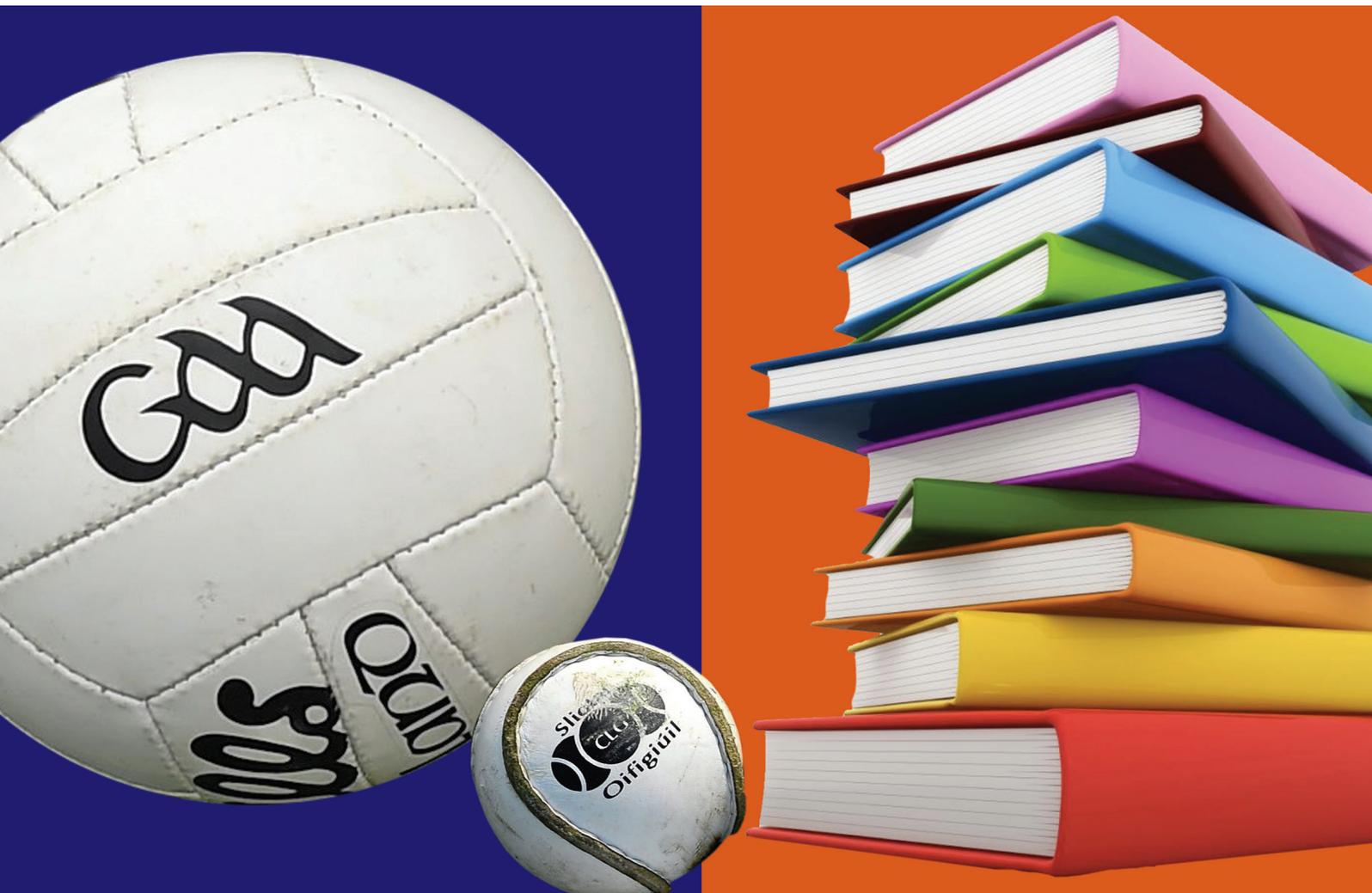


NEVER ENOUGH TIME

THE EXPERIENCE OF THIRD LEVEL STUDENT
COUNTY GAA PLAYERS



GPA Student Report
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Waterford Institute of Technology



THE BEST YEARS IN A YOUNG PLAYER'S LIFE



COLLEGE years can represent the most enjoyable and, in many ways influential, years of a young person's life.

Along with the importance of third-level education itself, the taste of independent living, a thriving social scene and the development of life-long relationships are only some of the essential lived experiences enjoyed during a student's time on campus.

For senior county players the experience is equally enriching. They often play a special role within the college sporting community, both as a key member of Sigerson or Fitzgibbon Cup panels and as a young ambassador for their county squad.

However, life as a student county player is not without significant challenges, particularly for players who are committed to multiple teams with club, county and college. This report was compiled essentially by listening to those players, talking to relevant stakeholders and developing a number of proposals which we believe can improve their experience of college life.

Like every other student this is a very exciting period in the life of a county footballer or hurler but there is a reality that, unlike their peers, these individuals have to manage a dual career - as an aspiring student and as an aspiring county footballer or hurler with all the attendant demands.

While the implications of that dual commitment are detailed in the report, the aim is not merely to highlight specific problems but rather to facilitate solutions which can enhance the lives of a significant cohort of young county players.

Over one third of the GPA membership are student players and the congested fixture period between January and March, when these players are most in demand, has been identified by the GAA as requiring serious attention.

However, to succeed in achieving solutions to the difficulties which may arise during this period, compromise will be required from the various stakeholders to ensure that positive changes can be made where necessary.

I would like to personally thank the players, academic staff, county board officials, county and college managers who took the time to help inform this document. Sincere thanks to Aoife Lane of the Waterford Institute of Technology who compiled the report. I am optimistic that your efforts will help improve the lives of many young players and assist them greatly in their long-term personal development.

