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An Analysis of National Governing Bodies' Coaching Certifications in England

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ABSTRACT

Sports coaches play a significant role in the development of athletes. However, the process by which coaches become coaches and the training they receive are under-researched. This study provides a detailed description of the coach education landscape in England. Specifically, it examines what coaches need to become independent practitioners in England, as well as the differences and similarities in the requirements between sports. First, a content analysis of 32 United Kingdom Summer Olympic Sport National Governing Body (NGB) websites was conducted to collect publicly available data on each sport's coaching certification. Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted with NGB Heads of Coaching ($n = 12$) to gather more data on the course prerequisites, structure, and content of these coaching courses. Findings reveal substantial differences between NGB prerequisites, course content, and coaching endorsements. This study provides an important yardstick for NGBs to assess their provision against the wider coach education landscape. Implications and future research directions for developing coach education programs in England are discussed.

KEYWORDS

Coach education; programme design; curriculum; pedagogy; course content

The United Kingdom (UK) sends athletes to compete in over 30 sports at the Summer Olympic Games (UK Sport [UK], n.d.). At the Paris 2024 Summer Olympics, 327 athletes across 26 sports competed (Team, 2024). Coaches who work with and develop these athletes are essential in providing various forms of support, such as psychological, technical, and tactical support (Gerrevall et al., 2024). Coaches involved in developing UK athletes often invest significantly in their own development and the athletes they support. However, the pathways for coach development are frequently criticized for acting only as a means of knowledge transmission and teaching a "right way" for coaches to act (Quick & Baghurst, 2025; Vella et al., 2013).

Coach education literature indicates that the preferred and effective development approach for quality coaching is applied experience and observation (Stodter & Cushion, 2017; Walker et al., 2018). Specifically, mentoring and experience are considered highly effective for developing coaches in a contextualized manner (Quick & Baghurst, 2025). Nevertheless,

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formalized, structured programs based on knowledge transmission remain common and are fundamental to the development of novice coaches (Quick & Baghurst, 2025). For Horgan and Daly (2015), there is a need to further examine the development and standardization of coach education programs (Horgan & Daly, 2015; Paquette & Trudel, 2018b).

A brief review of current education literature

The literature in this area spans three core strands. First, scholars have examined the implementation, effectiveness, and impact of alternative pedagogies and content. Insofar, these have consisted of sociological approaches (e.g., Cassidy et al., 2006), problem-based learning (e.g., Jones & Turner, 2006), ethnodrama (e.g., Cassidy et al., 2015), Socratic teaching (e.g., Roberts & Ryrie, 2014), communities of practice (e.g., Jones et al., 2012), and Freirean-informed pedagogies (e.g., Cope et al., 2021). Broadly, learner coaches have cited the benefits of critical thinking, reflection, theory-informed sense-making, and practical wisdom that arise from increased opportunities for social interaction with peers and coach educators (e.g., Cassidy et al., 2006). While much of this research has focused on tertiary or high-performance contexts, studies examining novice coaches within national coach education systems remain relatively limited.

The second incorporates attempts to evaluate the current condition of formal programs. Studies have evaluated the learner-centered status and alignment of (tertiary) programs (e.g., Milistetd et al., 2018), offering a range of guidance (e.g., faculty development, internships, technology, problem-based learning) for implementing learner-centredness. McCullick et al. (2005) devised three core principles for program design based which advised course administrators to include: (1) appropriately structured program content (basic-complex) and a positive learning environment, (2) curricula grounded in pedagogical knowledge, peer mentoring and tutor guidance, and (3) training activities that prepare coach educators to become skilled social interactors and content experts. Only Callary et al. (2014) have cross-examined multiple coach education programs regarding course design, structure, requirements, and assessment, concluding that each embedded experiential learning and reflection opportunities. Although a substantial body of scholarship exists on national coach education systems, certification pathways, and program structures, comparatively few studies have systematically analyzed entry-level courses across multiple sports within a single national system, particularly in how they prepare coaches to practice independently. For example, Atkinson et al. (2023) charted coach licensure and training requirements for school-based coaches across the United States and reported that most states ($n = 49$, 96%) require coach training. That said, governing bodies, training topics, and coach-specific training (e.g., assistant, volunteer, and middle school coaches) varied significantly by state, with some not requiring any formal coach education for up to three years (Baghurst, 2024). Similarly, Gök and Aslan (2023) compared coach education systems across countries and found significant differences in curricula, models, levels, and content.

