Plan Overview

A Data Management Plan created using DMPonline

Title: Evaluating current and future heading regulations in football

Creator: Daniel Walker

Principal Investigator: Daniel Walker

Data Manager: Daniel Walker

Project Administrator: Daniel Walker

Affiliation: University of Bradford

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ORCID iD: 0000-0002-9369-6953

Project abstract:

This award will deliver an ambitious programme of behavioural and policy research examining how heading regulations in football are developed, implemented, and accepted across the game. By investigating governance, stakeholder attitudes, behavioural determinants of policy adherence, and public support for future risk-reducing strategies, the programme of research will generate evidence to inform safer football participation.

Football is played by more than 265 million players including over 12 million in England. While the sport has many benefits to physical and mental well-being, there is a unique risk in heading the ball. Repetitive heading of the football has been linked with dementia and other neurodegenerative diseases and therefore this project aims to make football safer by translating research excellence to societal impact.

Heading has always been lawful within the game, but despite the introduction of heading restrictions in several countries, little is known about stakeholder awareness, adherence, acceptability, or support for alternative risk-reduction strategies. This evidence gap limits the ability of governing bodies to develop effective and proportionate safety policies. Drawing on psychological theories of behaviour, this work will identify key determinants (capability, opportunity, motivation) that influence adherence to current heading restrictions and support for potential future heading regulations. It is likely that FAs and governing bodies will turn their attention to other risk-reducing strategies in the future, and this programme of work will identify stakeholder preferences and acceptability to inform the most effective and appropriate strategies for implementation.

Expected Outcomes: (i) Development of an evidence-base to inform decisions regarding current age-based heading regulations, (ii) Identification of behavioural and contextual factors influencing awareness, acceptance, and adherence to football risk-reducing strategies, (iii) Evidence-based recommendations for the design, implementation, and communication of future risk-reduction strategies across youth and adult football.

Aims and objectives: This award intends to inform policy change and practices in men’s, women’s, and youth football and will be achieved through two main objectives.

- Objective 1: Evaluate Current Policy
  - To assess awareness, acceptance, and adherence to heading restrictions in youth football and understand stakeholder perspectives on their effectiveness.
- Objective 2: Evaluate Stakeholder Preferences for Future Policy
  - To understand the preferences for future risk-reducing strategies in youth and adult football.

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Evaluating current and future heading regulations in football

Assessment of existing data

Provide an explanation of the existing data sources that will be used by the research project, with references

Football is the most popular sport with over 265 million players globally (FIFA, 2007), 12 million who play in England (The Football Association, 2025) with these numbers rising when accounting for non-organised football such as playing recreationally and during physical education in schools. At the same time, concerns over the long-term consequences associated with repeated head impacts have prompted three Football Associations (USA, Scotland, and England) to introduce heading restrictions in youth football (up to Under-12s). Despite these policy changes across the three FIFA Members, there remains limited evidence regarding their effectiveness and the awareness of and adherence to them by the public.

This programme of research will address an evidence gap by generating new knowledge of the effectiveness of current policy aimed at combatting the consequences of heading the ball in adolescence and adulthood. This work is timely as there is growing interest from the public, academia, and policymakers regarding brain health in football for current and former players. This work also aims to support prospective players as it will be the first comprehensive assessment of both the effectiveness and implementation of heading restrictions in youth football and the preferences and potential for future risk-reduction strategies, creating an evidence base capable of informing future policy nationally and internationally.

Provide an analysis of the gaps identified between the currently available and required data for the research

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The primary beneficiaries of this research are football players, their families, coaches, schools, clubs, governing bodies, healthcare professionals and policymakers. Findings will be relevant and beneficial to football clubs and their academies, but also for recreational participation in football and physical education in schools. By informing evidence-based approaches to brain health in football, we aim to support the wellbeing of footballers in England and overseas.

