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“You Want to Be Paid?” The Complexity of Coach Developers, Free Citizenship, and Their Role in Sports Coaching

Simon Quick ^a, Timothy Baghurst ^b, and Callum Morgan^a

^aSchool of Sport, Rehabilitation and Exercise Sciences, University of Essex, Colchester, UK; ^bFSU COACH, College of Education, Health, and Human Sciences, Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL, USA

ABSTRACT

Coach developers play a crucial role in advancing the field of sports coaching and improving coaches' lives. Many academics, who also act as coach developers, deliver training, mentoring, and education services as part of their institutional “citizenship” or “service” obligations. Often, these are provided at no cost. These practices, while well-intentioned, can devalue sports coaching and exacerbate inequities within the field. This article explores the implications of unpaid coach development work, drawing on recent international literature to examine the dilemmas facing academics, institutions, and coach development practitioners. It presents practical strategies for recognizing, valuing, and appropriately compensating coach development work, while maintaining access to research sites and supporting coaches. We conclude by recommending institutional policy shifts, clearer role boundaries, and “charging models” that reflect the value of coach developers.

KEYWORDS

Coaching; value; coach developer; work; devalue

Within higher education, academics are often contractually obligated to contribute to the academy not only through teaching and research, but also through “service” in the United States or “citizenship” in the United Kingdom. This type of work involves administrative and outreach activities, mentoring internal and external stakeholders, professional engagement, and community-based work. Citizenship responsibilities vary depending on the institution's expectations but typically range from 5% to 30% of an academic's expected workload (Schuster & Finkelstein, 2006). For many academics, the recent intensification of academic capitalism, including metric- and audit-driven cultures, has rendered citizenship increasingly pressured and, at times, “less meaningful” (McCarthy et al., 2017). Nevertheless, it still plays a pivotal role in sustaining academia's ecosystem.

One form of academic citizenship that raises particular questions in sports coaching is coach development work undertaken with coaches, clubs, sport organizations, and governing bodies. Coach development is a distinctive form of academic and professional work. Academics in kinesiology, sport science, and related fields undertake a range of services, including committee work, community engagement, professional outreach, mentoring, and voluntary contributions to local organizations. Our focus on coach development is not intended to suggest that these other forms

CONTACT Simon Quick  s.quick@essex.ac.uk  School of Sport, Rehabilitation and Exercise Sciences, University of Essex, Colchester, UK

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of service are unimportant. Rather, coach development warrants specific attention because it involves providing specialist pedagogical, disciplinary, and professional expertise to coaches, clubs, sport organizations, and governing bodies. It therefore sits at the intersection of academic citizenship, professional education, consultancy, knowledge exchange, and, in some cases, access to research. This intersection makes coach development different from many routine forms of academic service because the work is often externally facing, relationally intensive, practically consequential, and connected to a field that is still negotiating its professional status, standards, and economic value.

Our concern with unpaid coach development is also informed by the sociology of professions. Rather than treating professionalization simply as the acquisition of credentials or status, this literature focuses on how occupational groups secure jurisdiction over particular forms of expertise, establish standards of legitimate practice, and negotiate the social and economic value of their work (Abbott, 1988; Larson, 1977). From this perspective, the value of professional labor is not inherent or self-evident; it is produced through institutional recognition, credible claims to specialist knowledge, shared standards, and forms of market and symbolic closure. Evetts (2003) similarly argued that professionalism should be understood less as a fixed occupational category and more as a process through which work, identity, authority, and accountability are organized. This is especially important in sports coaching, where Taylor and Garratt (2010) have shown that professionalization is shaped by relations of power, resistance, and compliance, as well as the enduring influence of volunteer traditions. We therefore approach unpaid coach development not only as a question of individual remuneration, but as a practice with implications for how coach development expertise is recognized, authorized, and valued within a still-emerging professional field.

In the field of sports coaching, the work of a coach developer frequently falls under the remit of citizenship and is often unpaid. While such goodwill is somewhat beneficial to both parties, such arrangements also carry significant risks: devaluing coach development, undercutting the professionalism of coaching and sport work more generally, contributing to inequity, and halting positive change(s) in a low-paid profession. It is not unfathomable to consider modern attitudes toward and practices of citizenship as echoes of the burgeoning legacy left by the grassroots and volunteerism cultures upon which sport has historically relied (Taylor & Garratt, 2010). They also speak to the comparatively embryonic structures and standards that give shape to the sport industry, as well as to an increased conceptualization of sport work as “serious leisure” and as neoliberal in character (Elkington & Stebbins, 2014).