The third comprises prescribed best practices for enhancing course design, structure, and implementation. The recommendations provided reflect a global shift in advocating learner-centredness to address the pitfalls of traditional coach education. Some (e.g., Paquette & Trudel, 2018a, 2018b) have taken a more macro-level approach, addressing the overarching structure of programs. For example, Pacquette and Trudel theorized that alignment with learner-centredness arises from issues relating to (a) program design (e.g., learning

strategies), (b) facilitation (e.g., integration of course facilitators), and (c) coach engagement (e.g., learner autonomy, awareness of personal beliefs). Similarly, McCarthy et al. (2021, 2022), proposed five underlying principles for the assessment of coaches: (1) integration of teaching, learning, and assessment, (2) assessment as a means of developing metacognitive skills, (3) practice-based assessment, (4) clearly and transparently describing criteria for success, and (5) collaboration within assessment. Scholars have identified numerous challenges in introducing such novel pedagogies, including resistance and bureaucracy (e.g., Hussain et al., 2012).

Given that much of this research is conceptual and has predominantly explored high-performance and tertiary coach education programs, there is a case for analyzing entry-level programs across the pathways of specific sports.

A Brief history of coach education in the UK

Between 2000 and 2010, coaching in the UK shifted toward standardized coach development and certification. In the early 2000s, the UK Coaching Certificate (UKCC) was introduced to address the flaws of coach education programs (Taylor & Garratt, 2008). The purpose of the UKCC was to professionalize the field of sports coaching by rethinking qualification systems and educational and training practices (McQuade & Nash, 2015). This vision of standardization aimed to establish parity in coaching certifications across sports in the UK that share similar requirements and outcomes at each level. For various reasons (e.g., economics, politics, culture), the standardization of coaching certifications did not come to fruition (Gray, 2011).

In response to the absence of prescriptive guidance for NGBs, the Chartered Institute for the Management of Sport and Physical Activity (CIMSPA) has emerged as the leading proponent for and vehicle toward standardizing coach education. Sport England's recognition of CIMSPA's potential to instigate change has led to significant financial investment, and CIMSPA has arguably become the preeminent force driving standardized education and workforce professionalization in English sport (Chartered Institute for the Management of Sport and Physical Activity, 2025)

CIMSPA enables coaches to earn the designation of Chartered Coach (Chartered Institute for the Management of Sport and Physical Activity, n.d.). This means practitioners meet a minimum standard within the sport and physical activity sector. CIMSPA presents this as a pathway to help coaches grow their careers, and gaining chartered professional status reflects CIMSPA's commitment to upholding standards. This is beneficial in the professionalization of sporting careers, but it is not directly related to sports coaches. The professionalization of sports coaches is under development, but progressing slowly, partly due to a lack of focus on professional development within the workforce (Lara-Bercial et al., 2022; Nash et al., 2016).

UK Coaching has also attempted to standardize aspects of the coach's toolbox. Recently, UK Coaching has released courses for coaches around caring for patients with sudden cardiac arrest, safeguarding athletes, and managing concussions. Indeed, these courses are a helpful step toward developing coaches who are competent, independent practitioners. However, like CIMSPA, UK Coaching has not been able to ensure that coaches across the spectrum of sports in the UK are trained similarly effectively. This leads to the inevitable question: Who is responsible for setting and upholding the standards required of coaches across the entire coaching landscape?

The challenges of standardizing coach education and qualifications across England

NGBs for sport in the UK have multiple purviews regarding what geographic areas they cover (e.g., UK, Great Britain, single constituent countries). As such, this article focuses on NGBs that cover a coach wishing to practice in England. Currently, the coach education landscape in England lacks coherence, partly owing to the significant influence of multiple organizations (Aldous & Brown, 2020). However, this also presents opportunities for collaboration and progress (under the right circumstances). Therefore, research aimed at describing the coach education landscape holds much promise. Due to NGBs and regulators being required to "go their own way" and with little support, it is not surprising that there is a pressing need to understand the current landscape of coach education in England. Therefore, this study explored the requirements and learning for coaches to practice independently in England. For clarity, independent coaching/practice was defined as a qualification level at which the relevant NGB explicitly permits a coach to lead sessions without direct supervision by a more qualified coach. Where documentation was unclear, we relied on formal role descriptors and coach deployment guidance published by the NGB. In sum, this research was driven by the two following research questions:

RQ1: What must coaches obtain to become independent practitioners in a given sport in England?

RQ2: What between-sport differences and similarities exist regarding requirements for coaches to become certified in England?

Method

This study was guided by a pragmatist research paradigm. Pragmatism prioritizes the generation of practically useful knowledge to address real-world problems and supports the integration of multiple data sources where appropriate (Yvonne Feilzer, 2010). Accordingly, we combined document analysis and semi-structured interviews to develop applied insight into how "independent" coaching is defined and operationalized across NGBs. Both documents and interview accounts were treated as contextually situated sources of understanding, valued for the practical perspectives they provide rather than as neutral representations of objective reality.

Research design and setting

This study examined the 32 NGBs responsible for UK Summer Olympic sports. Governing bodies for Winter Olympic, Paralympic, and non-Olympic sports were excluded due to the study's already substantial scope. This research employed a two-stage approach to provide a detailed examination of specific course prerequisites, structure, content, and other aspects of NGBs in England. NGB websites varied in the surface-level data available. Semi-structured interviews were crucial for investigating independent coaching courses in greater depth, beyond what could be gleaned from websites alone.

