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A Study of the Relationship Between Elite Athletes' Educational Development and Sporting Performance

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The requirements placed on Olympic and professional athletes in contemporary world sport are such that they need to dedicate themselves more and more to achieving excellence. This immediately implies that most athletes' time is dedicated to developing their sporting career, with very little time left to develop other aspects of their lives outside their sport. The reality facing many elite athletes is that few are sufficiently financially rewarded to allow them to make a living out of their sport, and even fewer can rely on measures in place in their own country to assist with the financial and psychological impacts of their retirement from sport [Stambulova, N., Stephan Y., and Japhag U. 'Athletic Retirement: A Cross-National Comparison of Elite French and Swedish Athletes'. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise* 8 (2007): 101–18.]. This places even more importance on the need for the athlete either to have a 'dual career' or to prepare for a post-athletic career while still participating in elite sport. The current work is an attempt to identify both the opportunities and constraints that have been experienced by student-athletes in combining an academic and sporting career successfully in three European contexts: Finland, France and the UK. It also proposes a rationale outlining eight reasons that student-athletes identified to justify their decision to pursue a dual career path. This is an important contribution to this field of research, as till date there has been hardly any evidence that claims that the two careers were not simply mutually compatible but in fact mutually complementary.

Keywords: dual career management; Europe; Olympic sport; professional sport; decision-making; life story

Introduction

This paper addresses the relationship between sporting and academic success from the point of view of elite student-athletes. It provides insight into these student-athletes' experiences and their perceptions of the significant factors affecting their personal educational decision-making. Eighteen detailed interviews were conducted employing a life story approach¹ with elite athletes who had experience of university-level education in three European countries: Finland, France and the UK. The overall aim was to understand what opportunities exist, and to what extent these two careers can be combined by athletes in different sporting contexts and in different types of educational system, with what kinds of outcome.

The analysis developed in this paper draws on the findings of two completed studies.² The first study was commissioned by DG Education and Culture of the European

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Commission (EC) to undertake a review of 'The Education of Young Elite Sportspersons' in 25 Member States of the European Union. This review focused on policy in terms of the provision of special measures to serve the interests of elite sportspersons. It addressed issues relating to educational provisions across the full range of services from compulsory education, through post-compulsory, further education, higher education/university provision and professional sports academies, to vocational training for post-athletic career employment. While the EC-commissioned study ranged across the full range of educational services on offer, the second piece of research (doctoral study) focused solely on the university and higher education sector. It also differed from the EC report by focusing not only on the education services provided but also on the perceptions of decision-making processes of the elite sportspersons, the chronology of such decision-making, rationales for choices made and consequences of such decisions. As such, the doctoral work was intended to complement the insights gained in the earlier study.

For the purpose of this research, the term 'student-athlete' refers to those individuals who were undertaking (or had completed) university-level education and who were also actively involved in (or recently retired from) elite-level sport. The term 'elite' was taken to refer to those athletes who have had experience in representing their country in major international competitions such as European, World Championships and the Olympic Games. This implies that such individuals are included on official lists such as the World Class Performance Programme in the UK or *Pôles Espoirs* in France. In terms of the professional players interviewed, only those individuals who currently had (or previously held) a full-time contract with a professional club were taken into consideration. This definition of 'elite' was analogous to that provided in the literature by Baillie and Ogilvie³ who utilised the term to refer to those athletes 'whose pursuit of excellence in sport has led to their participation and success in competition at the Olympic or professional level'.

Conceptualising Student-Athlete Dual Career Management

The requirements placed on Olympic and professional athletes in contemporary world sport are such that they need to dedicate themselves more and more to achieving excellence. This immediately implies that most athletes' time is dedicated to developing their sporting career, with very little time left to develop other aspects of their lives outside their sport. The reality facing many elite athletes is that few are sufficiently financially rewarded to allow them to make a living out of their sport, and even fewer can rely on measures in place in their own country to assist with the financial and psychological impacts of their retirement from sport.⁴ This places even more importance on the need for the athlete either to have a 'dual career' or to prepare for a post-athletic career while still participating in elite sport.