Dessie Farrell
Chief Executive Officer,
Gaelic Players Association
April 2015



GPA STUDENT REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

WHY THIRD LEVEL COUNTY PLAYERS?

Third level students represent an important sub group of county players who at a young age are striving to manage a dual career (personal development of the athlete off the field of play) incorporating personal, academic and playing responsibilities. The purpose of this report is to describe the experience of third level student county players who are members of the GPA; specifically the challenges they encounter in their playing and personal lives and how they engage with the GPA.

WHAT DATA WAS USED?

Data used in this report was collated from several sources, namely the annual GPA player survey, student scholarship questionnaires and student workshops. Additional feedback was gathered from a number of other stakeholders including academic staff, GAA officials, and third level and county managers.

WHAT WERE THE KEY FINDINGS?

40% of students in 2014-2015 stated that they have had to repeat exams in college and 14% have had to repeat an entire academic year, higher than the approximate 6% rate across all students reported by the Higher Education Authority (HEA).

55% of student county players indicated that they feel under pressure to represent their college team.

50% of student county players reported that they feel overwhelmed by their commitments.

41% are under pressure from their county manager due to their commitment to the college team and 36% are regularly torn between their county and college teams.

Over 50% of students rate county playing commitments as the most important facet of their lives compared to fewer than 40% who rate academic studies as their first priority.

40% of players revealed they would like more time for their sport, 51% more time to have a part time job, 56% more time to devote to their studies and 61% more time for family and friends.

A recent survey of the entire GPA membership - including student members - revealed that college competitions ranked lower than inter-county and club in terms of importance to players. 58% of players said inter-county competitions were most important, 41% rated the club competitions as most important while only 1% rated college competitions at the top. 87% of GPA student members rated the college competitions as third preference in terms of importance after county and club.

50%

are often overwhelmed by their commitments

Sporting Structures

Players receive inconsistent messages about training loads, and are often required to travel home midweek for sessions, which in their opinion could be carried out in college.

56%

would like more time to devote to their studies

Academic Structures

34% of players acknowledged positive support from colleges but there remains a lack of understanding and co-ordinated action from the academic community to the needs and challenges of the student county player.

40%

have had to repeat exams

55%

are experiencing financial difficulty

Funding Structures

55% of players are experiencing financial difficulty, only 29% have a part time job compared to 55% of the general student population and expenditure is higher across food, transport, communication and health care for student county players.

14%

have had to repeat an entire academic year

61%

would like more time for family and friends

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR STUDENT COUNTY PLAYERS?

For most players who are managing a dual career between intense sporting commitments and academic responsibilities, the indications are that they believe their sporting career is more important than their studies while there is very little time apparent for family life or friends. Students may not be aware about challenges they experience, and their subsequent use of and identified need for personal development, and emotional health and wellbeing support is low.

The needs and challenges of student county players are such that those who influence the education, sporting and personal lives of these players must all consider how they can contribute

to improving the experience of these players during their college years.

Initial consultation with these stakeholders (n=34) revealed recognition that action is required to manage the expectations of this playing cohort, particularly in relation to the playing and training requirements of players across college, club and county competitions.

One consistent item of feedback following consultation across a broad spectrum of stakeholders was the need to strive towards the designation of specific competition windows in the GAA calendar thus reducing the potential for players to have to play with numerous teams.



PROPOSALS ARISING FROM THIS REPORT

COMPETITION STRUCTURES

- Restructure fixture programme between January and March to avoid overlapping competitions.
- No games on consecutive days in Sigerson/ Fitzgibbon. Play semi-final on Wednesday night and final the following Saturday.
- Later start for National Football and Hurling League competitions
- During the college 'window', college players should not train with county or club during the week (weekends only). This change specifically aimed at the serious issue of players being required to travel home for county training during college week.
- Examine benefits of changing U21 grade to U20 in hurling and football
- U20 football competition to be played from mid March to finish end of April. U20 hurling to stay in same time period.
- Consider case for U20 players not to play with senior panels during U20 campaign; lowered age limit would naturally reduce the number of players realistically pushing for senior places
- Raise awareness of recovery strategies for athletes
- Remove college teams from pre-season inter-county competitions
- Outside of weather delays, no college games to be played during December (leagues to be played Oct-Nov)

GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

ENGAGEMENT WITH STAKEHOLDERS

- Discuss GPA Student Report and Proposals with GAA in context of overall review of fixtures
- Ensure that managers are made aware of, and are involved in identifying solutions to the challenges facing student county players.
- Support the development of a player welfare mentor position at county level as recommended by the GAA's Medical, Scientific and Welfare Committee to help manage the training and playing commitments of student county players representing multiple teams.
- Establish GPA representation on the GAA Higher Education group, which should facilitate engagement with other entities that impact on the wellbeing of the student county player, such as managers and educators. It is also important that the GPA support calling for and are involved in dialogue between Student Sport Ireland and the HEA to identify policy and strategies that will help the student athlete balance their sporting and academic commitments, potentially through flexible delivery modes or a formal academic mentoring system.



GPA STUDENT PLAYER REPRESENTATION

The GPA has established a County Player Student Council to ensure the views of playing members are well represented and communicated.

They will review education policy and strategy

within the GPA and treatment of student county players in third level institutions.

The GPA will also request all county squads elect a student representative to serve on the GPA Rep leadership team.

POLICY INITIATIVE

The Athlete Friendly Institution Protocol, which was developed by the GPA to protect the wellbeing and academic needs of student county players, is being piloted in 2015. This represents a useful contribution to the development of a co-ordinated policy of support for elite athletes across Ireland.