Participants

Participants for this study were individuals responsible for coach education within their NGB (i.e., "Heads of Coach Education"). NGBs use different terminology for individuals in this role (e.g., "Workforce Development Manager," "Coaching Development Manager," and "Delivery Manager for Coaching"). For clarity, participants will be referred to as a Head of Coach Education. For NGBs that did not list their Head of Coach Education on their website, the general e-mail and phone number were used for communication with that NGB.

A total of 12 participants (male: $n = 8$, 67%; female: $n = 4$, 33%; $M_{age} = 46.6$, $SD = 13.5$ years, range = 28–64) were recruited from 11 NGBs. Participants were responsible for coaching education within their NGB; the mean time in their current role was 9.7 years ($SD = 7.2$). Eight (67%) had previous experience working in sport in England, two (17%) had previous experience working in education, and two (17%) had no related experience. All 32 UK Olympic NGBs were represented in the publicly available data (see Supplementary Material Table S1). NGBs were grouped into categories based on the defining characteristics and tactical structures of each sport (e.g., invasion, net/wall), drawing on established sport classification approaches used within sport pedagogy (Bunker & Thorpe, 1982; O'Connor et al., 2024). NGBs were grouped into eight categories based on the defining characteristics of each sport (e.g., net, invasion). The sports were divided into the following categories: Aesthetic ($n = 7$), Combat ($n = 5$), Invasion ($n = 4$), Net-Wall ($n = 3$), Multiple Discipline ($n = 1$), Racing ($n = 8$), Striking-Fielding ($n = 2$), and Target ($n = 2$). NGB representatives who agreed to participate in interviews came from eleven NGBs and represented sports characterized as Aesthetic ($n = 1$), Invasion ($n = 2$), Net-Wall ($n = 2$), Racing ($n = 4$), and Target ($n = 2$).

Instruments

This first phase entailed collecting publicly available data from NGB websites. The second phase involved online semi-structured interviews, which were recorded on a Zoom account with Workplace Pro. Online interviews were used because of the geographical distance between researchers and participants. Semi-structured interviews ranged from 33 to 86 minutes ($M = 59.5$, $SD = 15.8$).

Semi-structured interviews consisted of 36 open and closed-ended questions concerning demographics, background and context, coaching pathway, course structure, course content, course assessment, and course delivery. Consistent with a semi-structured approach, all participants were asked core questions, while additional prompts were used flexibly to explore relevant issues in greater depth depending on participants' responses. Questions were designed to probe the course methodologies, structure, and content required for independent coaching. Examples of questions asked include: *How many guided learning hours are experienced in the course? What does your organization view as essential for coaches to coach independently? How are courses assessed?* Participants were provided with questions in advance, encouraging them to prepare answers to any questions they wished to address.

Procedure

Phase 1

Phase 1 involved gathering publicly available information from NGB websites (see Supplementary Table). Data were extracted from webpages that referred to coaching courses required for independent coaching, as well as from wider, linked resources (e.g., a student handbook or course description). The fruits of these ongoing activities (i.e., identifying what certain NBGs did) simultaneously informed the development of interview questions.

Retrieving information was an iterative process. For example, initial data collection involved exploring the NGB websites without preconceived expectations of what data would be generated, and designing a tentative table based on the findings. These tables were frequently updated during data collection, particularly when new information about programs was discovered.

Phase 2

Following ethical approval, all 32 NGBs were contacted to request an interview with the Head of Coach Education. Heads of Coach Education were contacted directly or through the NGBs via e-mail and phone. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the potential benefits and risks of participation, and how the data would be collected, stored, and presented. Twelve individuals participated, while two expressed interest in but did not respond to further communication. All participants completed an informed consent form and received a participant information sheet prior to data collection.

After obtaining consent, the primary researcher emailed the interview questions in advance and arranged a convenient time for the interview. Data were collected over three months (January – March 2025). Interviews were transcribed using Zoom's built-in transcription feature and cross-referenced by the lead researcher to ensure accuracy. Upon completion of the interviews, the lead author generated and populated tables (presented in the results section). Once the tables were completed, the participants were approached to review and verify all gathered and summarized information in case of potential discrepancies.

Data analysis

Phase 1

Basic descriptive statistics were employed to describe the range of coach education courses provided by the National Governing Bodies. Descriptive statistics (frequency, percentages) were presented as mean, SD, and range. This analysis has been employed in other research evaluating web content to isolate inferences from texts, such as web content (Hebard et al., 2023), and to identify organizational policies and resources related to coach education (Perlin & Kroshus, 2020).

Phase 2

Interview transcripts were analyzed using inductive content analysis. An iterative approach, involving repeated examination of transcripts and audio recordings, was employed to systematically identify and collate salient content. The third author led the coding process, while the first author provided oversight and contributed to interpretive sense-making. Discrepancies in coding were resolved through consultation with an additional research

team member to ensure consistency and reliability. Initial codes were subsequently organized into broader categories that captured patterns in how independent coaching was conceptualized and operationalized. These categories were iteratively refined through multiple reviews of the transcripts, ensuring that they accurately represented the data and maintained analytical rigor.