One of the main concerns often highlighted in the literature⁵ is in cases when the demands of elite sport by far outweigh other aspects in student-athletes' lives, which may eventually predispose them to potential failure both in academic and sporting terms. As David⁶ observes, the gruelling schedules of some of these student-athletes mean that apart from spending 30 hours per week studying they have to balance this with 20–30 hours of sports training, a work-schedule characteristic of a senior manager. This has immediate implications on the lifestyle of the individual in terms of time management, required effort and commitment to fulfil his or her role both as a student and as an athlete (and indeed other roles such as parent, spouse, etc.).

In their study on Canadian student-athletes, Miller and Kerr⁷ observed that there was a constant tension between the three identified components: academic, sporting and social.

The athletic and academic components clearly took precedence over the social, the latter being the first to be compromised due to the increasing time restrictions. In fact, the authors comment that social relationships are strictly confined within the context of athletic events and people. The findings of this study illustrate how contrary to popular opinion Canadian student-athletes were found to be heavily committed to their sporting development. In fact, student-athletes dedicated a lot of time and effort into their sport, often compromising their educational success. Other negative academic experiences were attributed to factors such as fatigue, lack of role experimentation and delayed identity development, which can have significant impact on the relationship between athletic participation and academic performance. As the authors reiterate 'there is always the potential to lose sight of the importance of balance in pursuit of one's goals and objectives'.⁸

One way of addressing these challenges is by developing transferable skills. It has been argued in the literature that fostering skills such as leadership, teamwork, effective decision-making and mature career planning can help to 'counterbalance the negative aspects of the elite performer's experience'.⁹ The authors extend this argument as they observe that such skills not only are critical tools to manage a dual career in academia and sport but also have lifelong value, as they 'address the whole person issues including psychological, emotional, personal, social, moral, and intellectual development'.¹⁰

Thus, there has been an increased effort by individual institutions, which have invested in life skills programmes to ensure that student-athletes are being assisted to develop such skills as are needed to achieve their academic and sporting potential. De Knop et al.¹¹ commented that since the early 1990s, there has been increased efforts by European institutions to facilitate the demands of combining a dual career in academia and elite sport, some of which are presented in the subsequent sections. Significant investment has been allocated to academic, national training centres and professional set-ups that accommodate student-athletes to put in place programmes that adopt a more tailored and integrated approach to enhance their academic and athletic development.

The USA has been prominent in such provision, introducing the National Collegiate Athletic Association CHAMPS/Life Skills programme in 1994, which addressed five core areas of academics, athletics, personal development, service to the community and career development.¹² By contrast, in Europe it is only a recent development that academic institutions are investing in such programmes. For example, Loughborough University in the UK launched its Performance Life Skills Programme in 2008, which comprised a number of mentoring and workshop sessions based on skills and abilities aimed at teaching student-athletes how to take more responsibility over their decisions, goals and achievements.¹³

In their study of student-athletes at a leading 'traditional' British university, McKenna and Dunstan-Lewis¹⁴ identified three main areas of concern: (i) establishing priorities of the 'student' and 'athlete' roles, (ii) relationships with academia and (iii) lack of support and understanding. Although these findings echo, in part, earlier studies conducted in North American colleges, it is still a critical text, primarily because it is one of the very few attempts to shed light on the university experience of student-athletes in Britain. More importantly, it differentiates itself in the sense that the student-athletes at this university are equally driven to achieve their goals in their academic and sporting lives. As the authors pointed out, the student-athletes are high achievers in both the sport and academic domains. This contrasts with the other studies that illustrate how most of the student-athletes considered felt that they had to compromise one aspect for the benefit of the other at different stages of their academic lives. To this end, McKenna and Dunstan-Lewis¹⁵

proposed that any programme intended to support student-athletes should aim to 'achieve a cognitive shift, from seeing the "oppositeness" of the "student" and "athlete" roles to balancing them'.

