

Management Criteria Evaluation of Lithuanian Football Academies' Certification System

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ABSTRACT

Background. There is a tendency in the football environment to assess and classify youth football organisations on a national scale to make their activities more efficient, raise the level of football and talent development, and increase competition in the context of international football. Considering the practices of Georgia and Latvia, Lithuania has started testing the certification of football academies since 2021. During the testing stage, it was observed that the certification project helped youth football organisations to improve the quality of their activities and competencies – after a year, the certification system was started to be applied to all Lithuanian football academies. As of 2022, higher certification criteria have been applied to football organisations, which the future of our country depends on.

Methods. Analysis of scientific literature, content analysis of official documents, semi-structured interview (qualitative research).

Results. Football organisations that participated in the certification process and received the highest evaluations are monitoring the certification process, examining the necessity of criteria through the prism of project improvement, constantly discussing with certification experts, and providing insights into the areas where the certification process should be improved. The research revealed what action plan would bring a higher level of quality to develop and improve a higher level of football in Lithuania.

Conclusions: The evaluation of the Lithuanian football academy certification system revealed strengths and weaknesses; Top-rated football academies are committed to improving themselves and football development in the country; Organisations face documentation difficulties and lack of clarity in criteria descriptions; Considering the problems in certain areas of limitations, solutions must be found through the support of Lithuanian Football Federation and governmental institutions; the study provides unique perspective and insights to improve certification system and raise the level of Lithuanian football.

Keywords: Lithuanian football, certification system, management criteria, certification system development.

INTRODUCTION

Football academies have a great responsibility for the training of young football players, perception of the game, mastery, necessary talent identification, and integration into men's football. Talent identification in association football is the complex process of recognising and selecting

players that have the greatest potential to excel in the future (Johnston, et al., 2018; Bergkamp et al., 2021). The identification and development of talented individuals in football have become increasingly important over recent years, as the standards of sporting performance have grown

(Relvas et al., 2010; Gangsø et al., 2021). The job of talent identification within football is undertaken by a variety of people, including coaches, performance analysts, and scouts (Reeves et al., 2018). Most professional football clubs want to provide high-quality talent development environments and strategies arranged in academies to provide players for a club's professional team (Nesti, M. & Sulley, C., 2015; Gangsø et al., 2021). The intensity of the modernisation of society leads to the need to comprehensively improve sports management methods, technologies, and organisational forms, which, in turn, requires theoretical summarisation and justification (Mikalauskas et al., 2021).

In relation to international football, the introduction of the academy certification system is new in Norway. The certification of the first football academies was carried out in 2017, which consists of ten factors: (1) Organisational Management and Human Resources, (2) Player Logistics, (3) Strategic Planning, (4) Competencies, (5) Training Processes, (6) Match Platform Management, (7) School/Soccer Program, (8) Collaboration Models, (9) Productivity, and (10) Finance and Infrastructure (Norsk Toppfotballsenter, 2017). The academy classification gives an overall evaluation of the academy's standards both related to sporting and non-sporting aspects. Based on the certification of these ten factors, each academy is given a rating (from one to five stars), indicating the overall quality of the academy. As the certification of these types of academies is given a higher value by the football federation, linking it to the perceived talent development environment in academies could help to understand their impact on football development (Gangsø et al., 2021).

It is worth noting that in the Latvian Football Federation's Regulations of the Certification of Junior Football Academies (2022), the project is mandatory for all Latvian football organisations, and they are subject to financial penalties if they refuse to participate in the project.

In Lithuania, before the certification system was introduced, most Lithuanian youth football organisations carried out their activities without a vision of the future, ineffectively and according to the old methods. The aim of the certification system is to have strong and competent football education organisations that would "grow" future representatives for the national team, help Lithuanian football clubs to become even more competitive, and they would in turn represent the country in European football tournaments. To be successful when developing and implementing its long-term plan for the game, a national association must involve all the relevant stakeholders: its own technical department, professional and amateur clubs, academies, coach educators, coaches at all levels, regional associations, governments, schools, etc. They all need to work together to define a "national football DNA" and have a shared vision for the future (UEFA, 2021).

