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## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

### The Comparative Study of Youth Football Academies of Iranian Clubs with Selected Countries: The Four European Quality Areas

    
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## EXTENDED A B S T R A C T

### Introduction

Football academies play a central role in modern football systems by providing structured pathways for talent identification, player development, and long-term sporting and financial sustainability (Ford et al., 2020; Hill et al., 2025). Their importance has increased in Europe following the Bosman ruling and the introduction of UEFA Financial Fair Play, which encouraged clubs to rely more on homegrown players and cost-efficient development models (Kelly, 2018; Dunbar & Middleton, 2022). Evidence from European contexts indicates that sustained investment in youth academies can reduce transfer costs and enhance competitive stability (Baliau et al., 2021; Larsen et al., 2020).

In Iran, academies are also expected to support clubs and the national team by developing domestic talent; however, they face persistent challenges, including financial constraints, dispersed facilities, fragmented planning, and shortages of specialized human resources (Reihani et al., 2024; Fereidnia et al., 2021; Javanmardi et al., 2023). While national studies emphasize the necessity of greater organizational coherence (Ghasemi et al., 2025; Rasouli et al., 2024), international research highlights the role of structured talent identification, integrated care systems, and adequate infrastructure in academy effectiveness (Bozkurt, 2024; Nilsen et al., 2024; Baraclough et al., 2024). Accordingly, this study adopts a comparative approach to examine Iranian and European football academies across four key domains-talent identification, cognitive care, physical care, and facilities-to inform context-sensitive development strategies for Iranian academies.

### Methodology

This study employed a qualitative comparative design to examine the structure and performance of Iranian and selected European football academies across four domains: talent identification, cognitive care,

physical care, and facilities. Using purposive sampling, the academies of AFC Ajax (Amsterdam), Olympique Lyonnais, Inter Milan, and RSC Anderlecht in Europe, and Sepahan Isfahan, Foolad Khuzestan, Paykan Tehran, and Gol Gohar Sirjan in Iran were selected.

European academies were chosen based on European Club Association indicators related to the number of academy-developed players and their playing minutes in first teams. Iranian academies were selected through analysis of youth development programs aligned with AFC club licensing regulations. Data were collected through document analysis, a 39-item open-ended questionnaire based on the ECA "Twelve Quality Domains" framework, and structured online interviews. The questionnaire's face validity was confirmed by seven sport management experts.

Data were analyzed using George Bereday's four-stage comparative model: description, interpretation, juxtaposition, and comparison.

### **Findings**

The findings highlight systematic differences between European and Iranian football academies across four key domains: talent identification, physical care, cognitive care, and facilities. These differences reflect variations in the level of structural organization, specialization, and consistency in the implementation of development-related practices. The following sections present a detailed comparison of the two contexts within each domain.

In the domain of talent identification, European academies employ independent and structured scouting departments supported by professional scouts, standardized evaluation criteria, and multi-layered regional, national, and international networks. Player monitoring is systematic and longitudinal, enabling informed and consistent decision-making. Conversely, Iranian academies rely primarily on youth coaches, school-based personnel, and trial-based selection processes, with limited organizational structure and minimal use of standardized data systems.

Regarding physical care, European academies operate independent medical departments comprising full-time physicians, physiotherapists, and strength and conditioning coaches across all age categories. Injury prevention, monitoring, and rehabilitation programs are systematically implemented. In Iranian academies, medical services are typically integrated into general club structures, with limited specialist coverage and incomplete age-group support.

Cognitive care in European academies is institutionalized through formal partnerships with educational institutions, academy-based schooling, and continuous psychological support. Academic progress and psychological well-being are regularly monitored. In contrast, cognitive support in Iranian academies is largely non-systematic, characterized by irregular psychological services and limited coordination with educational institutions.

Finally, European academies are based in centralized training complexes integrating training pitches, medical and fitness facilities, educational spaces, and accommodation. Iranian academies, however, often operate across dispersed training locations, which reduces operational efficiency and limits interaction between youth and senior players.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

The results of this study reveal clear structural differences between Iranian

and European football academies across four key domains: talent identification, physical care, cognitive care, and facilities. European academies operate within integrated and long-term development models that support player development through coordinated organizational structures across age categories.

In talent identification, the structured scouting systems observed in European academies align with the findings of Bozkurt et al. (2025), emphasizing independent scouting departments and standardized assessment processes. In contrast, Iranian academies rely predominantly on coach-based selection, often lacking systematic and longitudinal evaluation. Regarding physical care, the presence of independent medical departments in European academies supports earlier evidence reported by Ekstrand et al. (2018), whereas Iranian academies commonly depend on general club medical services with limited specialist coverage.

Differences in cognitive care are also evident, as European academies provide institutionalized educational pathways and continuous psychological support in line with Baraclough et al. (2024). In Iranian academies, however, cognitive support remains irregular and fragmented. Finally, the centralized training complexes characteristic of European academies correspond with the findings of McGuigan et al. (2024), while dispersed facilities remain a key structural limitation in Iranian academies.

Overall, these findings suggest coordinated structural reforms, long-term planning, and integrated support systems across all four domains to enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of football academies in Iran.

#### **KEYWORDS**

Comparative Study, European Four Quality Areas, Football Academies, Football Development, Football Clubs.