FINANCIAL SUPPORT

The GPA will initiate a fundraising campaign specifically for education in 2015 to increase support available to those who need it most. It is also important to continue to highlight the requirement in team charters that ensures regular payment of mileage expenses to college students and to advocate for a consistent mileage rate. Payments of grants and scholarships from various entities to student county players should be co-ordinated to facilitate appropriate financial and budgetary planning.

FURTHER RESEARCH TO CONSIDER

- Issues related to managing a dual career with the general playing body.
- The various scholarship systems in third level institutions in Ireland, and how this correlates with international best practice for elite student athletes.
- How academic and sporting structures might be improved to meet the needs of student county players.

WHY THIRD LEVEL STUDENTS?

The Gaelic Players Association provides support and services for senior county players in hurling and football. Third level students represent an important sub group of county players who at a young age are striving to manage a dual career incorporating personal, academic and playing responsibilities that extend beyond those experienced by the general student cohort.

There is often a lack of support for the student athlete from the various entities in which they live, play and learn, thus reconciling the various demands placed upon them is challenging. The

GPA currently award scholarships to their student members to support their academic development and provide an educational advice service. They also provide additional supports in areas such as personal development, career coaching, wellbeing services and managing the challenges experienced in third level education.

The purpose of this report is to describe the experience of third level student county players who are members of the GPA; specifically the challenges they encounter and how they engage with the GPA.

WHAT DATA WAS USED IN THIS REPORT?

Scholarship Surveys

at the beginning of each calendar year, third level students submit a scholarship application to the GPA, which contains a number of questions about their experience in college while representing their county in hurling and/or football. Data from 2012-2013, 2013-2014 and 2014-2015 were used in this report. Responses were very similar across all surveys so data is primarily presented as an approximate across years unless specified.

Student Workshops

to generate a more detailed description and subsequent understanding of the student county player experience, ten student workshops were carried out throughout Ireland in Galway, Limerick (n=2), Belfast (n=2), Dublin (n=3), Carlow and Cork.

GPA Player Surveys

to register their membership for the GPA, all players must complete a form, which includes general questions about engagement with the GPA, specific player needs, and player wellbeing.

WHO TOOK PART IN THIS STUDY?

The table below displays the characteristics of the 1,049 players who responded to the student scholarship questionnaires in 2012 and 2013. Data is also included from the recent 2014-2015 survey, which included 479 students. It is likely that these were not independent samples, but questions were specific to each academic year.

As well as these scholarship surveys, a total of 1,636 students responded to the national GPA player surveys between 2012 and 2015, while 214 student county players took part in the ten student workshops carried out in 2014.

Student Scholarship Questionnaire Participants

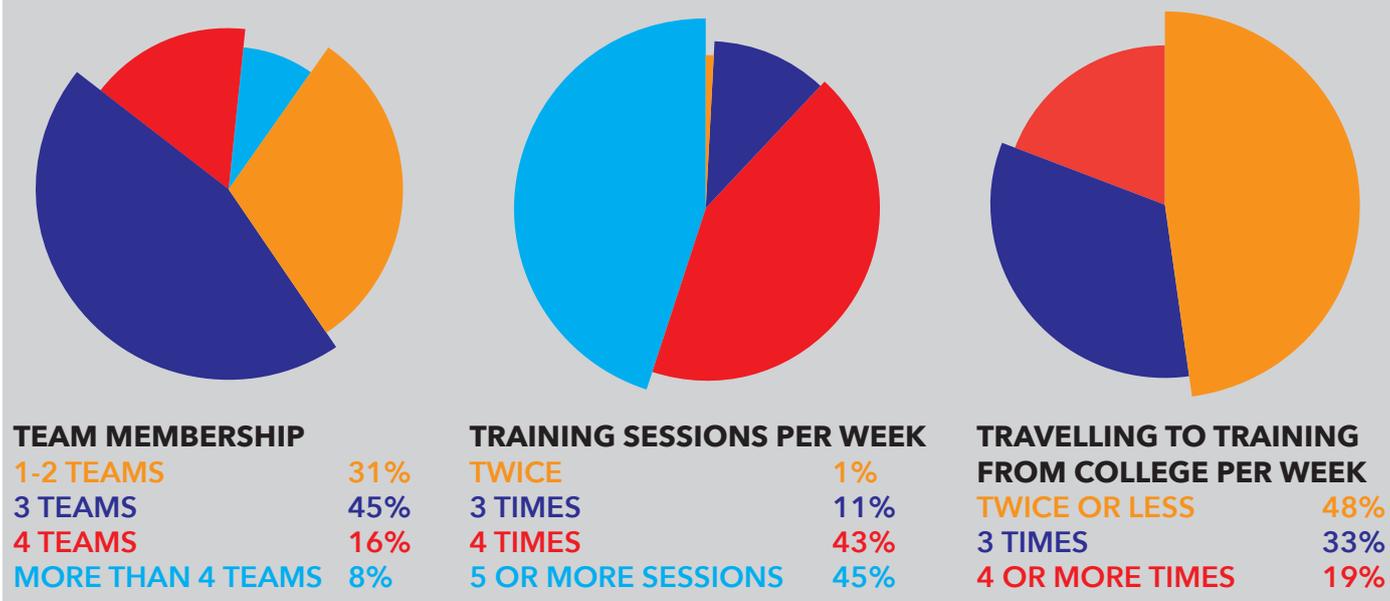
	2012-2013 (n=473)	2013-2014 (n=576)
Hurling	46	43.8
Football	54	56
Undergraduate	76.3	75.3
Postgraduate	21.2	21.8
Business/Accounting/Finance	21.3	24
Education/Teaching	18	16.8
Sport Related	17.5	14.4
Engineering	12.2	11.3
Arts/Humanities/Social/Law	10.6	11.3
Science	12.4	12
Technology/Computing	3.8	4.7

Students also reported on their participation in sport. The table below illustrates that over two thirds of players represented at least three teams in the previous year, 89% trained at least four times per week and 52% travelled from college to training at least three times every week, travelling on average 300km per week.