In light of these issues, we critically examine the problem of offering free expertise and unpaid labor in sports coaching. Furthermore, we draw on recent literature to offer recommendations for academics, coach developers, and institutions on safeguarding salaries, the integrity of the profession, and professional standards in sports coaching. To be clear, our purpose is to shed light on a complex issue and to foster a healthy debate on a potentially contentious topic.

Coaching, coach development, and academic citizenship

Sports coaching

Sports coaching is an underpaid profession that demands that coaches work unsociable hours (e.g., evenings and weekends), often to the detriment of personal relationships, health, and finances (Krahn, 2024). Coaching contexts vary significantly, contributing to the need for coaches to adapt and continually modernize their practice (Park et al., 2026). These challenges reflect a profession that is highly stressful, prone to burnout (Griffin et al., 2025; Quick et al., 2025). Research has revealed that sport coaching employment is increasingly precarious, with coaches and coach educators working within contexts shaped by short-term contracts, uncertain work allocation, metric- and audit-driven cultures, and limited organizational investment in professional development (Krahn, 2024; Watts et al., 2023). Practitioners in these studies have highlighted that their everyday realities are colored by short-term, non-traditional employment contracts, high turnover, performativity (e.g., performance and monitoring), and diminishing benefits (e.g., pensions and salaries). For example, Baghurst and Quick (2026) recently reported that turnover rates for high school coaches in the United States exceed 50% within three years of hire, and the average salary of a high school coach was approximately \$2,500 per season (Baghurst, 2025b). Relatedly, scholars have often implied that organizations are becoming less capable of, or unwilling to, invest company resources in staff development or initiatives that require long-term commitment and pose risk Hayter and Cahoy (2018). A lack of formal training among coaches has been noted as a significant problem within coaching (Baghurst, 2025a; Quick et al., 2026).

The intersecting pressures characteristic of these conditions are compounded by unrelenting expectations to produce participation (i.e., sign-ups) and learning and performance outcomes (i.e., wins) that are synonymous with different contexts (Pearson et al., 2021). Problematically, the regularly reported scarcity of organizational resources means that coaches who wish to upskill their qualifications or general knowledge are often required to undertake professional development at times when they could be earning money (Nash et al., 2017). Indeed, this further speaks to the tentative, conservative operations of employing organizations in an unpredictable market and the increased responsibility subsequently placed on the individual to become and remain “work ready.” Quick et al. (2026) reported that sport-specific qualifications can vary significantly in contact hours, prerequisites, and pedagogical content. Consequently, for coaches, finding ways to develop is a challenge (e.g., access, financial, and time constraints). Therefore, it is perhaps not surprising (as recommended in the literature, cf. Quick & Baghurst, 2025) that expertise and advice may be sought from coach developers working in academia.

Coach developers

Sport coach development systems (CDS) comprise interconnected actors (e.g., coach developers) that (in)directly facilitate learning activities that differ in formality and mediation (Culver et al., 2019). The term “coach developer” is often used as a catch-all term to describe those responsible for policy generation, course administration, and various modes of translation at the micro-level of practice (e.g., mentors, coach educators; Jones et al., 2024).

Coach developers, therefore, undertake a wide range of pedagogical, relational, administrative, and system-facing work. At the level of practice, they may design and deliver coach education courses, facilitate workshops, mentor coaches, support reflective practice, assess learning, provide feedback, and help coaches interpret and apply research-informed ideas within their own contexts. At the organizational level, they may contribute to curriculum design, accreditation processes, quality assurance, policy implementation, and the development of coach learning systems. Importantly, coach development is not limited to the transmission of technical or tactical knowledge. It involves facilitating adult learning, cultivating professional judgment, negotiating context-specific problems, and developing relationships through which coaches come to value, question, and adapt their practice.