METHODS

Research methods. Qualitative research is the most suitable method to analyse the certification criteria of Lithuanian football academies as the certification system in Lithuania has not been studied from a scientific perspective. A semi-structured interview method was chosen for the qualitative research data collection. The semi-structured interview consisted of 9 prepared questions, prepared by the authors.

Subjects. 3 technical directors of Lithuanian football academies, whose organisations were rated the highest (4 stars). The number of interview questions is 9 per respondent.

RESULTS

Experience of the certification process of Lithuanian football academies

Table 1. Familiarity with the certification process of Lithuanian football academies

Category	Sub-category	Analytics
Familiarity and the start of the certification process	Impact	R1: "It wasn't really something new for us, as we didn't need any special preparation."
		R2: "As we are quite new academy, the experience itself was extremely challenging."
		R3: "We, as an academy, had many things done well from a practical standpoint, which had historically developed over many years."
	Overcoming challenges and difficulties	R1: "Everything was clear, of course, and we understood why and how everything should be done".
		R2: "It was quite interesting to see how some coaches more or less ignored the process, while others tried to help."
		R3: "It was quite challenging to quickly transfer the accumulated experience from a decade of practice into documents, procedures, programs etc."
	Identifying areas for improvement	R1: "Everything we needed was provided, and the procedures went smoothly enough and didn't pose any external challenges"
		R2: We reviewed our internal processes and realized that there were many areas that needed improvement. But that's the content now. What we need to implement.
		R3: "In terms of documentation, we were very weak."

(Compiled by the author, based on interview information)

Table 1, which is divided into three primary categories, shows how comfortable Lithuanian football academies are with the certification procedure. Regarding the process's beginning, participants mentioned that it wasn't totally unfamiliar to them; one academy highlighted their pre-existing advantages and real-world experience. Overcoming obstacles entailed a variety of experiences; in one academy, the process was evident, in another, different levels of coach participation were noted, and

in a third, converting years of real-world experience into documentation proved to be challenging. One academy indicated that their procedure was easy to follow, another that internal changes were necessary, and a third pointed out deficiencies in their paperwork, indicating that they were concentrating on improving this part of their business.

Qualitative indicators for the football academy certification process of Lithuanian football academies

Table 2. Lithuanian football academies' certification system qualitative indicators related to criteria and desire for improvement from organisations' perspective

Category	Sub-category	Analytics
Criteria for evaluation	Qualitative criteria	R1: "Points, in terms of scoring, it's a good thing that sports and criteria, let's say, are a priority in this place."
		R2: "The first thing, in my imagination, would be the systemization of information using purposeful tools."
		R3: "There must be criteria that categorize the budget."
	Bringing back previous criteria with improvements	R1: "Furthermore, it might be worth considering next time about the scores that could possibly have a higher value, and which scores could have a lower value."
		R2: "Professionalism in football leads to players being in the national team, achieving high rankings in championships, and how many players eventually move on to other clubs."
		R3: "For example, knowing that you could collect a thousand points in the certification process, and you collected seven hundred. And you know that you're missing three hundred." When it was the second year, they made it so that only qualitative criteria had points, and the mandatory criteria had no points. If that thing came back, it would be a huge plus
Desire for continuous development	Local player development	R2: "The number of children in national teams and overall player development."
		R3: "If your academy works well and really develops players for the national team or A Lyga, you get additional points for that. Those additional points would give more weight and quality to the certification process."

(Compiled by the author, based on interview information)

Table 2 displays qualitative indicators pertaining to the standards and the aspiration for enhancements in the Lithuanian football academies certification system. Respondents highlighted the significance of sports and criteria as a top priority under the evaluation criteria, and they offered recommendations for organising data and classifying spending. There were also talks about adding qualitative criteria for a more thorough assessment and re-evaluating the significance of results. In terms

of local player development, the need for ongoing improvement was emphasised, with an emphasis on variables like the number of kids on national teams and overall player advancement. In order to improve the overall standard and significance of the certification process, respondents indicated that they would want to see extra points given for efficient player development.