In a GAA Report on Player Burnout, which was published in 2007*, it was stated that preventing

burnout 'will require limiting training and playing activity among young players' and facilitating 'time for the adequate physiological and psychological recovery of players'. Involvement in multiple teams at club, college and county level, exposes student county players to a variety of training regimes and limited recovery, which lessens the benefits accrued physiologically and psychologically.

Playing commitment of student county players



HOW DOES THE GPA SUPPORT THE STUDENT BODY?

In the annual GPA survey, engagement with the association and player experiences with GPA services, are monitored. In 2014, analysis showed that a greater proportion of students (53%) availed of GPA programmes in the previous 12 months than other members (38%).

Programme use increased from 37% among students in 2013 and is manifested mainly in higher use of scholarships and receiving other educational advice and support, which is understandably more relevant for student members. Availing of dental protection and cardiac screening is also markedly higher among student members.

Students were almost unanimous in their support for the accessibility of the GPA overall and their respective GPA representatives. Furthermore, students, who took part in this study were thankful of this opportunity where their 'voice and opinion were being heard and taken into consideration' and were aware that the 'GPA is there to turn to and is looking out for players best interests'.

It was noted that 'concerns would not be heard but for these (GPA) workshops'.

37%

of students availed of GPA programmes in 2013

38%

of other GPA members availed of programmes

53%

of students availed of GPA programmes in 2014

* Report on the Task Force on Player Burnout (2007). GAA: Dublin, Ireland.

A small number of students (3.5%) indicated that there were opportunities to expand the Player Development Programme. Suggestions included providing employment, internship or placement opportunities for students and advocating for greater academic support for county players while at college. (It should be noted that the GPA has commenced a programme of advocacy and while this is on a smaller scale, it is something players should be made aware of, possibly through the GPA Reps Panel on each county squad). Furthermore, approximately one quarter of student players (22%) did concede that there were areas of their life that they were experiencing difficulties

Programme use

	Students (%)	Other members (%)
Education Advice	4.6 (25)	1.3 (19)
Education Support	3.4 (19)	1.9 (27)
Scholarships	25.5 (139)	3.7 (51)
Personal Development Coaching	2.0 (11)	2.5 (36)
Cardiac Screening	7.9 (43)	3.9 (55)
Dental Protection	14.9 (81)	5.7 (79)

with. These are illustrated below for students and other GPA members. Financial support is a considerably greater concern for student players while they are also more likely to cite concerns about emotional health, stress/anxiety and self-confidence. In total, 10% of students experienced challenges in these three areas, which

are all related to emotional wellbeing, compared to 7.6% of other members. Also, a number of students in the student workshops indicated the need for 'mental health/psychological' support services from the GPA and 25% of students felt they had a strong sense of belonging in life compared to 46% of other members.

Challenges experienced by GPA members

	Students (%)	Other members (%)
Finance	16.2 (88)	8.4 (118)
Employment	4.2 (23)	6.3 (87)
Stress/Anxiety	5.5 (30)	4.0 (56)
Self Confidence	2.4 (13)	2.1 (29)
Relationships	1.8 (10)	2.2 (31)
Mental Health	2.0 (11)	1.5 (21)

Less than 10% of students felt that gambling was a problem in their squad while 36% felt that it was an issue in general amongst GAA players. While the perception of a gambling problem in the immediate playing environment is low, there is a greater acknowledgement by students of a gambling problem in general in their sport.

HOW ARE STUDENT COUNTY PLAYERS MANAGING ACADEMIC AND SPORTING COMMITMENTS?

The majority of students (96-98%) are happy with their course choice although about 17% in 2014-2015 did indicate that they came under pressure from others to select their courses.

This pressure was mostly exerted by parents (33%) and colleges (40%) with the remainder attributed to identifying a course with good job prospects. 40% of students in the latest survey stated that they have had to repeat exams in college and 14% have had to repeat an entire

academic year. This is considerably higher than data from the Higher Education Authority (HEA), which revealed an approximate 4-6% repeat rate across all third level students in Ireland.

In the 2014-2015 survey, 72% of student county players were representing their college team. These students were asked directly about how they manage their sporting and academic commitments at college. Findings included:

- 40% of students have had to repeat exams in college and 14% have had to repeat an entire academic year.
- 58% of players find it difficult to manage all of their commitments (college, sport, relationships, and work) while 50% of them claim to be 'overwhelmed' by those commitments.
- Almost half of student players concede that their involvement in sport affects their academic performance (45%) and attendance at college (43%) - 2012-2013 and 2013-2014.
- 55% of respondents indicated that they feel under pressure to represent their college team.
- 41% of players are under pressure from their

county manager due to their commitments with their college team.

- 28% of players received a scholarship from their college or another source
- 73% of players in receipt of scholarships are subsequently under pressure to represent their college team.
- 36% of student county players are regularly torn between playing and training for their college and their county.
- 34% of respondents acknowledged the

positive support that they receive from their college to help them manage their academic commitments.

- 13% of student county players self-reported poor well-being using an index developed by the World Health Organisation.
- 54% of players are stressed at least once per month.
- Approximately 8-12% of student players are unsatisfied with some aspect of their life (studies, relationships, emotional health and wellbeing and sporting career).