Results

Coaching qualification

The number of coaching qualifications (i.e., levels) within respective NGB coaching pathways was stated by 29 of the 32 NGBs (91%); level one ($n = 1$; 3%), level two ($n = 16$; 56%), level three ($n = 7$; 24%), level four ($n = 4$; 14%), and level six ($n = 1$; 3%). A total of 28 NGBs (88%) stated the coaching qualification required for independent coaching: level one ($n = 6$; 21%), level two ($n = 21$; 75%), and level three ($n = 1$; 4%). For seven (25%) of these NGBs, this represents the highest coaching qualification within the coaching pathway. Four (13%) NGBs had CIMSPA endorsement for their respective coaching qualifications required for independent coaching. Lastly, 19 of the NGBs (68%) stated the cost of the coaching course: less than £250 ($n = 4$; 21%), £250- £500 ($n = 10$; 53%), or greater than £500 ($n = 5$; 26%).

Course prerequisites

The prerequisites required for independent coaching certification by respective NGBs are presented by sport type in Table 1. Fifteen NGBs (54%) mandated a lower-level coaching qualification within their coaching pathway (e.g., Level 1), while one NGB (4%) also accepted applicants with a supporting witness statement instead of such a qualification. Beyond coaching qualifications, ten NGBs (36%) required coaches to have active NGB membership, and seven NGBs (25%) required coaches to be actively coaching within the sport.

Beyond coaching, eleven NGBs (39%) required safeguarding certification (assessed or attended), and six NGBs (21%) required a criminal record check. Further, five NGBs (18%) required first-aid certification, whilst one NGB (4%) required concussion-specific certification. Additionally, seven NGBs (25%) required a sport-specific safety qualification and/or proficiency in equipment activities (e.g., powerboat certification, lifeguard qualification, climbing wall certification).

The majority of NGBs ($n = 24$; 86%) specified a minimum age for enrollment; predominantly 18 years old ($n = 18$; 75%), followed by 16 years old ($n = 4$; 17%), and 14 and 17 years old each specified by one NGB (4%). Lastly, five NGBs (18%) had English-language proficiency requirements.

Course structure

All NGBs except one (96%) provided information relating to the course structure of the coaching qualification required for independent coaching (Table 2). The majority of NGBs adopted a blended delivery approach ($n = 19$; 68%), with 17 NGBs (89%) further detailing the components delivered face-to-face (e.g., practical sessions, workshops) or online (e.g., synchronous tutor-led delivery, asynchronous e-learning modules). Two NGBs offered a choice of delivery method: either blended delivery (face-to-face, $n = 1$; 4%) or online ($n = 1$; 4%).

Table 1. Frequency (n; %) of course prerequisites for the coaching qualification required for independent coaching by respective NGBs, according to sport type.

	Aesthetic (*n* = 6; 21%)	Combat (*n* = 5; 18%)	Invasion (*n* = 3; 11%)	Net-Wall (*n* = 3; 11%)	Racing (*n* = 8; 29%)	Striking & Fielding (*n* = 2; 7%)	Target (*n* = 1; 4%)	Total (*n* = 28)
Coaching								
Coaching Qualification(s)	4 (67%)	2 (40%)	3 (100%)	2 (67%)	4 (50%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	15 (54%)
NGB Membership	0 (0%)	3 (60%)	0 (0%)	2 (67%)	5 (63%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	10 (36%)
Actively Coaching	0 (0%)	3 (60%)	2 (67%)	1 (33%)	1 (13%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	7 (25%)
Safeguarding								
Assessed or Attended Safeguarding Education	2 (33%)	4 (80%)	0 (0%)	2 (67%)	3 (38%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	11 (39%)
Criminal Record Check	1 (17%)	3 (60%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (25%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	6 (21%)
Medical								
First Aid	0 (0%)	2 (40%)	0 (0%)	1 (33%)	2 (25%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	5 (18%)
Other	0 (0%)	1 (20%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (4%)
Other								
Minimum Age	5 (83%)	4 (80%)	3 (100%)	3 (100%)	8 (100%)	0 (0%)	1 (100%)	24 (86%)
Language	1 (17%)	2 (40%)	1 (33%)	1 (33%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	5 (18%)
Sport-Specific Safety Qualifications	1 (17%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	3 (38%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	5 (18%)
Equipment/Activity Proficiency	1 (17%)	2 (40%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (13%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	4 (14%)

Table 2. Frequency (n; %) of course structure information for the coaching qualification required for independent coaching by respective NGBs, according to sport type.