In a similar vein, De Knop et al.¹⁶ present the case of one particular university in Belgium, which established the department of top-level sport and study and therefore made it possible for elite student-athletes to achieve academic and sporting excellence without having to resort to alternative ways such as studying in American colleges to combine the two. However, in order for this to be possible, the authors argue that there has to be a structural and organisational framework/programme incorporating services and personnel that takes into consideration the needs of the student-athletes and helps them to combine sport and academic life successfully. Given the relative increase in freedom found in colleges and universities, student-athletes have to be even more vigilant that their studies do not suffer and thus having support services available within their academic institution will contribute to ensuring that student-athletes develop their academic career effectively.¹⁷

The Increasing Importance of Student-Athlete Contribution to Olympic Sport

This particular research area continues to be of growing importance to individual nation states as the proportion of elite athletes in higher education continues to increase. Official statistics released by the British Universities & Colleges Sport (BUCS) website state that over the last 20 years (from Barcelona Games 1992 to London Games 2012), 61% of Team GB were in fact 'products' of the higher education system.¹⁸ During the London Olympic Games 2012, there were a number of sports that had a very strong student-athlete representation, such as modern pentathlon (100%), women's water polo (100%), rowing (90%), field hockey (87.5%), athletics (79.5%) and swimming (54%).

In 2001, the UK also created nine regional national institutes of sport, responsible for the development and delivery of elite sport services. These multi-sport high-performance centres, some of which are located on university campuses (e.g. Bath and Loughborough), are in charge of coordinating professional support for elite athletes by providing services in sports science, medicine, physiotherapy, biomechanics, physiology, psychology, nutrition and lifestyle.¹⁹ What used to be formerly known as Athlete Career and Education (ACE) programme was rebranded as Performance Lifestyle, but retained many of the core functions, especially those in relation to educational and career support. There are approximately 40 advisers in the UK who are providing this Performance Lifestyle service.²⁰

In April 2004, the government (through the Department of Culture, Media and Sport) launched the Talented Athlete Scholarship Scheme (TASS), a new initiative to deliver sports scholarships and bursaries to talented athletes aged 16–25. The budget for this initiative was approximately £2 million per annum over an initial three-year period. The student-athlete has to be recommended by his/her national governing body to be eligible for consideration. This type of scholarship is reviewed yearly, and athletes can apply for a maximum of three years. However, the athletes can have a TASS scholarship in conjunction with other types of sports scholarships such as the ones provided by universities as explained below. There are approximately 24 Universities in the UK that offer sport scholarships in a variety of sports under different terms and conditions. The University of Stirling (Scotland) has been one of the leading universities in this area having offered sport scholarships for over 20 years. By 2004, 150 students had benefited from these scholarships (an investment of over £500,000) to help them gain a degree and achieve the highest levels of sport.²¹ The TASS scheme was further extended in the run-up

to the London Olympic Games 2012. Talented athletes who had potential to make to the World Class Performance Programme could apply to annual grants up to £10,000 to help them access specialised sport services.

To date Loughborough University has supported three types of scholarships: the Loughborough University Sport Scholar, the Government-funded initiative the TASS and 2012 scholarship. The first criterion to qualify for the university's sport scholar scholarships requires that all athletes must have been accepted by the university as students first. The second criterion is that these student-athletes have to have some experience of competing at junior or senior international level in a number of sports that the university considers its performance sports. The 2012 scholarships in turn were restricted to Olympic sport only. The advantages of being awarded a 2012 scholarship included up to £3000 per year towards tuition fees, £1000 towards living expenses, £250 towards on-campus facility hire/memberships, elite coaching, sports science and medical support, top training facilities, a support network of staff and flexibility with academic workloads.²²

In France, the statistics from the Athens Olympic Games are comparable to those of the UK. Bayle, Durand and Nikonoff²³ observed that half of the medallists (21 out of 41) were in fact student-athletes based at the National Institute of Sport and Physical Education (INSEP). Therefore, the authors argued how the elite training centre is regarded as a highly successful system as it consistently manages to produce exceptional athletes who have contributed towards France's top 10 ranking in the world in both the Olympic Games and World Championships.