In 2014-2015, 40% of players revealed they would like more time for their sport, 51% more time to have a part time job and 56% more time to devote to their studies.

Similarly, in workshop sessions many players indicated that they did not have time to study and complete assignments to the standard they would wish to, or that was necessary to pass. It was apparent that these county players 'never have enough time' and that 'a huge amount of time is given up for sport'.

Attendance at college was mainly affected by travelling to, and playing in college games and the tiredness experienced due to county playing and training commitments, particularly for those students who have a large commute to their college.

One player experienced 'feeling so drained that even if you went in (to class) you would not be capable of concentrating', another stated they were 'too tired mentally and physically' to attend class.

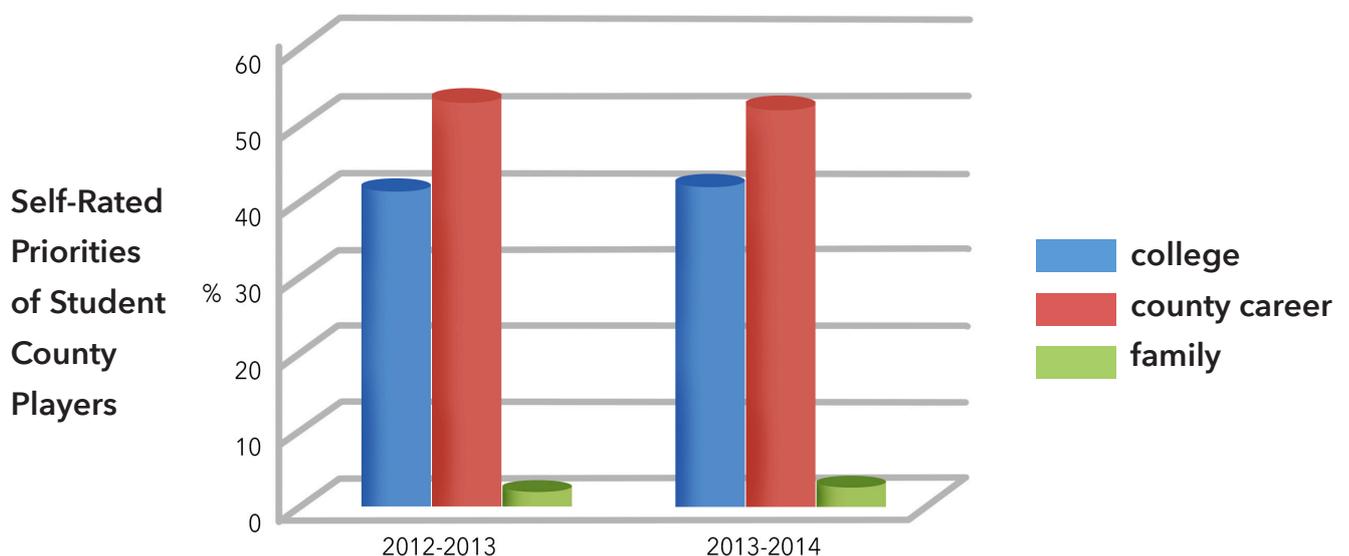
Player's sleep is often affected by training (31% regularly have difficulty sleeping) and others had to engage in recovery sessions the morning after

training, which both resulted in absence from class.

Approximately half of students in both 2012-2013 and 2013-2014 scholarship surveys rated county playing commitments as the most important facet of their life, compared to just under 40% who rated their academic studies as their first priority. One player offered a sentiment expressed by many that the 'time devoted to sport is much higher than to studies'.

Finally, only 2% of student players rated family life and relationships as the area of their life that mostly pre-occupies them. This suggests that players are not allocating sufficient time to this aspect of their life, which is a concern because players may not, as a result, be managing the expectations of their family, partners and friends, which could result in another source of stress and worry.

Indeed, in 2014-2015, 61% of players stated that they would like more time to spend with their family and friends. The European Commission (2012) stated that dual career athletes should be facilitated to establish healthy relationships and a positive role in society as well as to pursue sporting and academic excellence.