Emerging evidence suggests that *some* coach developers suffer the same employment-related ills as their coaching counterparts. For example, Watts et al. (2023) found that short-term contracts, ad hoc and uncertain work allocation, metric- and audit-driven cultures, unsociable working hours, scarce resources, and hobbyist-like “goodwill” colored coach educators’ professional contexts. It is telling that the interviewed practitioners framed coach development work as a leisure-type activity pursued for enjoyment and self-fulfillment rather than as a worthwhile, financially stable career path.

In the last decade, researchers have examined the role(s), practice(s), and perceived impact(s) of coach developers (Jones et al., 2024). Most recently, Quick and Baghurst (2025) reported that coach developers actively shape psychosocial learning environments, serve as therapeutic outlets, facilitate deep learning, and significantly influence how (or whether) coaches perceive the value of pedagogical interactions (e.g., approaches, ideas). Others have cited their central role in the development of coaches’ technical and tactical knowledge (e.g., McQuade & Nash, 2015), accreditation and certification processes (e.g., Wang et al., 2025), and accessibility and inclusivity (e.g., Townsend & Cushion, 2017). Given the field’s relative maturity, Jones et al. (2024) suggested that the irrefutable and critical role(s) of coach developers in shaping coach(ing) identity and learning remain under-researched and speculative.

The precarious and ill-defined state of play outlined is probably best reflected in the way(s) in which the coach developer role is or is not recognized. At present, the Chartered Institute for the Management of Sport and Physical Activity (CIMSPA, n.d.) in the United Kingdom is formalizing and accrediting the coach-developer role. While this will, to some extent, clarify the role’s formal expectations and competencies, it is unlikely to guide coach developers (and those employed in academic institutions) on how to deliver their services without devaluing this work. In North America, the Coaching Association of Canada (n.d.) has a well-established coach development program; in the United States, efforts remain in their infancy, and there is no formal, nationwide coach development training or certification program. Indeed, the absence of domestically and internationally established and regulated standards raises important questions regarding who they are and can be, including coach developers, as well as the respective parameters of their practice(s).

Frameworks such as the International Coach Developer Framework (International Council for Coaching Excellence [ICCE], 2024) have helped clarify the coach-developer role internationally by positioning coach-developers as central actors in coach education and development systems. The framework provides guidance for sport organizations, higher education providers, and individual practitioners, and emphasizes that coach development requires facilitation skills, professional judgment, and ongoing learning. Such

frameworks are important because they present coach development as skilled professional work rather than as an informal extension of coaching experience or academic goodwill. However, their uptake remains uneven across national and organizational contexts, and the coach-developer role itself is still inconsistently recognized and professionally underdeveloped, leaving coach development vulnerable to being treated as an informal or goodwill-based activity rather than skilled professional work (Walton et al., 2024).

Academic citizenship/service

In higher education, citizenship, also known as service, is often a formal component of academic contracts. This facet of the job is usually non-remunerated beyond salary and rarely tied to external income (unless through consultancy, grants, or external examining). While citizenship does contribute to promotion or workload models, it often lacks the institutional “weight” or “pull” of research or teaching (e.g., research output, quality, and citations are more widely recognized; Beatson et al., 2022). Often, this mode of working within sports coaching and higher education conflicts with academic expectations and performance measures. Indeed, many academics working in sports coaching invest significant time working with sports organizations, national governing bodies (NGBs), teams, and coaches. However, this type of service work is complex and, as we will outline, not without consequences. Academics who support coaches (e.g., through engagement work) frequently do so without receiving formal recognition or compensation.

Despite a backdrop of precarity, it is understandable why some academics elect to continue engaging in service work. We note that this type of work can lead to research opportunities, fruitful relationships that may lead to further opportunities, or notable accomplishments on a resume when applying for a new position or promotion. However, as we discuss, the unintended consequences of providing such expertise may contribute to precariousness, reduced coach developer and coach salaries, and a broader devaluation of the qualifications and professional work involved.