The French state operates five state-run national sports institutes to accommodate elite athletes, namely the following: the INSEP; the National School of Ski and Mountaineering; the National School of Sailing; the National Equestrian School (ENE); and the National School of Cross-Country Skiing and Ski Jumping. INSEP is a government body supervised by the Ministry of Sport and was founded in 1945. Its aim is to help sportspeople of international level to balance intensive training with academic studies. INSEP can house up to 1000 sportspeople selected by their respective sports federations. The National Technical director of the sport federation is usually the one who recommends a number of promising athletes to be taken into consideration for selection and admission to INSEP. Athletes who are accepted to attend INSEP have to pay a fee to cover training and accommodation expenses, which is usually covered by either their club, sport federation or their sponsor.²⁴

In the INSEP system, teaching staff come to the sports establishment to teach the student-athletes and classes at INSEP are relatively smaller having on average 15 students in each, with the aim of optimising the learning environment for student-athletes.²⁵ Moreover, INSEP offers the support of an education adviser and coordinator if the student-athletes are experiencing difficulties with any of their study programmes or had to miss out on lessons while away on training or competition.²⁶

In Finland, the trend of having more than half (65%) of the proportion of Olympic athletes in education also manifested itself. The Finnish Olympic Committee plays a key role in providing different services related to athletes' educational and career issues. Since 2001, the Ministry of Education has financed the Olympic committee to employ a study and career counsellor to provide assistance to athletes on academic and career matters and to coordinate with educational institutions and sports federations.²⁷ To this end 12 academies with the remit of helping young athletes to combine sport and education were set up in 2006 across Finland. Elite athletes who enter the sport schools at secondary and/or upper-secondary level (which lasts until the age of 18) have access to this network of

sport academies and can benefit from counselling sessions, personal tutoring and flexible timetables. All major schools within the regions are involved with the network via a designated contact responsible for coordinating student's training and study programme. Although studies after the age of 16 are not compulsory, more than half of the students tend to finish upper secondary school and sit their matriculation exam, which is mandatory to enter university.²⁸

Gaining a matriculation certificate does not necessarily mean that students get to go to the university and department of their choice, as on average only one-third of particular age group in one given year is offered a place. The annual number of applicants is approximately 68,000 and on average only 28,000 candidates are admitted. In 2004, it was estimated that there were 170,000 university students, with 21,900 being postgraduates.²⁹ The Finnish University system is particular because students are not given a set timetable to follow for a degree programme. Rather students have the opportunity to pick modules according to individual preference as long as they achieve a set target of points accumulated at the end of each year. This allows the students to continue to progress at their own pace. In addition, there are also some universities such as Tampere University, which has a system where students are not even restricted to a choice of modules solely from their department but are allowed to pick modules across a number of disciplines.³⁰

The conclusions drawn from a survey investigating 425 Finnish athletes' educational and vocational profiles, conducted in 2006, found that overall student-athletes were seen to 'follow the same academic paths as their non-sporting peers, while those elite athletes aged 20–29 have an even higher level of academic qualification attainment to date than the Finnish population of the same age'.³¹ Other findings from the same study showed how 80% of athletes interviewed agreed that having access to services such as study counselling and career management, which were not directly linked to athletic training, still had a positive impact on their sporting performance.³² These two sets of conclusions demonstrate how the two careers of academia and elite sport can actually support each other to the extent that they can enable the student-athlete to achieve better results in both their academic career and their sport.

