

Football's foreign exchange: Challenging perceptions of foreign player involvement in the English Premier Academy League

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Foreign players in England



- The increasing numbers of foreign players in the Premier League has been a source of heated debate for a number of years
- These debates have predominantly focused on the perceived negative effects of foreign player involvement; specifically the ‘underperformance’ of the England national team
- It is argued that the involvement of foreign players in the Premier League stifles opportunities for indigenous talent, taking its place, and squeezing it out to the margins of the professional system



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Foreign youth players



■ Recently, the debate relating to foreign player involvement has repositioned itself

■ It has been argued that the same negative processes observable in the senior game are now being seen at youth level as increasing numbers of foreign players are recruited to Premier League academies

■ It is argued that the best indigenous talent at youth level is being increasingly marginalised

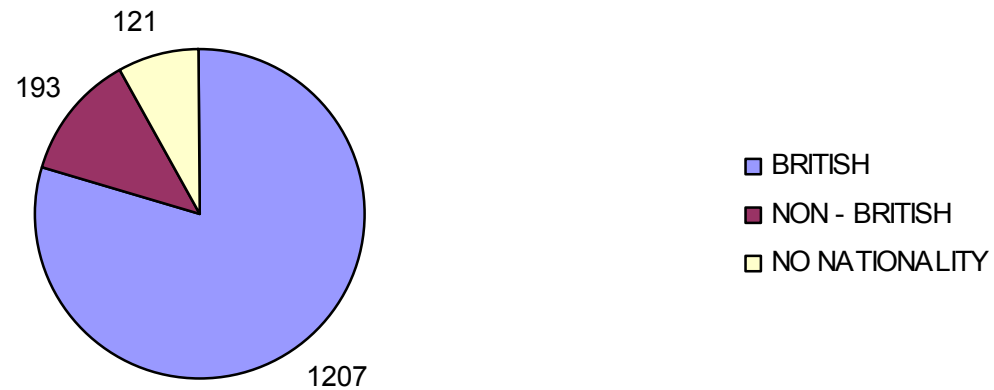


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Foreign youth players: The numbers

Fig. 1. Nationality breakdown of players at U-18 Level between 2002/03 and 2006/07



Source: Premier League

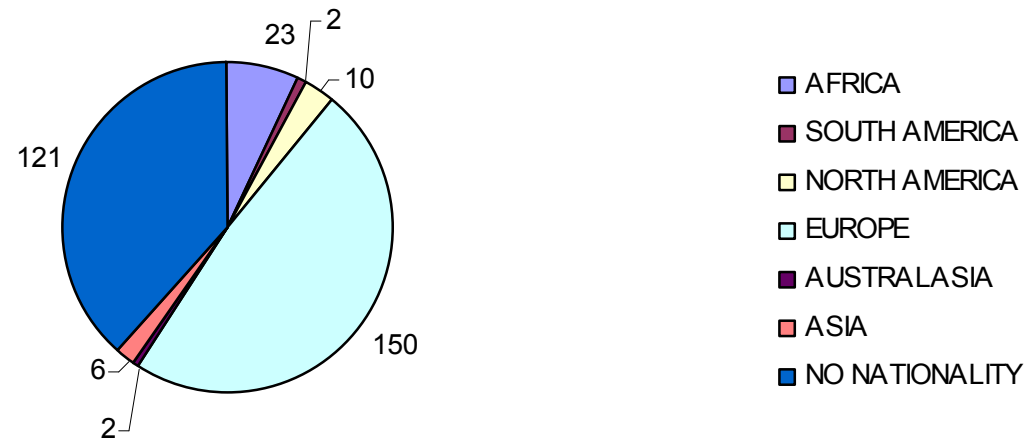


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Foreign youth players: The numbers

Fig. 2. Nationality breakdown of foreign players at U-18 level between 2002/03 and 2006/07



Source: Premier League



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'Feet-exchange'



- The statistics appear to disprove that significant numbers of foreign players are being recruited to the Premier Academy League
- Moreover, further investigation conducted with academy staff suggests that the involvement of foreign players might be viewed positively, as processes of 'feet-exchange' occur
- 'Feet-exchange' is derived from the term 'brain-exchange' whereby migrant workers exchange skills and knowledge with an indigenous workforce
- In the Premier Academy League, this process occurs in two ways



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Foreign youth players: ‘Ethic and skill’



- When interviewed, respondents argued that the involvement of foreign players raised the overall standard of competition at the clubs
- Through the involvement of foreign players, who often bring a different work ethic, indigenous players are forced to compete at a higher level
- Indigenous players are also exposed to players who are often technically superior. On this basis, indigenous players develop the technical sides of their game whilst working with foreign players
- Thus, a potential transfer of skills/knowledge may be occurring from the foreign players to the indigenous players



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Indigenous youth players: ‘Pace and power’



■ Respondents also argued that whilst working with indigenous players, foreign players learnt how to cope with the defining elements of the English game; its pace and physical nature

■ Therefore, whilst the foreign players may be technically superior, their technical skills have to develop to cope with the pace and power of the English game. Coaches argued that this development occurred whilst working with the indigenous players

■ Thus, as the transfer of knowledge occurs from the foreign players to the indigenous players, it also flows from the indigenous players to the foreign players



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Conclusions



■ A statistical analysis of foreign player numbers in the Premier Academy League shows that few foreign players are recruited relative to British players

■ Further analysis would appear to show that those foreign players who are recruited do not act to the detriment of British players

■ Rather, their involvement has the capacity to improve the quality of the British players

■ Additionally, the foreign players also benefit as an exchange of skills/knowledge flows in the opposite direction



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