls. This gives the possibility to offer the players a holistic ecological development environment earlier than now.



### 5.3 Players high-quality everyday life and Dual Career

The Dual Carrier environments will offer the possibility to create a holistic development environment. The Sports Academies have the resources and the knowledge how to help to combine school and football and by creating individual study plans and being flexible with training hours during school time the athletes will be able to get a good weekly rhythm. The Academies can enable a holistic life for the athletes when they live, train, and go to school in high-quality conditions, where training, recovery, studying, and other life are balanced. The full-time Academy coach, adequate coaching resourcing and a collaborative, competent network of experts will offer an excellent development opportunity for young players.

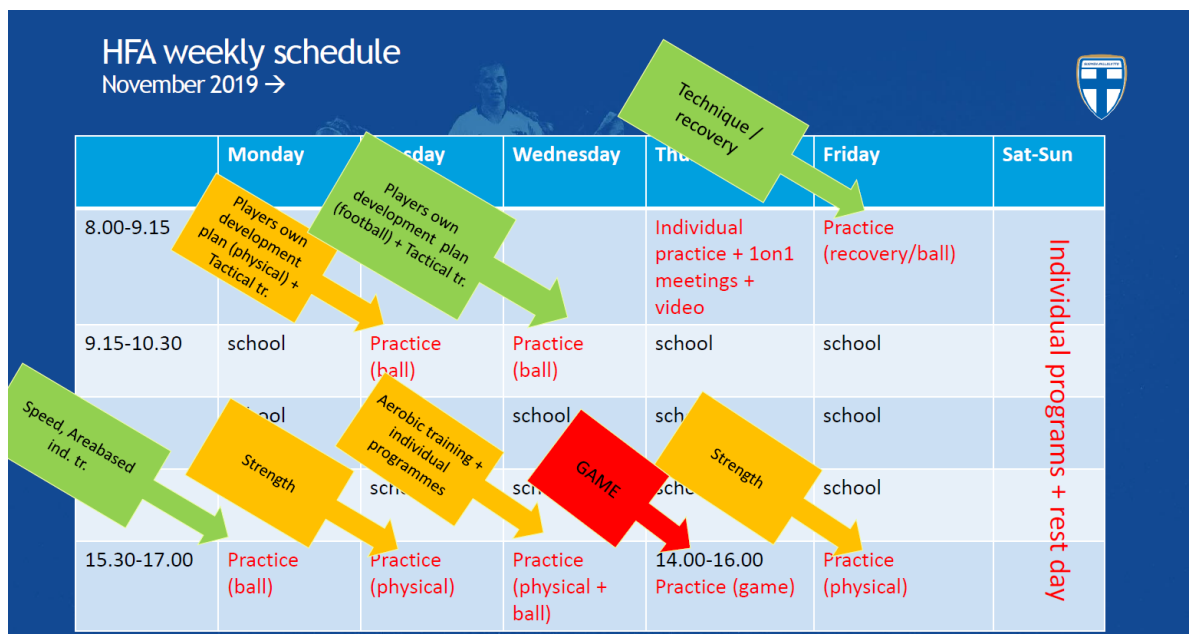


Figure 27. An example of weekly schedule in a pilot Academy HFA. (Söderström 2019, 14)

The Elite Youth Academy model is based on building a quality everyday environment for youth players. One important tool for that is an optimal weekly rhythm. When all the daily tasks (training, school classes) are between 8.00 and 17.30 there is a possibility to offer better weekly schedule for the players to train, recover and to also have time for studying in the evenings. The training facilities needs to be close to the school, like it is in the Central European Academies, so that the players do not use a lot of time to move between training fields and school.

By this date, the board has not yet confirmed the funding. Funding affects the number of Academies. The board of the Football Association of Finland has already given the green light to the model of academies and to the targeted age groups. As funding is decided, the application process will be opened immediately. The aim is to get the application process running during the summer of 2021. This would enable the launch of a new Finnish Elite Youth Academy model during autumn 2021.