Problems with free coach development and subsequent recommendations

Before outlining these problems, it is important to distinguish between the different forms of “free” coach development work addressed in this article. We do not treat unpaid work as a single or uniform practice. Rather, we identify three overlapping but analytically distinct forms. First, coach development may be undertaken as academic citizenship or service, where work with external stakeholders is absorbed into institutional workload expectations but is not directly remunerated, resourced, or always recognized in promotion and appraisal systems. Second, coach development may be offered voluntarily or as a goodwill gesture to clubs, coaches, organizations, or communities, often intended to support access, inclusion, or professional learning. This form of provision raises questions about market value, professional recognition, and the sustainability of skilled labor. Third, coach development expertise may be exchanged, explicitly or implicitly, for access to research settings, participants, relationships, or data. This form of unpaid work raises a different set of ethical and methodological questions concerning role clarity, consent, reciprocity, and the boundary between research and service provision. Although these forms can overlap in practice,

distinguishing between them allows us to address their different economic, ethical, and institutional logics more carefully.

The discussion that follows is therefore organized around these distinctions: the first problem concerns how unpaid or undercompensated provision can affect the perceived value of coach development in a weakly regulated professional market; the second concerns how institutional citizenship and voluntary provision may reproduce inequities in academic and coaching labor; and the third concerns the ethical complexities of exchanging coach development expertise for research access.

Problem 1: devaluation of coaching and coach development

Offering high-quality coach development for free, while seemingly benevolent, can unintentionally signal that the work lacks financial, professional, or social value. Research in related fields has highlighted similar dynamics: in social work, freely provided professional development has been linked to perceptions of diminished worth and legitimacy (Carreon, 2024), and in teaching, unpaid contributions to professional learning can undermine recognition and long-term sustainability (Staudt Willet & He, 2024).

Within the context of coaching, providing services without financial compensation does not automatically devalue coaching or coach development. Indeed, in established professions such as law and medicine, pro bono and community-facing provision can coexist with high professional status and stable market rates. We suggest the difference lies in the structure and maturity of the occupational field. In more established professions, free provision is typically located within protected jurisdictions, formal credentialing systems, recognized professional boundaries, and relatively stable expectations about the economic value of expertise. Sport coaching and coach development, by contrast, remain more weakly regulated and unevenly accredited, with a stronger historical reliance on volunteerism, goodwill, and “serious leisure” narratives (Elkington & Stebbins, 2014; Taylor & Garratt, 2010). The absence of consistent standards and market expectations makes unpaid coach development more likely to shape perceptions of what this work is worth.

Our claim, therefore, is not a simple causal one in which any instance of free coach development directly produces professional devaluation. Rather, we suggest that repeated free or undercompensated provision can contribute to a devaluing mechanism under particular market conditions. These include precarious employment, limited organizational investment in coach learning, inconsistent accreditation, weak role boundaries, and a field in which coach development expertise is still being professionally recognized. Under these conditions, free provision can create market distortion: when high-quality coach development is repeatedly available at no cost, organizations may become less willing to allocate funds for equivalent work, paid coach developers may feel pressure to reduce fees, and coaches may receive mixed signals about whether coach development expertise should be understood as skilled professional labor or goodwill-based support. While competition is a normal part of professional markets, expecting people to work without pay risks normalizing the undervaluation of the profession.

Second, the absence of funding or compensation can limit coach developers’ capacity to maintain and enhance the quality of their work. Resources (i.e., time and money) are essential for activities such as preparing high-quality materials, engaging in reflective practices, and working with coaches toward solutions. Without these resources, the quality

of coach development may decline, undermining professionalization efforts and the long-term sustainability of effective coaching practices.

Third, the practice of working for free can have cumulative effects on professional identity and career trajectories. For coach developers who are already employed (by NGBs or as freelancers), competing with free services may require compromises in pricing, time allocation, or service quality, potentially affecting their professional reputation and perceived expertise.

Recommendation 1: compensation models

Introducing sustainable compensation mechanisms (e.g., institutional funding, grants, or fee-based participation) can help reinforce the value of coach development. Even nominal fees can signal professionalism and create incentives for maintaining high standards. Any compensation model must be sufficiently robust and recognize the different practice and employment landscapes for freelance and organizationally situated developers (e.g., The Football Association). Research (e.g., Akuffo-Aduamah, 2025) shows that compensation models that address employees' financial and non-financial needs enhance job satisfaction and reduce turnover and career transitions, producing a suite of system-level benefits discussed next (e.g., quality assurance).

Recommendation 2: recognition and accreditation

Professional recognition systems, including certifications, continuing professional development (CPD) credits, or formal accreditation, can help validate the expertise of coach developers and distinguish high-quality offerings from unpaid, informal provision. We acknowledge that this is being addressed in certain countries (e.g., CIMSPA in the UK; the Coaching Association of Canada). However, progress is slow and uneven.