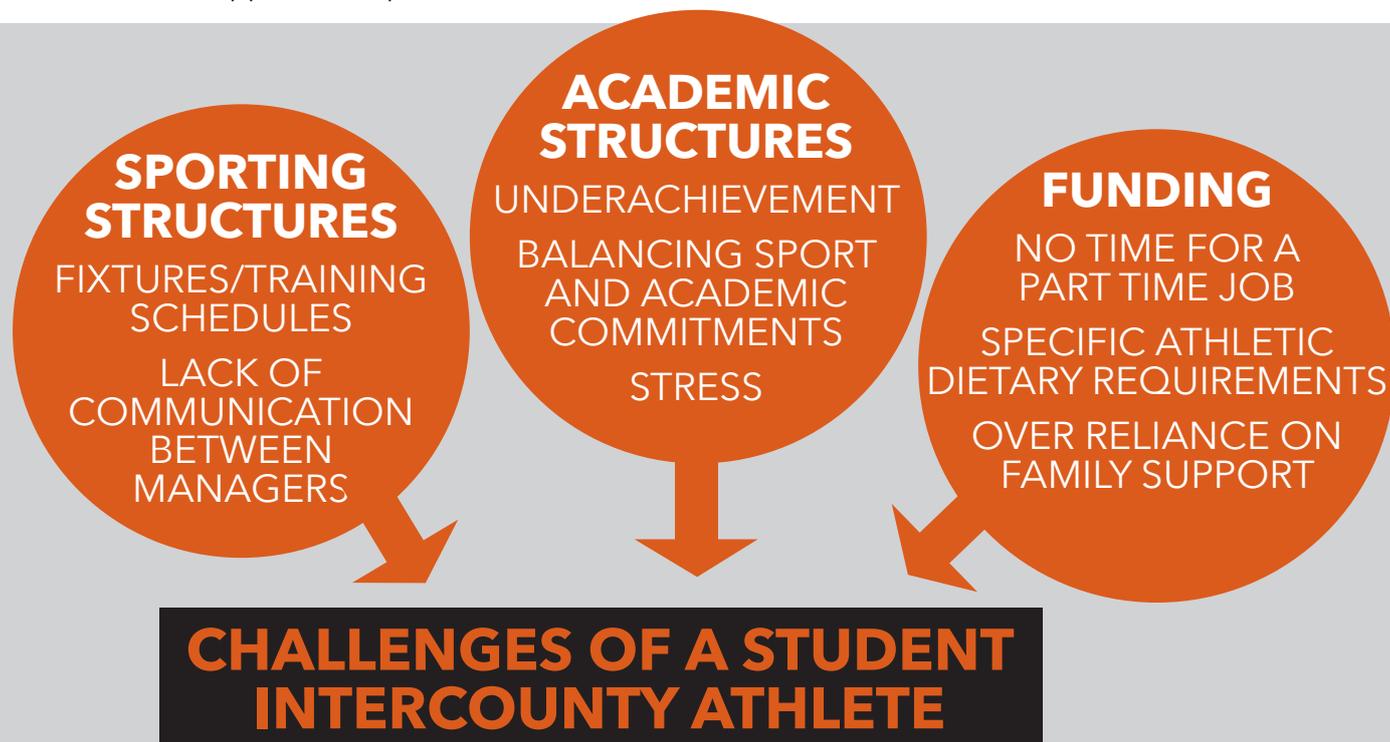


* EU Guidelines on Dual Careers of Athletes (2012). Recommended policy actions in support of dual careers in high-performance sports. Brussels: Sport Unit of the DG for Education and Culture of the European Commission.

WHAT ARE THE MAIN CHALLENGES EXPERIENCED BY STUDENT COUNTY PLAYERS?

Workshops, which focused on the challenges experienced by student county players highlighted issues that were apparent in questionnaire data

around sporting, and academic structures and sufficient funding to support education and sport commitments.



SPORTING STRUCTURES

In relation to sporting structures, players remarked that the lack of a consistent plan in relation to their playing and training schedules was a considerable challenge for them.

While there are standard fixtures for league and championship games, players do not always have a clear training plan for college and county teams, which greatly inhibits their ability to manage and balance their sporting and academic commitments.

Furthermore, many players are required to undertake additional gym and training sessions. Players suggested that many of these sessions could take place remotely at college if there

was greater communication and understanding displayed by team managers.

This same issue extended to receiving inconsistent messages and lack of consistent standards and thinking from management and coaching personnel across and within teams about commitment and training loads.

Consequently, players are often frustrated, tired, stressed, and need more rest, due to extensive and repeated training.

During the workshops it was noticeable that players put themselves under pressure not to let people down, particularly in their role as a county player.

ACADEMIC STRUCTURES

In an academic context, players were very aware that they underperformed at college (missing classes, not doing well in assessments, failing exams), and were equally very concerned about this. Players, particularly those who are less well established on their county panel, expressed the struggle and stress that they experience trying to balance college and

sporting responsibilities:

'I find it difficult at times to get a balance between sport and studying. Sometimes I feel I should have studied more but due to training/games, it can be difficult.'

'I train and compete nearly six days a week. Sometimes it's impossible to find time to properly dedicate to my course.'

Again, players felt that they were letting people (lecturers, family) down, but also alluded to a lack of support from college authorities, and a lack of understanding about their specific needs and challenges as county players. Student players felt that they 'do not have the same amount of time to study and complete work due to training and matches'.

FUNDING EDUCATION AND SPORT

In 2014-2015, players were asked to rate their level of financial difficulty; 55% of players were in some or serious financial difficulty compared to 43% of the general student population in Ireland*.

Financial concerns also manifested in workshops and related mainly to the inability of players to find and have time for part time work, due to their playing and training commitments.

Subsequently, players are reliant on scholarship money and family support to manage the general costs of education, such as fees and accommodation.

The Irish student contribution fee (the second

highest tuition fee in Europe) has increased by 37.5% since 2011 and, will increase by a further 12.5% in 2015-16. Concurrently, student income has decreased by 26% since 2010 while overall student expenditure has remained stable*. Student county players have additional expenses including funding special dietary requirements and travel costs.

On average, county players spend more on food, transport, communication, and health compared to the general student population.

Players do receive travel expenses and scholarships but payment is irregular and often insufficient to cover the costs incurred particularly in relation to pre and post game/training nutrition.

Also, only 29% of players have a part time job. In the general student population, 55% of students have a part time job, which equates to one fifth of their income while in college.

As a result, 70% of players are under financial pressure with many excessively reliant on their families to financially support their standard education and additional sporting costs.

In quite a lot of instances due to economic difficulties, this is a challenge for families, and subsequently is a source of stress for players.