	Aesthetic (*n* = *6*; 21%)	Combat (*n*=5; 18%)	Invasion (*n* = *3*; 11%)	Net-Wall (*n*=3; 11%)	Racing (*n*=8; 29%)	Striking & Fielding (*n*=2; 7%)	Target (*n* = *1*; 4%)	Total (*n* = *28*)
Course Structure Information Presented	5 (83%)	5 (100%)	3 (100%)	3 (100%)	8 (100%)	2 (100%)	1 (100%)	27 (96%)
Course Delivery								
Delivery method	4 (67%)	4 (80%)	3 (100%)	2 (67%)	8 (100%)	2 (100%)	1 (100%)	24 (86%)
Face-to-face	1 (17%)	1 (20%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	3 (38%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	5 (18%)
Online	1 (17%)	1 (20%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (7%)
Blended	4 (67%)	2 (40%)	3 (100%)	2 (67%)	5 (63%)	2 (100%)	1 (100%)	19 (68%)
Guided Learning Hours	2 (33%)	4 (80%)	1 (33%)	3 (100%)	6 (75%)	2 (100%)	1 (100%)	19 (68%)
≤20 Hours	0 (0%)	1 (20%)	1 (33%)	2 (67%)	4 (50%)	2 (100%)	0 (0%)	10 (36%)
>20 Hours	2 (33%)	3 (60%)	0 (0%)	1 (33%)	2 (25%)	0 (0%)	1 (100%)	9 (32%)
Total Duration	0 (0%)	2 (40%)	0 (0%)	3 (100%)	4 (50%)	2 (100%)	0 (0%)	11 (39%)
Maximum Duration	0 (0%)	1 (20%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (13%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (7%)
Expected Duration	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (13%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (4%)
Course Assessment								
Method	2 (33%)	2 (40%)	2 (67%)	2 (67%)	6 (75%)	0 (0%)	1 (100%)	15 (54%)
Duration	1 (17%)	1 (20%)	2 (67%)	1 (33%)	6 (75%)	0 (0%)	1 (100%)	12 (43%)
Learning Outcomes	1 (17%)	1 (20%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (25%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	4 (14%)

Of the NGBs ($n = 19$; 68%) which specified the number of guided learning hours (or contact hours), the range was between 5.5 and 48 hours, with a comparable number of NGBs providing 20 hours or less ($n = 10$; 36%) or greater than 20 hours ($n = 9$; 32%) of guided learning. Where total duration for the course was listed, this information was provided in hours ($n = 2$; 18%; 44–125 hours), weeks ($n = 5$; 45%; 4–9 weeks), months ($n = 3$; 27%; 2–8 months) or years ($n = 1$; 9%; 3 years). Only two NGBs specified a maximum duration for

course completion (nine months and two years), while one of those NGBs (racing) also provided an estimated duration for course completion. None specified a minimum duration.

Fifteen NGBs (54%) presented information on course assessment. Methods of assessment included; live or pre-recoded delivery of a practical coaching session ($n = 15$; 100%), written and online tasks or e-assessment ($n = 12$; 80%; e.g., session planning, reflections, coaching diaries, developing portfolios), discussion-based tasks ($n = 3$; 20%), non-observed practical coaching delivery ($n = 2$; 13%), tests ($n = 2$; 14%) and practical non-coaching competency-based tasks ($n = 1$; 7%). Where NGBs stated the duration of assessment components ($n = 10$; 83%), this ranged from 45 minutes to 1 day. In contrast, two NGBs (17%) utilized ongoing/continuous assessment during courses. Lastly, only four NGBs (14%) provided the course learning outcomes being assessed.

Course content

Information on the course content of the coaching qualification required for independent coaching by respective NGBs is presented by sport type in Table 3. The majority of NGBs ($n = 21$; 75%) presented information regarding course content. Regardless the sport type, course content predominantly covered topics relating to coaching (principles, strategies, and skills applied directly in practice) and coaching pedagogy (methods and instructional approaches used to teach or develop coaching practice) ($n = 21$; 75%), technical performance ($n = 17$; 61%), and the role and responsibilities of the coach ($n = 14$; 50%). Eight NGBs (29%) covered population-specific topics (e.g., coaching female athletes, coaching children and young people). The most frequently used words to describe course content are presented in Figure 1.

Table 3. Frequency (n; %) of course content information required for coaching qualifications by respective NGBs, according to sport type.