Strengths and weaknesses of the certification system of Lithuanian football academies

Table 3. Positive feedback and areas to improve for the certification system of Lithuanian football academies

Category	Sub-category	Analytics
Evaluation Criteria	feedback of the previous Certification season	R1: "It's good that the activity of sports personnel was highlighted. The further we go, the more they are needed. In the future, perhaps even more attention and evaluation will be needed."
		R2: "management-related aspects seemed relatively easy for us as we had already implemented them."
		R3: "Some try to quantify qualitative things, others quantify practical things. There are questions about the experts, and I think the weak point here is that the federation and the tech department have not communicated well to journalists and communities who these experts are, why they are appointed as experts in one field or another."
	How to improve these criteria	R1: "it is very important to emphasize and break down the criteria for sports as much as possible, even to the maximum extent possible."
R3: "For example, what we may consider a strength, another expert may consider a weakness. That's where I lack and miss a simple description in those qualitative criteria."		
Management-related aspects	Changes in the organization	R2: "It also prompted us to sign a strategic plan."
		R3: "We need to leave as little room for interpretation as possible and leave more room for purely specific things. And the academies understand equally what that criterion is and cannot create any noise because it is written that way."
	Experts' competencies	R2: "The people who came to evaluate were well-prepared, which in turn motivated us to be well-prepared as well, and it elevated our organization to a higher level."
		R3: "Questions about the competence of experts have always arisen, although I have the least number of questions about their competence. I believe that those who evaluate do so sincerely."

(Compiled by the author, based on interview information)

Table 3 lists favourable comments and suggestions for enhancements to the Lithuanian football academies' accreditation system, with an emphasis on assessment standards and management-related elements. Regarding input on the evaluation criteria from the previous certification season, participants emphasised that sports personnel's activities were positively recognised, but they also expressed the need for future evaluation and attention to be given more focus. The federation and tech department's communication regarding the duties and recruitment of experts has drawn some criticism. Improvement suggestions included highlighting and

thoroughly dissecting the sports criteria as well as giving precise explanations for the qualitative criteria. In terms of management-related aspects, positive changes in organisational strategies were noted, with an emphasis on minimising room for interpretation in criteria and ensuring clarity. Respondents also praised the preparedness and competence of the experts, expressing the belief that sincere evaluations contribute to elevating the organisations to higher levels.

Measures to improve the certification system of Lithuanian football academies

Table 4. Lithuanian football academies' certification system development

Category	Sub-category	Analytics
Development	Quality for the academies	R1: "I think that the fact that there are even five stars already shows that there is a possibility to differentiate, let's say, from the academy that meets the minimum criteria to the highest one, without lumping them all into one category"
		R2: "Sometimes you may find one academy highly rated in terms of management, another one excelling in marketing, and another one with a good reputation but poor player development."
		R3: "Here we agree that if four or five stars are a continuous effort, continuous monitoring throughout the year, then we would like more specific plans for feedback on how we're doing that."
	Differentiation	R1: "Also, for example, if there is a fourth or fifth star, it should not require certification every year, but a longer interval than for the third, second, or first stars."
		R2: "In my opinion, to improve the certification system for football academies, I would suggest narrowing down the focus of academies to either mass participation or elite development."
		R3: "It could also be a criterion, an additional way of scoring, so that if you do a self-assessment, fill in those tables and write down the scores you receive, it would be easier for the experts themselves to evaluate and compare."
	Talent development	R1: "From a sports perspective, I think we pay too little attention to the development of individual excellence. There should probably be a separate section related to talent development among the sports criteria."
		R2: "I would suggest narrowing down the focus of academies to either mass participation or elite development. I find it hard to imagine having 30 academies in Lithuania that can all excel in both areas."
		R3: "We understand that the technical department of the football federation is the source of competence, but we somehow don't receive much feedback from the certification process, except when the certification itself takes place and real conversations happen."

(Compiled by the author, based on interview information)

Table 4 presents the evolution of the accreditation scheme for football academies in Lithuania, emphasising talent development, difference, and quality. The importance of the five-star rating system was emphasised by the respondents, who also emphasised the chance to distinguish academies according to distinct qualities instead of classifying them all the same. It was suggested to distinguish between higher-rated schools using longer certification intervals, in addition to differentiating between them based on areas of specialisation. A way

to improve the accreditation process was to suggest that academies should concentrate only on elite development or mass participation. Additionally, there was a call for increased attention to individual talent development within the sports criteria. Respondents also expressed a desire for more specific plans and feedback throughout the year to support continuous improvement efforts.