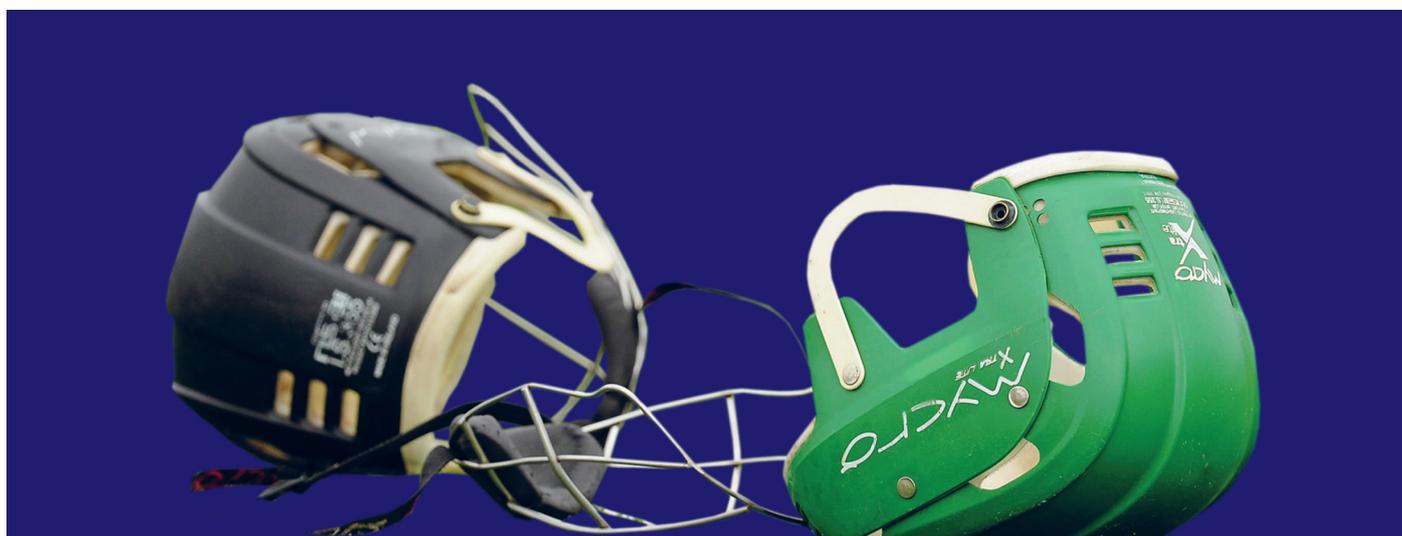
Average Monthly Expenditure of Student County Players v General Student Population

	Overall Student population (€)	County players (€)
Accommodation	334	291
Food	177	213
Transport	99	216
Communication	33	58
Health	33	70

'I find it difficult at times to get a balance between sport and studying.'

Sometimes I feel I should have studied more but due to training/games, it can be difficult.'

'I train and compete nearly six days a week. Sometimes it's impossible to find time to properly dedicate to my course.'



* Harmon, D & Foubert, O (2013). Eurostudent Survey V: A Report on the Living and Social Conditions of Higher Education Students in Ireland.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR STUDENT COUNTY PLAYERS?

Student players were very happy with this opportunity to engage with the GPA and seem keen to see the outcome of this work. The association has quite a lot to offer this cohort, which is apparent from very favourable student perceptions of the GPA and from current programme use.

The latter is weighted heavily towards educational support through scholarships and other general support and advice structures but students are experiencing financial difficulties, are stressed, frustrated, under pressure, and are finding it hard to manage and balance sporting and academic commitments, which suggests that other services must be better utilised and new services provided.

The needs and challenges of student county players are such that those who influence the education, sporting and personal lives of these players

must all consider how they can contribute to improving the experience of these players during their college years.

To this end, the GPA has commenced engagement with these key influencers, namely with representatives from the third level sector, the GAA centrally, county board officials and county and college team managers (n=34).

There was recognition among this group that student county players are 'at the pin of their collar' trying to balance sporting and academic commitments, that they are often prioritising sport over their studies, they are receiving 'mixed message from managers and backroom teams', and that some practices such as traveling home midweek for club and county training, and overlapping fixtures across different competitions with no rest periods, were particularly unhelpful, often leading to

'exhaustion, stress, fatigue and drop out'.

It was acknowledged that a supportive academic environment, including flexibility from lecturers in some formalised system would be beneficial for these players and that current training and playing loads should be revised.

There was a general consensus that action is required to 'manage the expectations' placed upon these talented young players to ensure that they succeed academically while in college.

Equally, players appear willing to engage with the GPA and these other stakeholders, to identify ways that they can manage the challenges they experience and also, to guide and be involved in decision-making that relates to their position as student athletes.

For most players who are managing a dual career,



their sporting career is more important than academic responsibilities with very little time apparent for family life or friends.

This detracts from a holistic student experience where the student engages with institutional and community life and develops life skills that enhance the development and maintenance of positive relationships in the home, work and sporting environment.

The additional challenges of being a county player, including playing and training commitments, recovery, fatigue, dietary modification, and travel are magnified among student players as they also strive to represent their college team.

These players, who are prioritising their sporting career, whether by choice or demand, consequently often lack the necessary time and energy to perform and attend well at college, and the finance to support their education and

independence.

Players are very concerned about their academic performance, but feel unable to commit the time required to resolve this. It is inevitable that student county players are under considerable stress as they attempt to represent multiple teams, adhere to a number of training schedules, successfully progress through their academic studies, and finance standard daily, education and additional sporting expenses.

There is a disconnect between players expressions about challenges they experience, in particular in relation to balancing college and sporting life, and their sense of belonging, and their subsequent use of and identified need for personal development, personal counselling and emotional health and wellbeing support. It is likely that student players are not associating the

problems they are very clearly experiencing as emotional health concerns, or with the services that could relieve or alleviate some of these issues.

This is not surprising; students and young men often find it hard to recognise and acknowledge such problems and, in this instance, there is likely considerable difficulty in finding the time to use and access services that might be supportive.

In many instances, players feel they are not being treated with respect; they are being undermined and taken for granted. They have identified that they have greater concerns and face more challenges than the general student cohort.