	Aesthetic ($n = 6$; 22%)	Combat ($n = 5$; 18%)	Invasion ($n = 3$; 11%)	Net-Wall ($n = 3$; 11%)	Racing ($n = 8$; 29%)	Striking & Fielding ($n = 2$; 7%)	Target ($n = 1$; 4%)	Total ($n = 28$)
Course Content Information Presented	4 (67%)	4 (80%)	2 (67%)	3 (100%)	7 (88%)	0 (0%)	1 (100%)	21 (75%)
Coaching Knowledge, Understanding, and Competencies								
Role and Responsibilities of the Coach	3 (50%)	3 (60%)	1 (33%)	2 (67%)	4 (50%)	–	1 (100%)	14 (50%)
How to Coach and Coaching Pedagogy	4 (67%)	4 (80%)	2 (67%)	3 (100%)	7 (88%)	–	1 (100%)	21 (75%)
Population-Specific Topics	2 (33%)	2 (40%)	1 (33%)	1 (33%)	2 (25%)	–	0 (0%)	8 (29%)
Components of Performance								
Physical	3 (50%)	1 (20%)	1 (33%)	0 (0%)	4 (50%)	–	0 (0%)	9 (32%)
Psychosocial	3 (50%)	2 (40%)	1 (33%)	1 (33%)	2 (25%)	–	0 (0%)	9 (32%)
Tactical	0 (0%)	2 (40%)	1 (33%)	1 (33%)	1 (13%)	–	0 (0%)	5 (18%)
Technical	4 (67%)	2 (40%)	1 (33%)	3 (100%)	6 (75%)	–	1 (100%)	17 (61%)
Wider Knowledge, Understanding, and Competencies								
Performance Analysis	3 (50%)	1 (20%)	1 (33%)	0(%)	1 (13%)	–	0 (0%)	6 (21%)
Nutrition	2 (33)	1 (20%)	1 (33%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	–	0 (0%)	4 (14%)
Safeguarding	0 (0%)	2 (40%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (25%)	–	0 (0%)	4 (14%)
Health and Safety	1 (17%)	3 (60%)	0 (0%)	1 (33%)	5 (63%)	–	0 0%)	10 (36%)
Wider Professional Development	2 (33%)	0 (0%)	1 (33%)	1 (33%)	2 (25%)	–	0 0%)	6 (21%)

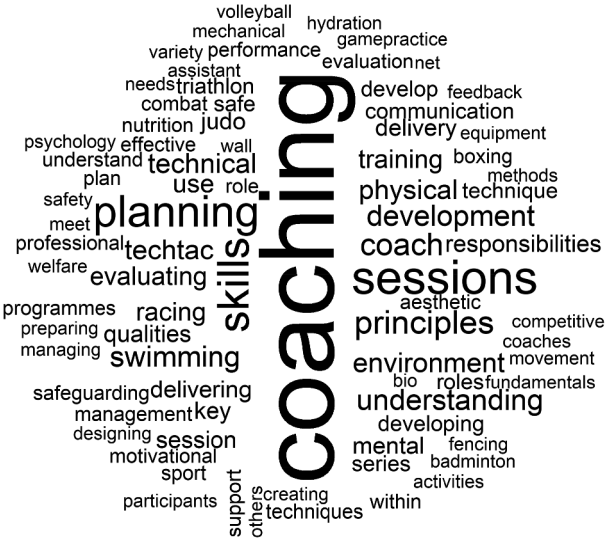

Figure 1. Word size representing the number of times used across NGBs to describe the course content of the coaching qualification required for independent coaching by respective NGBs.

Further information

Semi-structured interviews with practitioners ($n = 11$; 34%) verified and elaborated on the information on independent coaching courses within their respective NGBs. Respective courses were introduced (first iteration) between 2000 and 2023, with most NGBs introducing their courses within the 2020s ($n = 4$; 36%), followed by the 2010s ($n = 3$; 27%) and 2000s ($n = 3$; 27%). Eight NGBs (73%) disclosed the number of participants per year (range: 21–364); however, the number of courses delivered per year and thus the participants per course per year were not ascertained. The ratio of tutors to learners for NGBs delivering synchronous content ($n = 10$; 91%) ranged from 16:1 to 6:1, with a comparable number of NGBs ($n = 5$; 45%) maintaining a learner-to-tutor ratio higher or lower than 1:10. All but one NGB ($n = 10$; 91%) offered participants the opportunity for deferral or reassessment assessment(s).

Over half ($n = 6$; 55%) of NGBs considered ways to keep course costs low (e.g., by using resources efficiently and by offering delivery modes such as online or blended). Six NGBs (55%) embedded components of equality, diversity, and inclusion within their course content. All NGBs ($n = 11$; 100%) expressed interest in collaborating with other NGBs and achieving standardization through appropriate organizations (e.g., CIMSPA), albeit to varying degrees.

Discussion

We investigated the requirements to coach in England across all 32 Summer Olympic sports. Our findings revealed key insights into the current status of coach education in England, which are discussed next. For clarity, this research was driven by the following two research questions.

R1: What do coaches need to obtain to become independent coach practitioners in a particular sport in England?

R2: What between-sport differences and similarities exist in terms of requirements for coaches to become certified in England?

Prerequisites

The differences in NGB prerequisites should be of particular importance to those involved in the development of coach education and those invested in the professionalization and standardization of coaching in England. Findings revealed a wide range of requirements that NGBs require of their learners. This range of prerequisites (e.g., medical, sport-specific safety qualifications, safeguarding) indicates a disparity among NGBs about what learning and knowledge are essential for coaches to coach independently. Perhaps some NGBs assume that the knowledge learners need to be successful in their coach education pathway is implicit, which may appear problematic, as prior knowledge is an essential component of student learning success (Brod, 2021).