This programme will implement a two-step plan to promote optimal brain health in football: (1) evaluating current provisions and policies in football, (2) identifying preferences for future risk-reducing strategies. This plan will be achieved through the two developed work packages that will generate actionable evidence that can inform policy and practice. For example, the findings of this programme can inform future reviews of heading restrictions in England, Scotland, and USA, as well as in other nations where restrictions are currently not implemented.

In preparation for this programme of work, a Football Brain Health Advisory Board has been developed bringing together a wide-range of researchers, stakeholders, policymakers, and governing bodies. Outputs of the work will include peer-reviewed journal articles, infographics, policy briefs for Football Associations and policymakers as well as practical resources for football clubs and schools to use. Through these avenues, this project aims to translate scientific endeavour to real-world application and impact, in-turn contributing to safer, evidence-informed participation in football. Obtaining this award will allow me to make a critical step forward from early career to independent researcher.

Information on new data

Provide information on the data that will be produced or accessed by the research project

Quantitative Data

- We will obtain quantitative data on the preferences of different heading regulations from different key stakeholders.
- Therefore, data will be uploaded to Open Science Framework in SPSS files on these topics.

Qualitative Data

- This project will be interviewing players, parents, and coaches about their thoughts and feelings towards heading in football and the newly introduced heading restrictions in youth football. Therefore, there will be anonymised interview transcripts made available on Open Science Framework.

Quality assurance of data

Describe the procedures for quality assurance that will be carried out on the data collected at the time of data collection, data entry, digitisation and data checking.

The main point to highlight here is that all procedures will be documented in data collection. This will be reported in academic peer-reviewed journal articles that will allow other researchers the opportunity to replicate the study. They will also have raw data available on Open Science Framework so that we are transparent, and they are able to re-run data analysis should they wish to do so.

Backup and security of data

Describe the data security and backup procedures you will adopt to ensure the data and metadata are securely stored during the lifetime of the project.

The data will be stored safely on the researchers university OneDrive account.

Management and curation of data

Outline your plans for preparing, organising and documenting data.

All data will be made available on Open Science Framework following completion of the project. A glossary of terms will be provided to aid the interpretation of the data when needed, as well as the lead researcher's contact details should anyone wish to contact them with any queries relating to the data or analysis.

Difficulties in data sharing and measures to overcome these

Identify any potential obstacles to sharing your data, explain which and the possible measures you can apply to overcome these.

Participants have until a month after taking part in the study to request the withdrawal of their data. If they do so, then their data will be deleted immediately without having to give reason for doing so, and therefore their data will not be analysed and in-turn shared on Open Science Framework.

Secondly, it might be that during interviews, participants disclose something we deem too personal, or makes an individual too identifiable. The research team will make all efforts to anonymise the participant, but if we cannot, this data will not be shared either.

Consent, anonymisation and strategies to enable further re-use of data

Make explicit mention of the planned procedures to handle consent for data sharing for data obtained from human participants, and/or how to anonymise data, to make sure that data can be made available and accessible for future scientific research.

In the participant information sheets and consent forms it will be made explicit that data will be anonymised and uploaded on Open Science Framework. The data has the potential to provide indications for future policy of heading regulations and therefore the data should and will be retained and preserved so it is useable in subsequent studies as secondary data. Once uploaded to Open Science Framework, this data will be freely available for other researchers to conduct their own further analysis.

Copyright and intellectual property ownership

State who will own the copyright and IPR of any new data that you will generate.

The data will be the intellectual property of both the researcher and the University of Bradford.

Responsibilities

Outline responsibilities for data management within research teams at all partner institutions

The lead researcher will be responsible for the data that comes from this project.

Preparation of data for sharing and archiving

Are the plans for preparing and documenting data for sharing and archiving with the UK Data Service appropriate?

This data will be available on Open Science Framework, where researchers will have access to it.

Is there evidence that data will be well documented during research to provide highquality contextual information and/or structured metadata for secondary users?

The method of data collection will be reported in academic peer-reviewed journal articles. This will also include origin, circumstances, processing, and analysis of data.