Accreditation and recognition are fundamental to the bedrock of professions, professional identities, and legitimacy. One defining characteristic is the subscription to a shared vocabulary. For example, in regulated professions such as law, medicine, and teaching, practitioners (through qualification) draw on shared vocabularies to think about and accomplish work tasks, and their (mis)use or (in)visibility is a clear marker of legitimacy and expertise.

The importance of recognition and accreditation speaks to the emerging body of literature, which highlights the role of positive coach perceptions of coach developer credibility, trustworthiness, and capital in successful outcomes and high-quality engagement with the learning process (Quick & Baghurst, 2025). Accreditation of the Coach Developer role by an awarding body would strengthen practitioner biographies, enabling more effective engagement with practice.

Problem 2: impact on equity and sustainability

Unpaid professional and citizenship labor is unevenly accessible, raising significant concerns about equity and sustainability. Engagement in unpaid coach development work is more feasible for academics and practitioners with lighter teaching loads, secure contracts, senior positions, or access to external funding. In contrast, Early

Career Researchers (ECRs), contingent or precariously employed faculty, and those working in under-resourced institutions, often lack the capacity to absorb unpaid labor without personal or professional cost. For example, conference attendance often comes at considerable personal expense for academic staff. Problematically, in UK higher education, perceived (or real) job precarity, coupled with university funding and “ranking” exercises such as the Research Excellence Framework (REF), produces institution-level pressures for academics. Against this backdrop, an uneven distribution of opportunity risks reproducing structural inequities within the coaching and academic landscape.

Sustained engagement in unpaid work also contributes to poor health (e.g., fatigue and burnout), particularly among individuals already facing high workload demands and job insecurity (Giunchi et al., 2016). Some scholars have further explained the toll that precarious and demanding working conditions take on romantic relationships and friendships, as well as on broader social connections (Wilson & Ebert, 2013). Over time, this dynamic may lead talented coach developers to withdraw from the field, undermining both individual well-being and the long-term sustainability of coach development initiatives. What may initially appear as a voluntary contribution can thus become an implicit expectation, unfairly and disproportionately borne by those least able to sustain it.

Coach development work further complicates traditional academic role boundaries, often occupying an ambiguous space between internal service, external consultancy, teaching, and community engagement. When this work is unpaid and informally recognized, it risks becoming invisible within institutional workload models and promotion criteria (Gordon et al., 2024). As a result, significant contributions to coach development may be undervalued or excluded from formal assessments of academic performance, limiting career progression and reinforcing inequitable workload distributions.

Recommendation 3: formalized recognition and workload allocation

Institutions and professional bodies should formally recognize coach development as legitimate academic and professional work by embedding it within workload models, appraisal systems, and promotion criteria. Clear categorization, whether as teaching, service, consultancy, or community engagement, would reduce ambiguity and prevent coach development from becoming invisible or disproportionately assigned to those in less secure positions. Formal recognition supports equity by ensuring that contributions are acknowledged consistently and transparently across career stages. The first step in achieving this is arguably to ensure greater representation of sport coaching and related disciplines on various decision-making committees. In our experience(s), university, department, or school-level leadership roles are typically filled by those who operate within the traditional areas of kinesiology/sport science (e.g., physiology, biomechanics, psychology) and possess a partial understanding of sports coaching. At the very least, leadership should consult sport coaching scholars to understand the realities and norms of the role with a view to creating bespoke allocation and recognition systems. The current blanket approach to citizenship fails to recognize the differences of this type of work within and across disciplines.

Recommendation 4: clarification of role boundaries and expectations

Clear institutional and professional guidelines are needed to delineate the boundaries between voluntary contribution, expected service, and professional consultancy in coach development work. Explicit articulation of expectations, including when work is undertaken, for whom, and under what conditions, would support more equitable participation and protect individuals from implicit pressures to undertake unpaid labor. Establishing shared norms and accountability mechanisms can help prevent the normalization of unpaid work and contribute to the long-term sustainability of coach development practices.