## 6. Discussion

The Finnish women's football has used the existing Sport High School system well already from the from the 1990s. The morning training sessions during school hours has offered many Youth National Team players important extra trainings to support their individual development. At that time, it was important to raise the quantity of training sessions. Most of the young players did not train more than three to four times a week with their club teams and since the intensity and level of requirement was not at international level either we needed to develop those areas things first. During one school year the youth national team players got approximately 90 extra training sessions in a high-performance environment and in top-class facilities. The school was paying the coaches salary for the sessions they coached. So, already then, the Finnish women's and girls' football was using other resources than club's money since the clubs did not have money to hire full time coaches.

The challenge was, that the players came to this school group from six to seven different clubs. The clubs trained at different days of the week and had differences in their weekly rhythm and training load. So, the morning and evening were not connected as one coaching process. The morning sessions focused more on players individual development and positional training, but it was not connected on players last or next Saturday's game in their own club team and the themes of the morning trainings did not transfer into the games in optimal way.

Now situation has changed in to better. Many club teams in Kansallinen Liiga have already own morning training sessions and some of them have also full time hired head coaches who can coach these morning sessions. So, some of the young players can be part of these sessions, but not all of them. Not especially the 15–16-year-old youth players. Also, since the resources are small the clubs are not able to offer all the support services on their own, what for instance the Austrian and Belgian players are offered in their Women's Football Academies.

So, I strongly believe that this Elite Youth Academy model will improve the quality of young players everyday life into same level with Central European countries. To be able to compete with other countries Finland needs to develop the daily environments towards high-performance environments where football is first career also for girls. The main goal for Elite Youth Academies for girls is that we can help the players develop from the youth age towards the adult elite football and become professional football players one day. So, the results of the work can be seen in the future, not in the actual moment. The project is

also about building a long-lasting, sustainable structure in Finnish player development together with different stakeholders. The investments what are made now are giving possibilities to get better results in the future. Player development is a long-term work.

Compared to Central European model the Finnish model will also develop the clubs. By connecting these holistic player development environments to the club's structure, the club can use the same processes in different age groups when adapted to their needs. The club's, players and their families will also benefit of joint resource model. The costs will not get too big for anyone when sharing the costs of human resources and facilities.

The Organizational triangle model what was used in Danish Swimming is a similar idea that is used in the Elite Youth Academies -project. To be able to achieve that goal, all the main stakeholders should be engaged in the project from the beginning. The main stakeholders, the clubs, need to see the Elite Youth Academies as an important part of their player development structure. The Sport Academies needs to be involved from the start to be able to ensure the use of their expert services and facilities and the Football Association board needs to be convinced of the concept so that the funding will be guaranteed. There can be great plans and structures but, in the end, people are the ones who are doing the work. All the people in this network should feel their relevance to Elite Youth Academy, autonomy in their work for the Academy and cohesion to this network. The role of the network leader, the Football Association of Finland, will be important in creating this hybrid environment.

No system has made any players. The environment and the system give the players and the coaches possibilities to focus on the essential things, but at the end of the day, the most important job is always done by the player herself. That is why it is important to find players who have passion for developing themselves, motivation to work hard, who have learning ability and players who have the ability to tolerate discomfort and difficulties. Because they will experience failures and obstacles during their careers, and they just need to get up and move on and continue the journey towards their dreams. Kristoffer Henriksen wrote also about the importance of psychological determinants in soccer in his study *The Ecology of Talent Development in Sport*: "*They identified important psychological determinants of successful development in soccer as a) discipline (compliance with institutional demands and external instruction and willingness to sacrifice time spent with family and friends), b) commitment (love of the game and determination to succeed supported by strategic planning), c) resilience (overcoming obstacles and bouncing back after adversity), and d) the ability to find and use social support.*"(Henriksen 2010, 16).