Changes according to updated certification criteria of Lithuanian football academies

Table 5. Changes of updated certification system management criteria of Lithuanian football academies

Category	Sub-category	Analytics
Annual medicine examinations	Its impact	R1: "Annual sports medicine examinations are very important from one perspective, even indisputable."
		R2: "Each new criterion will contribute to the development of each academy."
		R3: "These two criteria will not have an impact, as sports preventive examinations have always been carried out in practically all academies."
	Implementation in the organization	R1: "This year, the entire list was expanded during the licensing procedures, and what should follow those medical examinations"
		R3: "As it has always been, according to the regulations of the football federation, just like for professional athletes."
	Faced problems	R1: "The responsibility for a child's health is primarily on the parents, and then it falls on us. It is not enough to just include this point in the criteria, but the federation itself should take some initiative to expand the knowledge of our specialists. But it is important to appeal to the consciousness of parents, so that they do not solely rely on one institution to constantly monitor and not miss appointments, because the situation with children's health is not improving, and it is quite challenging for us to control this matter alone."
R3: "However, the major issue is not from the academies' side, but from the side of sports dispensaries."		
Youth integration in football refereeing	Its impact	R1: "As for the integration of players into officiating, it is very timely - a perfect opportunity after a professional sports career, let's say, when you have some alternative for work, then this opportunity is good"
		R2: "Each new criterion will contribute to the development of each academy."

(Compiled by the author, based on interview information)

With an emphasis on yearly medical exams and youth inclusion in football refereeing, Table 5 examines the modifications made to the updated management criteria of the certification system for Lithuanian football academies. Respondents acknowledged the significance of annual medical exams, with one academy highlighting their undeniable importance. This criterion was thought to have a positive effect on each academy's development. While one academy pointed out that sports-related preventive exams have always been commonplace, others expressed worries about parents bearing the primary responsibility for their child's health. It was suggested that the football federation should take

the lead in raising parents' awareness and enhancing the expertise of experts. Regarding the subject of youth integration in football refereeing, it was thought that players should be allowed to transition into officiating as a different line of work following their professional sports careers. In general, different academies implemented these objectives differently; difficulties with sports dispensaries and parental duty stood out.

Relevance between updated criteria and achieving maximum rating in football academy certification

Table 6. Quality enhancement in Football academies

Category	Sub-category	Analytics
Quality Enhancement in Football Academies	Implementation of best practices	R1: "But if you are aiming for a four or five-star level, I think it's not bad that the latest, let's say, very good practices are also implemented here. Especially the fourth and fifth stars, which were not there before – Assistant to the Technical Director.
		R2: "because we can see how far we still must go and how much we need to improve our processes."
		R3: "I believe that for now, we will improve the criteria that we can improve."
	Limitations	R1: "It depends on the financial capabilities of each academy, whether you can do it or not."
		R2: "However, there is a lack of infrastructure and finances."
		R3: "Because for us, the main limitation was the lack of infrastructure."

(Compiled by the author, based on interview information)

Table 6 is devoted to improving the quality of football academies, specifically with regard to the application of best practices and the related constraints. The significance of implementing cutting-edge, superior techniques was recognised by the respondents, particularly for those striving for a four or five-star rating. Putting such methods into place was thought to be one way to evaluate what distance academies still needed to teach and pinpoint areas in need of development. Nevertheless, restrictions were mentioned, mostly related to each

academy's financial capacity. Financial and infrastructural limitations were mentioned as obstacles; one academy explicitly mentioned infrastructural deficiencies as the primary barrier to using best practices. The conversation emphasises the goal of ongoing development while acknowledging the practical limitations that academies must overcome to achieve these improvements.

Improving football academy processes for enhanced development and success

Table 7. Improvement in processes towards the development of the certification system of Lithuanian football academies

Category	Sub-category	Analytics
Change of work ethics related with new criterions	Side of improvement	R1: "It would be desirable to clarify it so that coaches wouldn't duplicate each other, even within the same age group, but that they would work specifically at the highest level, while others would work at a lower level"
		R2: "We will seek individuals who can explain what the work of a referee entails, and we will try to generate more interest among children by integrating additional training, seminars, and so on."
		R3: "Everything else is solvable, and the academy is at a stage where we have good practices in place. We have a lot of documents prepared and ready to be implemented, so to speak, and we always need to align them."
	Challenges to overcome	R1: "The biggest challenge is human resources."
		R2: "We will continue to search for motivated individuals to integrate into refereeing to raise the level."
		R3: "To ensure that practices align with documents and see where synergy is achieved, so that everything is on the same page, as employees change, children change, and parents change. But everyone needs to be on the same page."