More formal structures (e.g., assigned mentors) and accountability systems (e.g., annual performance reviews) should place greater emphasis on the “bedding in” role that senior colleagues are expected to enact with new or junior academic staff (Beatson et al., 2022). This may entail invitations to coauthor manuscripts, co-teach, and contribute to projects and funding applications, as well as facilitating links with external stakeholders and integration with coach development activities. Generally, expectations should reflect the rhythm, flow, and fluid demands of work realities while remaining attentive to personal circumstance (i.e., connections, years post-doctorate) and career season.

Problem 3: sharing expertise in exchange for access

A further challenge arises when coach developers are expected to share their expertise without compensation in exchange for access to research settings, participants, or data. This practice is often framed as “mutually beneficial.” For example, coach developers provide development support, while institutions or organizations grant access for research purposes. Indeed, such research (e.g., action research or participatory collaborative approaches) exists and can offer substantial benefits. However, for clarity, we suggest that some arrangements raise significant professional, ethical, and methodological concerns, particularly when academics undertake coach development work without remuneration primarily to secure research opportunities. Put simply, there may well be short-term gains for the individual (e.g., access to clubs/coaches, data collection, affiliation with elite sport people/clubs), but we pose the question: “What is the longer-term impact on the field of coach development?”

High-quality coach development requires responsiveness to local cultures, constraints, and participant needs. When development work is positioned as a transactional means to gain access, there is a risk that delivery becomes less shaped by pedagogical or developmental priorities and more by the requirements of access agreements. This can compromise professional judgment and undermine the integrity of coach development practice. That is, it increases the likelihood of rendering pedagogical interactions and activities in cynical, inauthentic terms, primarily grounded in self-interest and a lack of concern for the legacy of such involvements. Coach development becomes counterproductive when it is viewed as a means to an end, driven by what individuals can gain rather than what they can give.

For academics, working for free as coach developers in exchange for access further blurs the boundary between research and service provision. Such blurring risks conflating roles, positioning the academic as a developer, collaborator, and researcher simultaneously. This raises ethical questions about power, consent, and voluntariness, particularly when participants may feel obliged to participate in research because of

the perceived value of the “free” development they are receiving. In this sense, unpaid labor may inadvertently create asymmetrical relationships that challenge principles of transparency and ethical research practice. However, we acknowledge that many scholars undertake numerous “enabling” roles in multiple worlds (e.g., academia, sport organizations) that precede research, and that opportunities and identities may evolve through active participation. For clarity, we are proposing a clearer distinction between research (i.e., collecting data and answering questions) and coach development work (i.e., providing knowledge and expertise).

Research ethics literature provides a useful basis for developing this concern. Guillemin and Gillam (2004) distinguished between “procedural ethics,” which is typically addressed through institutional approval processes, and “ethics in practice,” which refers to the situated ethical dilemmas that emerge during the conduct of research. This distinction is important because access-for-expertise arrangements may appear acceptable at the level of procedural ethics while still producing ethical tensions in practice. Similarly, insider research literature highlights how researchers who are already embedded in a setting or who occupy multiple roles within it must navigate ongoing relationships, prior knowledge, role conflict, power dynamics, and expectations of reciprocity (Floyd & Arthur, 2012; Holian & Coghlan, 2013). In coach development research, the academic may simultaneously be a researcher, educator, mentor, consultant, evaluator, and gatekeeper to valued knowledge (e.g., Jones et al., 2024). These roles are not inherently incompatible, but they do require explicit negotiation. When coach development is offered without remuneration in exchange for access, participants may struggle to distinguish developmental support from research participation, or feel subtle pressure to participate because they have benefited from the academic’s expertise. The ethical issue, therefore, is not simply whether consent has been formally obtained, but whether consent remains voluntary, informed, and free from relational or professional obligation.

Additionally, normalizing unpaid coach development as a route to research access contributes to the broader devaluation of both coaching and academic labor. It reinforces the expectation that expertise (particularly academic expertise) can be exchanged informally rather than recognized as skilled professional work. Over time, this expectation risks eroding professional standards and pressuring academics to absorb unpaid labor as part of their research, thereby disadvantaging those without the capacity to do so.

