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Koutrou, Niki and Kohe, Geoff (2020) Expert Comment: Response to Scottish FA's head contact ban. . URL.

DOI

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Publisher pdf

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Expert Comment: Response to Scottish FA's head contact ban

Following the news that the Scottish FA is due to ban under-12s from heading footballs in training sessions, Dr Niki Koutrou (Programme Director for Sport Management) and Dr Geoff Kohe (Lecturer in Sport Management and Policy) of the University of Kent, have provided comment on how the head contact ban can be seen as a positive movement, yet sport organisations need to act beyond this to safeguard young people.

'Concussion, and in the UK specifically head contact in football, have both received considerable global attention in recent years. Concerns have been informed by: the confluence of scientific advancement (particularly links posed between Dementia and loss of cognitive function later in life), increased media attention and growing public awareness about the detriments of sport, athlete advocacy, and shifting attitudes about organisational responsibilities. Notwithstanding ongoing research being undertaken to ascertain the precise effects of heading on players' lives, debate (fortified by organisations such as the International Olympic Committee, FIFA and its affiliates, British Medical Association, and sport bodies) has gathered substantial momentum.

Advances have been made in establishing guidelines, research and training initiatives in attempt to improve practices and overall playing conditions. Moreover, international and national federations are progressing with specific bans on restricting head contact for youth players - of which the Scottish FA's steps are just the latest responses within the sport.

While such efforts make sense, counter arguments - which have also been expressed with regards to rugby in New Zealand and Australia, and American football and ice hockey in North America – have identified that the risk and harm are minimal, and such bans represent a fundamental shift in the nature of the respective sports and detract essential aspects of the sporting experience for young people.

Irrespective of opinion, such debate has precipitated wider ethical, legal and political discussion in sport, and UK football specifically, about the sport ethos, ethics and duties of care. For organisations at the domestic level, the efforts to address heading in football can be situated within the wider context of strengthening and extending clubs' and regional FA bodies' health, safety and welfare responsibilities toward player, coach, referee and parent education. Within a framework of organisational duties of care, efforts to ban head contact can be considered needed steps to safeguard young people and create safe spaces in sport at all levels.

Our recent examination of the grassroots football industry in South East England revealed an underlying unease at the current culture of the game, and the (at times) hostile and unsafe conditions in which young people were competing. Drawing on the experiences of 490 community football stakeholders in Kent, we identified a greater need for action regarding the FA's responsibility to provide safe spaces.

Among football community members there was a strong consensus with regards to improving safeguarding practices toward young athletes, enhancing training and education about safety concerns (not just related to head contact), more rigorous and consistent approaches to the enforcement of discipline on safety violations on the pitch and player and club infractions. 'The win at all costs mentality is an issue', one participant summarised, and currently football is 'certainly not an atmosphere I want to expose myself or my children to'. Such comments, echoed across the cohort,

are prescient given that research has already established that participation experiences at an early age can affect attitudes and behaviours towards participation in sport in later life.

For our participants, the issue was not with heading *per se*. Rather, that safety issues were inseparable from endemic discontent about the sustainability and growth of grassroots participation. Banning head contact was noted (although opinions were mixed), but what appeared to matter more were implementing practical measures to ensure young people enjoyed football, were less susceptible to injury and/or harm, and had safe spaces to play.

In cultivating safe space, the hope was that the sport would become more attractive (particularly to young female participants) and young people (and volunteers) within the sport could be retained. Agreement on what safe space effectively 'looks' like on and off the pitch varied, yet there was acknowledgement that cultural change necessitated careful navigation and resolution at all levels of the football structure. Considering these perspectives, as debates proceed, we believe what is needed is further collection of the perspectives of grassroots participants, volunteers and clubs. Moreover, young peoples' voices on welfare issues also remain underrepresented. Drawing on such specifics, we contend, would add value to sport organisations' abilities (in and beyond football) to further participation imperatives and address moral and legal duties of care in meaningful ways.'