(Compiled by the author, based on interview information)

Table 7 focuses on the enhancement of procedures leading to the creation of the Lithuanian football academies' certification system, specifically looking at modifications in work ethics concerning new standards. To prevent coaches from working in tandem, respondents indicated a wish for clarification regarding the requirements, highlighting the importance of distinct tasks at varying levels within the same age group. Attempts to pique children's interest in officiating were discussed; they included hiring people who could explain the referee's duties and including seminars and further training. Although the academy acknowledged having good

procedures and documentation, there were several issues that were brought up. One academy named human resource constraints as the biggest obstacle. One more highlighted the continued need to find motivated people to serve as referees. Maintaining uniformity within the school was deemed to depend critically on procedures and documentation matching, particularly when staff and participants changed.

Motivation and assistance from LFF for achieving highest rating

Table 8. The assistance of Lithuanian Football Federation Certification system of Lithuanian football academies experts

Category	Sub-category	Analytics
Assistance from the experts	Communication and feedback	R1: "Another aspect is that when forming a work group for certification evaluation, it would be beneficial to involve external consultants who can provide an unbiased perspective. This would benefit the federation itself as well."
		R2: "There was certainly a willingness to help. They provided suggestions for improvement."
		R3: "We can inquire about anything we do not know, and we will learn... In terms of expertise, it provides teaching and assistance... What we lack is more frequent communication, not just when something needs to be done, but also calmly evaluating the situation."
	Funding and resources	R1: "So, considering the amount allocated for the fourth star today, and if we take an annual fund for salaries, for example, it's not enough to make a significant impact."
		R2: "However, there was no explicit motivation to achieve the highest rating, such as a guaranteed financial incentive. Overall, the motivation from the LFF is primarily financial."
		R3: "When it comes to the financial aspect, what the Football Federation provides has been agreed upon from the very beginning, and it has been communicated to everyone that the allocated funds are not meant to cover all the expenses of the certification process, but rather to contribute to some extent."

(Compiled by the author, based on interview information)

Table 8 explores the support offered by the Lithuanian Football Federation for the football academies' certification programme, including funds and resources, as well as communication and feedback. Respondents emphasised the value of bringing in outside experts for their objective viewpoints during the certification review process, as this helps the federation and the academies alike. The experts' proposals for improvement and their readiness to assist were acknowledged, but more frequent communication was desired—not just in

response to urgent requirements but also to objectively assess the situation as a whole. Academies observed that there was not enough money allotted to have a major effect, especially when it came to earning the fourth star. The motivation from the Lithuanian Football Federation was primarily perceived as financial, with the acknowledgement that the provided funds were not meant to cover all certification expenses but rather to contribute to some extent.

Importance of current and achievable rating for organisation

Table 9. Final certificate rating of the certification system of Lithuanian football academies

Category	Sub-category	Analytics
Star rating and progression	Importance of the certificate	R1: “Indeed, when we achieved the fourth star, we were very proud, as there were quite a few contenders, and during the pilot project, we had anticipated aiming for the fourth solid star.”
		R2: “Certainly, after receiving the certificate from LFF, gave to our organization proud moment.”
		R3: “That evaluation is extremely important to us, and we are proud of it, but not so important that we would do everything and anything for it.”
	Approach	R1: “But do we want to aim for the fifth star? Yes, but we don’t want to do anything artificially. We want to naturally progress towards it.”
		R2: “It’s important to sometimes step back and see how others perceive our achievements, as we may not always fully appreciate our own progress.”
		R3: “The quality of internal processes is much more important, and it doesn’t depend on whether you receive four or five stars, but rather on whether you work qualitatively every day, or not.”