This concern is also connected to questions of power and reciprocity in community-campus and participatory research partnerships. Boser (2006) argued that participatory research creates distinctive ethical challenges because it involves social relations that traditional, distanced models of research ethics do not adequately capture. This is particularly relevant to coach development, where relationships with clubs, organizations, and coaches may be built through trust, informal exchange, and shared practical work. In such circumstances, the exchange of unpaid expertise for access can make reciprocity ambiguous: it may be unclear whether the academic is contributing as a coach developer, negotiating access as a researcher, fulfilling institutional service expectations, or cultivating future research opportunities. We therefore suggest that the ethical challenge lies less in the existence of multiple roles per se and more in whether those roles are disclosed, negotiated, resourced, and revisited throughout the research relationship. Without such clarity, access-for-expertise arrangements risk compromising transparency, consent, professional judgment, and the integrity of both coach development and research practice.

Recommendation 5: separation of coach development and research access agreements

Institutions, ethics committees, and professional bodies should require a clear separation between coach development provision and research access arrangements. Coach development should be commissioned, funded, or formally recognized as professional work, rather than implicitly exchanged for access to participants or settings. Explicit separation reduces role confusion, protects professional judgment, and ensures that participation in research is genuinely voluntary, transparent, and ethically sound. This is important for coaching scholars who often tap into their own or others' personal networks for service- and research-related activities. For example, researchers (e.g., Quick & Baghurst, 2025) have reported the strengthening of social bonds and the evolution of relational roles (e.g., researchers to friends) as a result of their extended and immersive fieldwork. Thus, it is important to remain cognizant of boundaries and wary of undertaking free labor.

Recommendation 6: greater ethical guidance on dual roles and unpaid expertise

Clear ethical guidance is needed to support academics who occupy dual roles as coach developers and researchers. Such guidance should discourage the use of unpaid coach development as a strategy to secure research access and instead promote principled approaches that recognize expertise as skilled labor. While it is perhaps inevitable that research opportunities arise from connections, in this instance, it is the intention of the relationships and “reasons for being” that we question. For example, are coach developers giving free expertise simply because they hope that it will lead to something in the future? Establishing expectations around compensation, role clarity, and disclosure would help safeguard against coercive dynamics, reinforce professional standards, and promote equity in who can undertake coach development and research activities. To promote equity, academic schools could reframe “service work” (i.e., coach development) as an organizational responsibility rather than an individual one. For example, institutions may leverage staff resources (e.g., professional services) to establish partnerships with sport organizations (e.g., clubs). Practically, this would provide structure that enables intentional planning for staff deployment (i.e., “who goes where, when, and for how long?”) and increase the scope for research impact. Here, one possible scenario is that the nature and duration of provision is negotiated between academics and external stakeholders, with staff receiving remuneration for hours worked.

Relatedly, we invite university leadership and policy actors to reflect on matters of “ownership” that are written into most academic contracts. We suggest a shift toward employment contracts that enable, rather than prohibit, the independent engagement with coach development services without sanctions or financial sacrifice. Within our own networks, colleagues are increasingly launching independent coach-development consultancy businesses in pursuit of additional income and real-world impact, and perhaps less so to support the various changes we have advocated here. Indeed, Quick and Baghurst (2025) discussed the significance of how coach developer roles materialize (e.g., personal companies and websites). Therefore, institutions should respect individual agency and the entitlements of staff and factor into citizenship and service appraisals non-university-governed

activities which contribute to esteem. This *may* hold some promise for recognizing and distributing work more equitably.

Conclusion

Coach development is a vital contributor to the professionalization of sports coaching. When delivered for free or undercompensated, it not only means that academics give away their expertise, but it also contributes to a host of problems, as outlined. Therefore, to safeguard both the field of sports coaching and the well-being of those who support it, universities, sports organizations, and coach developers must develop coherent frameworks to recognize, fund, and value this type of work. To be clear, we do not suggest that this work stop entirely. Instead, we suggest that a critical conversation among stakeholders is needed regarding the impact of this work. Finally, cultural change, institutional policy, and transparent compensation mechanisms will be key in ensuring that coach development remains a valued and professionalized feature of sport and higher education.

Author contributions

CRedit: **Simon Quick**: Conceptualization, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Timothy Baghurst**: Conceptualization, Methodology, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Callum Morgan**: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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ORCID

Simon Quick  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0331-0739>

Timothy Baghurst  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4551-6575>

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