Leading this project was an educational experience. I have led many projects before, as a youth national team head coach, but those projects have been about the National Team's development in the game of football. We have also had a vision, goal, strategy, and an action plan how to achieve that goal and we have also worked together to reach that goal. But I have never led this kind of project before. I feel that I have developed my skills a project manager because of this project and believe that I can use these skills also in the future in my role as a Head of Performance.

I think that my experience about Sports High School system as a former player, as a Sports Academy Coach and Youth National team Head Coach was really important in leading and developing this project. I had faced myself the challenges, tested different ways to do the cooperation with Sports Academy and the clubs and also seen the level of the Finnish players in national team games. That gave me insight about what kind of support services we would need to create to be able to develop the youth players holistically. So, in a way I already had used the Lean PDCA-cycle for 10 years in Sports Academy environments and now in this project the PDCA-cycle from my point of view came to Plan phase again.

Next steps in this project are really important. We are still waiting the confirmation about funding from the Football Association of Finland Board. It might effect on the number of academies in a positive or negative way. If the Football Association's funding is lower than proposed there can be a situation that the Football Association will start an application for only 3-4 Elite Youth Academies instead of proposed five Academies. If the funding is bigger than expected the financial support to the Academies can be bigger and the club's deductible may be lower.

After the board funding decisions, the next step will be finalizing the Elite Youth Academy criteria. After that the application phase can start. After reviewing the applications, the Football Association of Finland can nominate the new Academies who will get the Elite Youth Academies status and financial support.

There will still be many challenges during the project. Even conflicts. There will be different opinions about the choices of the five Academies, different views about the final Academy criteria, different opinions about which players should be in the Elite Youth Academies and different ideas how to monitor and evaluate. The only way to succeed is the cooperation. The regular encounters are needed, multiple discussions should take place, and in the network, there needs to be an atmosphere where people are also able to raise

a hand and say “I was wrong” when needed. Honesty, openness, and interaction are the key to build trust and relationships between people. The Collaboration Success Factors (CSF) working model (Mathorne etc. 2020, 3) also highlighted the efficiency of informal relationship's so building those relationships needs to be priority one. We are such a small football country that the cooperation and working together with other people is crucial to be able to succeed. In club level, in national team level and as an individual professional football player.

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# Appendix

## Appendix 1. Questionnaire

\* Pakollinen

1. Mikä on mielestäsi 16-20 vuotiaiden akatemiatolinnan tarkoitus? Kolme tärkeintä tavoitetta akatemiatolinnalle? \*

Kirjoita vastaus

2. Montako taloudellista tukea saavaa tyttöjen akatemiaa tulisi koko Suomessa olla? \*

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

Muu

3. Miksi tämä määrä akatemioita koko Suomessa? \*

Kirjoita vastaus

4. Tulisiko akatemioiden olla: \*

Seura-akatemia

Liittovetoinen

Hybridiakatemia (seura-liitto-urheiluakatemia)

5. Mikäli akatemiat olisivat Hybridimalleja (seura-liitto-urheiluakatemia) mitkä olisivat jokaisen tahon tärkeimmät roolit kokonaisuudessa? \*

Kirjoita vastaus

6. Mikäli akatemiat olisivat liittovetoinen, mikä olisi seurojen rooli? \*

Kirjoita vastaus

7. Mitkä olisivat tärkeimmät kriteerit akatemioita valittaessa? \*

Kirjoita vastaus

8. Tulisiko Akatemiaryhmän olla oma joukkueensa ja pelata omalla joukkueella jossain sarjassa? Jos pelaisi sarjassa, niin missä sarjassa? Jos ei - niin missä pelaajat pelaisivat? \*

Kirjoita vastaus

9. Miten akatemioiden toiminnan laatua tulisi seurata ja mitata? \*

Kirjoita vastaus

10. Jotain mitä emme kysyneet, mutta tulisi huomioida akatemioiden profiilissa ja kriteereissä? \*

Kirjoita vastaus

Lähetä