They require more support, including greater consistency in relation to payment of expenses and scholarships, consideration of training loads and requirements, communication between



multiple managers and above all, need to be facilitated by academic and playing authorities to perform better at college while at the same time progressing their sporting career.

At the college level, many student county players receive scholarships, but the terms and nature of these vary including in relation to expectations of the student player in receipt of the scholarship award.

Players at the very minimum need to be fully informed of the context of their scholarship but it is important also that all colleges commit to helping their award recipients to balance their sporting and academic commitments.

In a playing context, it was recommended by the GAA Medical, Scientific and Welfare Committee and subsequently by the Minor Review Working Group* that a 'player welfare mentor' be appointed in every county to ensure the staged, long-term development of young county players.

This role should encompass the protection and management of the student county player. It was also recommended that managers should sign up to a player welfare charter indicating the importance of their role in protecting the young player.

Both county and college managers and coaches have a considerable responsibility to the

player in relation to managing their training load.

One recommendation that was forthcoming from players was for their respective managers/coaches to agree on one strength and conditioning programme that they could carry out in the college setting.

This arrangement requires co-operation and engagement between managers and players and ultimately transfers responsibility to the player but their evident commitment to their sporting career and their desire for respect suggests they will respond accordingly.

Reconciling college and sport is one of the biggest challenges that exist for student county players and a solution will require input and learning for players, managers and college authorities (particularly sporting sections). The Higher Education Authority (HEA) in Ireland maintain that all students should have an excellent learning experience while there is a consensus in Europe that young elite athletes are offered a quality education in parallel to their sporting commitments. According to this study, the majority of student county players are not enjoying a high quality learning experience and require more support from their respective academic and sporting environments.

There is overall, an absence of planning and consideration for student athletes and how they

engage with their education in the Irish third level sector, which was deemed a 'laissez-faire' approach in a European review carried out in 2012.** Action, which has been specified by Student Sport Ireland, is required on a national level to ensure young athletes move successfully through the developmental pathway for their sport.

This is especially relevant in the amateur context of Gaelic games where county players are required to commit and play for multiple teams at a very high level while they are a full time student.

In several countries across Europe, student athletes can avail of part time or flexible college programmes⁵ while in America, the National Collegiate Athletic Association are committed to the pursuit of sporting and academic excellence in a collegiate model where students balance their academic, social and sporting experiences.

This report highlights that a similar commitment is required in Ireland to ensure that student county players and other student athletes are given equal opportunities to learn, play and succeed in life and on the sporting field.

* Minor Review Workgroup Interim Report (2014). GAA: Dublin, Ireland.

** Caput-Jogunica, R et al., (2012).

Comparative analysis: support for student athletes and the guidelines for universities in South-East Europe. *Sport Science* (5)1: 21-26.



PROPOSALS ARISING FROM THIS REPORT

The GPA has considered the implications of this research and has identified the following priority action areas:

COMPETITION STRUCTURES

- **Restructure fixture programme between January and March to avoid overlapping competitions.**
- **No games on consecutive days in Sigerson/Fitzgibbon. Play semi-final on Wednesday night and final the following Saturday.**
- **Later start for National Football and Hurling League competitions**
- **During the college 'window', college players should not train with county or club during the week (weekends only). This change specifically aimed at the serious issue of players being required to travel home for county training during college week.**
- **Examine benefits of changing U21 grade to U20 in hurling and football**
- **U20 football competition to be played from mid March to finish end of April. U20 hurling to stay in same time period.**
- **Consider case for U20 players not to play with senior panels during U20 campaign; lowered age limit would naturally reduce the number of players realistically pushing for senior places**
- **Raise awareness of recovery strategies for athletes**
- **Remove college teams from pre-season inter-county competitions**
- **Outside of weather delays, no college games to be played during December (leagues to be played Oct-Nov)**

GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

Engagement with Stakeholders:

- Discuss GPA Student Report and Proposals with GAA in context of overall review of fixtures
- Ensure that managers are made aware of, and are involved in identifying solutions to the challenges facing student county players.
- Support the development of a player welfare mentor position at county level as recommended by the GAA's Medical, Scientific and Welfare Committee to help manage the training and playing commitments of student county players representing multiple teams.
- Establish GPA representation on the GAA Higher Education group, which should facilitate engagement with other entities that impact on the wellbeing of the student county player, such as managers and educators. It is also important that the GPA support calling for and are involved in dialogue between Student Sport Ireland and the HEA to identify policy and strategies that will help the student athlete balance their sporting and academic commitments, potentially through flexible delivery modes or a formal academic mentoring system.

GPA Student Player

Representation:

The GPA has established a County Player Student Council to ensure the views of playing members are well represented and communicated. They will review education policy and strategy within the GPA and treatment of student county players in third level institutions. The GPA will also request all county squads elect a student representative to serve on the GPA Rep leadership team.

Policy Initiative:

The Athlete Friendly Institution Protocol, which was developed by the GPA to protect the wellbeing and academic needs of student county players, is being piloted in 2015. This represents a useful contribution to the development of a co-ordinated policy of support for elite athletes across Ireland.

Financial Support:

The GPA will initiate a fundraising campaign specifically for education in 2015 to increase support available to those who need it most. It is also important to continue to highlight the requirement in team charters that ensures regular payment of mileage expenses to college students and to advocate for a consistent mileage rate. Payments of grants and scholarships from various entities to student county players should be co-ordinated to facilitate appropriate financial and budgetary planning.

FURTHER RESEARCH TO CONSIDER:

Issues related to managing a dual career with the general playing body.

The various scholarship systems in third level institutions in Ireland, and how this correlates with international best practice for elite student athletes.

How academic and sporting structures might be improved to meet the needs of student county players.

Research on workload and training schedules