One of the key factors in the development of the sport coaching industry is the status of its workforce in relation to education and accreditation (Stodter & Cushion, 2017). Here, NGBs mandating advanced prerequisites appear to be assisting individual learners by providing them with the necessary prior knowledge for success, while also supporting the development of a successful coaching workforce. Reflecting the largely embryonic nature of sport coaching research, scholars often adopt learning theories and explanatory frameworks from other domains without critical examination (Stodter & Cushion, 2017). As such, coaches may benefit from meeting the prerequisites set by governing bodies and organizations that deliver them, rather than relying on NGBs to provide first aid, concussion, or safeguarding training. Relatedly, learners prefer and are successful in learning from multiple sources (Callary et al., 2014; Stodter & Cushion, 2019), indicating that having learners complete more of their prerequisite qualifications away from their NGB may enhance learner satisfaction. Our results do indicate, however, that the most stated prerequisite for course participation after "age" was "holding a previous coaching qualification." This is particularly interesting because related prior knowledge does not necessarily predict the highest level of learning (Brod, 2021).

Assessment

Given the societal and practical reach of the coaching workforce, quality development has received increased attention (e.g., McCarthy et al., 2021). However, recent work suggests that in some settings, coach assessment can be a token gesture, requiring only minimal standards and assessments to ensure a larger pool of available coaches (Baghurst, 2024).

Our findings demonstrate that assessment (including both type and format) functions as a quality assurance mechanism for graduating learners. Our results have demonstrated some variety in how NGBs administer assessment within their contexts. The variation in assessment practices may be positive and indicative of an evolution toward learner-centered education (Callary et al., 2014), with NGBs situated in a context where the role and nature of assessment are closely scrutinized (McCarthy et al., 2021). Those NGBs that have recently revised their coach education pathways may be focused on providing an assessment

experience that more closely aligns with current recommended practices (McCarthy et al., 2022; Paquette & Trudel, 2018a).

It is important to recognize whether NGBs are conducting assessment-of-learning or assessment-for-learning. McCarthy's et al. (2022) principles of assessment call for assessments that prioritize integration, self-regulatory skills, authenticity (to context), collaboration, and appropriate levels of challenge. Echoing some of these principles, Paquette and Trudel (2018a) suggested that learner-centered coach education relies on learners becoming independent and on the assessment purpose being to promote learning through integrated and authentic means.

Our results indicate that some NGBs are attempting to apply the principles of learner-centered assessment. Each participant indicated that their NGB assesses practical coaching at least partially, indicating that the NGBs are committed to assessments that are authentic to the learner's experiences. Findings also indicate that continuous assessments, such as portfolios and workbooks, were common among most NGBs, offering assessments that were not confined to a single time period but spanned the entirety of the course or a significant portion, and were integrated into the learning process.

This study highlights two principles that were not acknowledged in the assessment process of any of the NGBs interviewed. Participants did not specify the criteria for success in the assessment. Additionally, none of the participants mentioned collaboration within the assessment. A lack of collaboration within assessment is particularly surprising, given the inherently social nature of sport coaching (Cassidy et al., 2016; Malcolm et al., 2014) and working with athletes. Paquette and Trudel (2018a) also suggested that liberal attitudes toward evaluating assessments have been proposed to encourage deeper learning (e.g., Trudel et al., 2013) and discourage learners from treating assessment instruments instrumentally and cynically (Chesterfield et al., 2010). It could be inferred that such an observable shift is in response to the political landscape of coach education and the implementation of policy (i.e., "better" coaching). To an extent, this begins to address the lack of during- and post-course support, which has been highlighted by coaches (e.g., Nash & Sproule, 2012), and provides a point of reflection on how NGBs monitor and administer processes of change. This is evident in the number of NGBs that offer action-plan activities if learners' initial assessment does not meet the prescribed competencies, illustrating the "integrated" component of McCarthy's et al. (2022) assessment principles.

Content

There was significant variation in taught content across NGBs. NGBs prioritized content on coaching pedagogy, organizational aspects of coaching, and the technical and tactical components of their sport. Surprisingly, physical, psychosocial, and safeguarding content was presented by fewer than half of NGBs. As indicated by Dempsey et al. (2022), curriculum design is a complex and contested process that is far from straightforward. The context-specific nature of coaching and coach education means that prescribing content can be challenging (Dempsey et al., 2022). Indeed, while there continue to be progressive shifts in policy and administration, curricula translation presents coach educators with various ambiguities, dilemmas, and constraints (e.g., Hammond & Perry, 2005; Maskrey et al., 2025). Coach educators cite a lack of pre-role training, logistics, time

constraints, conflicting ideologies, and co-tutor misalignment as pertinent barriers (e.g., Watts et al., 2023). It is perhaps no surprise that courses are delivered with sub-par fidelity (e.g., Hammond & Perry, 2005). Clearly, the ability of coach educators to translate and communicate content is integral to the endeavor of NGBs; therefore, office holders should revisit practitioner preparation and the broader role of coach educators within program design.