Research Design

The method employed to gather the data for this research study was the life story approach. This decision was informed through a systematic review analysis that highlighted the advantages of adopting such a qualitative method in producing rich data and identified a limitation to the research methods that had been adopted in studies on elite athletes to date.³³ Moreover, keeping in mind the nature of the research questions driving this study, this method seemed the most appropriate 'tool' to capture holistically the life experiences of student-athletes for the following reasons outlined by Sparkes³⁴:

The ability of life history to focus upon central moments, critical incidents, or fateful moments that revolve around indecision, confusions, contradictions, and ironies, gives a greater sense of process to a life and give more ambiguous, complex and chaotic view of reality. It also presents more 'rounded' and believable characters than the 'flat' seemingly irrational and linear characters from other forms of qualitative enquiry.

Drawing on Miller's³⁵ typology of life story analysis, the study uses a 'narrative approach' in conducting 18 life stories with elite athletes who also have experience of university-level education in France, Finland and the UK. The study took into consideration the pathways that participants had chosen to negotiate their way through their educational and sporting careers, the opportunities they had availed themselves of and which others they

had had to forego. By engaging the student-athletes in a dialogue through life stories, the researcher was able to trace the decision-making processes that gave meaning to the athletes' lives and how these decisions then affected the way these athletes viewed their world. By using a non-directive form of questioning, the interviewer was able to encompass more elements of the participants' life during the interview process. There are a number of strengths in using such a method but perhaps the most critical to note is that it gives 'voice' to the interviewees, empowering them from the very start of the interview process, and shifted the power balance in their favour as they could take greater control of the narrative provided. As Atkinson³⁶ argues:

As a way of meaning making, identifying life influences, and interpreting experiences, there may be no better method than the subjective narrative of the life story to help the researcher understand a life from the insider's point of view.

A total of 18 student-athletes were interviewed for this study. Seven criteria were invoked to base this selection. The first factor required that interviewees had to be formerly or currently listed as either an elite athlete or a professional player in France, Finland or the UK. The countries selected reflect different approaches to state intervention in sport/education identified by the author in an earlier policy study commissioned by the European Union.³⁷ France was chosen as an example of a state-centric system of defined legal obligation. The case of Finland represents a state-sponsored formal system established on permissive legislation while in the UK, the representation of athletes' educational interests are largely the responsibility of sporting bodies. An elaboration of the review of policy provision within this area can be found in the study of Aquilina and Henry.³⁸

The aim of this study was not to directly compare the same sports across nations. Therefore, the researcher did not restrict the number of sports (13) chosen. The limiting criterion was that the interviewee's sport had to be either an Olympic (both Summer and Winter games) or professional sport. Acknowledging the differences in the way countries assign 'professional' status to a given sport, those athletes who were either formerly or currently on a professional contract with their club were included for pragmatic reasons only. For Olympic athletes, the restriction was that they had to be formerly or currently on the official elite athletes lists held by each respective National Olympic Committee/Elite training centres. The fourth criterion taken into consideration was the current stage of their sporting career (beginning/mid-point/end) to gain a better understanding of the changing nature of the type of decisions that these individuals were making in light of their prospective retirement from sport. All participants who were interviewed had to be either former or current University students and were able to speak English (in two cases with the help of an interpreter). With regard to the graduates it was stipulated that they had to have graduated within the past five years from when the interview was undertaken. Finally, eight male and eight female athletes were interviewed for this research study, ensuring that both genders were equally represented. A detailed overview of the 18 student-athletes interviewed is provided in Table 1.

Theoretical Framework

Owing to the exploratory nature of this study, the researcher did not start with *a priori* theory or hypothesis-driven theoretical assumption characteristic of a deductive research approach and thus an inductive research strategy was adopted. Induction was defined by Landman as 'the process by which conclusions are drawn from direct observation of empirical evidence'.³⁹ This approach entails the researcher looking for particular patterns in the data and establishing relationships between variables. A key element of the

Table 1. An overview of the 18 student-athletes who were interviewed.