(Compiled by the author; based on interview information)

Table 9 illustrates the significance of the certificate and the methodology for obtaining star ratings by concentrating on the final certificate rating in the Lithuanian football academies’ certification system. The importance of the certificate was highlighted by the respondents, who also expressed pride in receiving higher star ratings. One academy expressed excitement and delight at earning the fourth star, while another emphasised the joyous moment when they received the certificate from the Lithuanian Football Federation. Academies differed in how much weight they placed on the evaluation, with some stressing its extreme importance, others recognising its importance but not acting upon it, and still others believing that the quality of internal processes was more important than the rating itself. The approach towards achieving star ratings varied as well, with academies expressing a desire to progress naturally and qualitatively rather than artificially pursuing higher ratings. Overall, the discussion emphasised the value of the certification process while acknowledging the diversity in the importance placed on ratings and the focus on continuous improvement in internal processes.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this research was to evaluate the management criteria of the Lithuanian football academies’ certification system. The answers of study respondents were different but towards the same direction. It is possible to conclude, that these top 3 football academies of Lithuania are monitoring the whole process of certification with a vision towards the improvements and general development of themselves. It is worth noting, that a 2–year–old project is receiving good feedback from participators with room for improvement through communication to find the best outcome related to the general rise of football in Lithuania. It is important to mention, that this study of the Lithuanian football certification system is unique as there is the absence of previous research in the field.

Considering the obtained research results, as the answers differ, the general experience with the certification system for football was difficult, as some of them before the foundation of the project was focused on practical process implementation. The main challenge faced by these football organisations was the documentation – when all practical processes were supposed to be implemented in the documentation. Talking about the outcome, the

representatives declared that the certification system had an impact on the organisational development internally and externally.

Mentioning the qualitative indicators of the Lithuanian football academies' certification system, technical directors of football academies considered the indicators/factors that were one of the most important in previous requirements indicated in the pilot project. Research participants indicated different insights – points system, budget assessment, and local player continuous development. Certification system experts should take these considerations into account, as the outcome will strengthen the football academies of Lithuania.

Strengths and weaknesses that have been indicated by participants show the area for improvement – sporting criteria highlight the importance as an area to be focused and assessed more critically, which could lead the academies towards the highest standards possible. The need to break down the sporting criteria to have a clear vision arises for better understanding, as general qualitative criteria are supposed to be more concrete with simple descriptions to leave as little room for interpretation as possible. Clarification on strengths leads the respondents towards the sports personnel activity criteria, as well as certification experts' competencies. The top management also needs to make sure that the right prerequisites in terms of financial resources, time and documentation exist so that the members of the organisation can conduct the implementation process in an adequate way. It is imperative to give and create a time slot to analyse the certification system and subsequently make a thorough plan for the implementation. The employees need to be given time to plan and adapt the system along the unique aspects of the organisation, and to realise the importance of the quality system and the purpose it fulfils in the organisation (Carlsson & Ring, 2012). Overall, the focus on clear criteria descriptions is needed to stay on the same page altogether.

The measures to refine the criteria of Lithuanian football academies rely on the possibility of increased length of 4–5-star academies certification validity for better self-assessment and self-monitoring. Also, the suggestion about separating the academies into two categories – grassroots/mass football and elite football academies. Also, one of the respondents reflected on the opportunity for organisations to self-assess their processes according to certification criteria that result in additional points and better vision for the experts, if the organisation is critical and understands their challenges

in certain areas. Another important topic is talent development. The new section must be separated, which could mean additional criteria establishment. To conclude, better communication is key to establishing more qualitative criteria that could massively raise the level of Lithuanian football.

The appearance of certification system of Lithuanian football academies' new criteria is expected to be implemented by each higher-tier organisation, as most of them already implemented that into their eco-system. According to Lithuanian Health Ministry guidelines (2011), the periodic medical check must be examined at least once in 4 months. The representatives indicated that the criteria were valid in their organisation, but expanded and adapted to LFF regulations, which is important for improvement in youth health. But knowledge of specialists and their human resources must be developed. Raising the question of the current situation of refereeing, LFF presented additional criteria for the organisations to adapt the integration process into refereeing through education, seminars, and the attractiveness of alternative career paths for players not to move away from football. To conclude, these criteria will help to grow the whole football community in the national prism.

