

The FA is hamstrung as English clubs have too much power

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In an unusual attempt to pre-empt England's inevitable World Cup failure, the FA has published a report to investigate problems affecting the national team.

The report represents the findings of the [England Commission](#), a body launched in September 2013 by the new FA chairman, Greg Dyke, to understand why there were fewer players qualified to play for England at the elite level. It highlights how just 32% of players in the Premier League are qualified to play for England, compared to 69% two decades ago.

The Commission focuses on four main proposals: the introduction of Premier League "B teams" into English football; the development of strategic loans between clubs; "home-grown" player requirements; and work visa restrictions that would prevent clubs having more than two non-EU players.

Plan B

The B teams proposal is the most controversial. The FA wants to add a "League 3" in 2016/17, made up of the top half of the Conference (the current fifth tier) and ten Premier League B sides. But many feel this [ignores tradition](#) and the pride that fans of smaller clubs feel towards their team.

Would Conference fans really rather watch their side play Arsenal reserves rather than a traditional rival? The jury is out.

No matter, says the FA, just look at the results. B teams are permitted in both Spain and Germany – Barcelona B and Real Madrid B both compete in La Liga Segunda, for instance – and home-qualified players have accrued far more minutes of competitive playing time than their English counterparts.

It's true that Spain has dominated over the past decade, but the Commission fails to take into account the structure of La Liga that contributes to this. Governance in Spain was completely deregulated and resources have been concentrated in the elite: Barcelona and Real Madrid. Many clubs in Spain now cannot afford expensive foreign players. The extraordinary generation of Barca talent – Xavi, Iniesta and co – has masked the failings of Spanish football.

In Germany, the national football federation is more powerful and regulation is controlled and centralised. All 36 Bundesliga clubs have to have an academy, and these academies have to recruit 12 boys that are eligible for the national team each year. Since this rule was introduced in 2002, the number of Germany-qualified players in the league has increased.

Fighting the authorities

England's football clubs have been arguing with the FA more or less since the sport's inception more than 150 years ago. If we're looking for the real reason for England's failures over the years, this is it.

Soon after the FA was established in 1861, clubs challenged amateur principles and campaigned to pay players. This contest was eventually overcome with the formation of the Football League in 1888, which established a new competition run by the clubs themselves. As the popularity of the sport grew, the number of teams increased. A second division was added in 1892 and the Southern League was incorporated in 1920. Not only

did this establish a longstanding club tradition in English football, it also entrenched the contest between clubs and FA.

This contest was spectacularly exposed in the late 1980s as top clubs sought to command more television money from the Football League. In 1992, fuelled by Sky's millions, these elites broke away to form the Premier League, with the full support of the FA.

In other nations, notably Germany, Spain and Italy, the FA equivalent still controls the football league. This enables them to impose conditions on the clubs, or else they're out of the league. Germany's academy rule, for instance, is imposed by their FA rather than the Bundesliga. A similar rule in the UK would need to be introduced by the Premier League. And why would a league focused on developing the best global TV product want to prevent foreign stars joining its clubs?

In England, the division between the Football League and FA has hamstrung both. It has given more power to the clubs, enabling them to establish a separate elite league. Yet it has also left the FA with little power to enforce home-qualified players onto the elite clubs.

The irony is that the FA reinforced its weakness with the establishment of the Premier League. They did not take control, but relinquished power. Now they have no authority to enforce home-qualified players on the elite clubs. Instead they are attempting to tinker with the football league structure.

Unfortunately, the oldest professional league in the world is a longstanding tradition and many fans have already protested at the proposals. This is only likely to enhance the power of the Premier League teams as the proposals will bolster their academies at the expense of the Football League clubs. And all this will do is further weaken the power of the FA.