Unsurprisingly, pedagogy and organizational content are prominent at this level, as the courses are intended to prepare coaches to practice without supervision. The same is true of technical and tactical content, where NGBs must ensure that coaches they train are capable of effectively disseminating their knowledge to charges (e.g., athletes). A concern is that only a quarter of NGBs include safeguarding, safety, and ethics content in their courses. Safeguarding is an essential part of the coaching role at all levels of sport (Rhind & Blair, 2018). However, it is particularly important within these courses because many coaches starting their coaching careers do so while working with children and young people. Those NGBs that have set safeguarding and safety prerequisites may view the learners as having "ticked the box" regarding safeguarding, but should still be considerate of the highly contextual nature of their position and the consumers of their labor. For example, compared to invasion sports, coaches in aesthetic sports may need a more context-specific approach to safeguarding the athletes in their care.

Structure

Most independent coaching courses have been updated since the introduction of the UKCC's governance (Taylor & Garratt, 2008) for coach education in England. Frequent updates of coaching courses appear progressive, but should be informed by the latest research and guidance on "best practice." The structure of the programs provided an interesting view of the level of education that NGBs in England believe is required to train coaches adequately. Some reported in hours, some in days, and some in sessions. Further questioning revealed a disparity in the number of contact hours learners experienced on independent coaching courses. Interestingly, of the NGBs that stated course costs, nearly three-quarters indicated the cost of their course(s) was between £200 and (in excess of) £500, which resonates with the cost-related barriers to coach education cited by coaches.

Research advocates for an increased focus on learner-centeredness (Paquette & Trudel, 2018b). Revisiting an earlier point, Paquette and Trudel (2018a) divided their guidance for achieving learner-centered coach education into three categories: program design, facilitation, and coach engagement. In terms of program design, only a small number of the studied NGBs implemented varied learning strategies. Despite 78% of courses explicitly indicating their delivery method, only 53% used a blended approach. Blended learning is an example of how to integrate multiple learning strategies and may be supplemented with more specific learning strategies during a course (e.g., presenting, problem-solving, role-playing; Ciampolini et al., 2019; Morgan et al., 2013). However, it should not be assumed that NGB officeholders possess the authority to implement such changes. As outlined by Culver et al. (2019), coach development systems comprise enablers and constraints (e.g., resources, regulations, governance) that can limit or impede desired advancements.

Study limitations and future directions

This article has taken care to represent and describe the landscape of coach education within the United Kingdom; however, limitations exist that future research should seek to remedy. In addition to the small sample size and scant research base, this study invited individuals to speak on behalf of the organizations for which they are employed. Relying on individuals to speak on behalf of groups and organizations may result in opinions that are personal to the individuals but not representative of the organizations as a whole.

Researchers seeking to contribute to the body of knowledge will be well-positioned to extend this study and advance our understanding of coach education in England. Participants have expressed a desire to be situated within a system that helps them make the best decisions for their coaches. Future researchers should engage with this interest in standardization by investigating what has been done in other countries (e.g., the National Coaching Certification Program in Canada; Misener & Danylchuk, 2009). Considering the pivotal role sport coaches play in safeguarding athletes (Rhind & Blair, 2018), future studies may also investigate the varying ethical and safeguarding requirements across NGBs, highlighting a lack of clarity about the education and experience coaches need to practice safely. Research may also wish to employ cyclical interviews and sustained participant observation to examine how coach educators from various sports/NGBs individually and collectively understand and navigate problematic work contexts to enact prescribed approaches (Grills & Prus, 2019).

Conclusion

The present research provided a contemporary depiction of coach education in England. The primary focus was to explore the requirements for independent practice across sports, inclusive of prerequisites for education and experiences within coach education programs, as well as the differences that exist between NGBs. Through an iterative content analysis, the results demonstrated a significant lack of standardization across the courses being delivered. The lack of consensus on the requirements for independent coaching makes it difficult to draw any firm conclusions. Similar to coaching practice, coach education is highly influenced by the context in which it is situated (Paquette & Trudel, 2018a, 2018b; Stodter & Cushion, 2019). Sports and NGBs have different requirements, which shows clearly in the results. It is essential, however, to acknowledge that many NGBs have shown a willingness to update their coach education practices to align with standards established by organizations such as CIMSPA.

Moving forward, it will be essential for UK Sport, CIMSPA, and NGBs to agree on non-negotiable standards for coaches who wish to practice independently. An example of this would be to develop a CIMSPA-delivered safeguarding qualification as a prerequisite for coach education programs in England. NGBs may prefer self-determination regarding the content of their courses, but having nonspecific education covered as prerequisites may be a key step toward standardization.

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