Quality enhancement through good practices could help to identify the gaps and areas for improvements for the highest rate in the Certification process of Lithuanian football academies. Based on the real situation in Lithuania, there are limitations for the organisations. Two main aspects indicated – lack of finances and infrastructure. For the managers and board of these organisations, it is important to know which resources can contribute to the reduction of organisational problems and consequently to organisational success (Wicker & Breuer, 2012). All in all, LFF together with governmental institutions could find the solution and the best outcome focused on the national scale of football.

As more and more football academies are seeking better quality in their processes, the number of challenges is increasing. These challenges give motivation to learn throughout the experience and most commonly – human resources. Recruitment and retention remain significant challenges in the sports sector. These challenges directly influence the operation of sports organisations because they cannot run any events or day-to-day operations due to a lack of staff (Weerakoon, R., 2016). Also, clarifying the coach's work to avoid duplications could increase productivity and make it easier to improve the work ethic. Bringing consistency into processes

will assist the development of standards.

How the LFF provided the feedback and assistance, the organisations reflected differently. Suggestions on the involvement of external experts could give a broader look for both parties as well as developing more frequent communication is required. As the certification system of Lithuanian football academies provides financial motivation, it will not have a significant impact on achieving the highest certification rating. As LFF communicated, that this financial incentive is not supposed to cover all the expenses, the organisations expressed their interest in redeveloping the financial incentive system with a higher budget.

On the reflection of the final certification system rating the organisations showed that the final grade was important to them as the outcome of their hard work being paid off. As organisations face challenges and have weaknesses from the perspective of the national context, the certification system of Lithuanian football academies assesses all activities, and it allows organisations to increase the quality in these perspectives to grow football in Lithuania. Sports organisations face increasing pressure to professionalise and standardise their program delivery and operations (Van Hoecke et al., 2013; Schroeder, L., 2019). It was mentioned that the priority to grow to the maximum rating is supposed to be natural.

To conclude, the study was conducted to evaluate the management criteria of the Lithuanian football academy's certification system. The study found that the certification system had an impact on the organisational development of football academies, and it was viewed to increase the quality of football in Lithuania. Mentioning the limitations, the study is unique as there is an absence of evidence on the field of Lithuanian football because the project is still quite new.

CONCLUSIONS

The evaluation of the management criteria of the Lithuanian football academies' certification system provided valuable insights into the strengths and weaknesses of the system. The study showed that the top three football academies in Lithuania are monitoring the certification process with a vision towards improving themselves and developing football in the country. However, there were also challenges faced by the organisations, including difficulties with documentation and the need for more clarity in the criteria descriptions.

To address these challenges, the study suggests several measures to refine the criteria, such as increasing the length of certification validity, separating academies into two categories, and establishing a new section for talent development. Furthermore, good practices and consistent processes could help to identify gaps and areas for improvement in the certification process.

Despite the limitations faced by some organisations in terms of finances and infrastructure, the study suggests that the Lithuanian Football Federation, together with governmental institutions, could find solutions to support the growth of football in the country.

Overall, this study provides a unique perspective on the certification system of Lithuanian football academies, as there is a lack of previous research in the field. The insights gained from this study could be used to further develop and improve the certification system, leading to higher standards and a more professionalised approach to football in Lithuania.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations, that could be taken into consideration for the certification system of Lithuanian football academies' experts:

1. Identify the specific goals and objectives of the certification program, including the skills, knowledge, and competencies that will be assessed.
2. Develop a clear and comprehensive set of standards and criteria for certification, including eligibility requirements, examination content, and passing scores.
3. Consider partnering with industry associations or professional organisations to ensure that the certification is aligned with industry best practices and meets the needs of employers and practitioners.
4. Develop an effective and efficient examination process that is fair, reliable, and valid, including measures to prevent cheating and ensure test security.
5. Establish a process for ongoing evaluation and improvement of the certification program, including regular updates to the examination content and passing scores, and feedback mechanisms for candidates and other stakeholders.
6. Market the certification program effectively to potential candidates, including the

benefits of certification and the value proposition for employers.

7. Consider offering continuing education or recertification requirements to ensure that certified professionals stay up-to-date with industry trends and best practices.
8. Work with legal counsel to ensure compliance with any relevant laws and regulations governing certification programs.

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