France	Student- athlete's sport	Age	Individual/ team	Male/ female	Early/late age of specialisation	Active/ retired	Student/ graduate	University degree/other qualifications
	Athletics	28	Individual	F	Late	Active	Graduate	Bachelors in Sports Science Masters in Coaching Professorat de Sport Bachelors in Sports Science
	Badminton	31	Individual/ team	M	Late	Active	Student	
	Handball	21	Team	M	Late	Active	Student	Professorat de Sport Bachelors in Business and Management
	Judo	27	Individual	F	Early	Retired	Graduate	Bachelors in Sports Science Masters in Sport Management FIFA Masters Information Technology Diploma Coaching diploma Bachelors in Sports Management
UK	Swimming	22	Individual	M	Early	Active	Student	
	Synchronised swimming	20	Team	F	Early	Active	Student	
	Athletics	23	Individual	F	Late	Active	Graduate	Bachelors in Psychology
	Athletics	23	Individual	F	Late	Active	Student	Bachelors in English and Publishing
	Golf	22	Individual	M	Late	Active	Student	Bachelors in Business studies
	Gymnastics	22	Team	M	Early	Active	Student	Foundation degree in Sports Science
	Rugby	22	Team	M	Late	Active	Graduate	Bachelors Degree in Sports Science (Honours) Bachelors in Fine Arts Masters in Engineering Masters in Environmental Economics Masters in Media Technology (Engineering) Masters in Sports Sociology Masters in Food Technology-Chemistry
Finland	Triathlon	23	Individual	F	Late	Active	Student	
	Athletics	32	Individual	M	Late	Active	Student	
	Basketball	28	Team	F	Late	Active	Graduate	
	Football	42	Team	M	Late	Retired	Graduate	
	Gymnastics	32	Team	M	Early	Active	Student	
	Ice-Hockey	20	Team	F	Late	Active	Student	
	Judo	22	Individual	F	Early	Active	Student	

inductive approach to theory building is that generalisations from this type of research are 'sought from the specific to other wider contexts', suggesting that conclusions drawn from empirical research can be generalised to a certain extent, leading the researcher to more abstract ideas including conceptual models and theory formation.⁴⁰ Life story research is an inductive approach, which means that data is given primacy and it is only after the initial analysis stage has taken place that theory starts being built into the research. The premise behind this kind of approach is that in order for the findings to be 'the most valid' they can be, 'the theory that is more appropriate to the specific story will flow from the story itself'.⁴¹ One other strength of such an approach is that the researcher can avoid the risk during the analysis stage of reading narratives as evidence to justify a prior theory.

A critical weakness that certain 'fundamentalist' versions of the life history methodology and grounded theory approaches share is that they advocate the denial or rejection of prior knowledge/theory. Simply starting from data gathered inductively, the researcher builds explanations into theory. Such accounts are naïve, however, since the data we collect or the phenomena we choose to look at, and treat seriously, rather than regarding as trivial, are a product of prior thoughts, concepts, conceptual schemes or theories. There is a distinction, or balance to be sought, between theory testing and theory-informed data collection. The critical thing for the researcher to do is not to 'empty her head' of prior theory, but rather to acknowledge the theoretical influences on the data collection process.

Thus, in the context of this research, the Development model on transitions faced by athletes of Wylleman and Lavalée⁴² significantly informed the researcher's approach to the interview process. The model was not used as a point of reference against which to test the data, but rather its abstraction of stages and life domains (athletic level, psychological level, psychosocial level, academic-vocational level) was significant precursors to the researcher's interview approach and the model is therefore introduced here in some detail. Developed predominantly within the discipline of psychology, Wylleman and Lavalée's⁴³ developmental model on transitions faced by athletes addresses the individual's development across four domains: athletic, psychological, psychosocial and academic, comprising a number of transitions that an athlete can be expected to experience in life. The rationale for the development of such a model was based 'on the strong concurrent, interactive and reciprocal nature of transitions', which not only impacted on the athletic career of athletes but also found to have a significant influence on other aspects of life such as academia and professional employment.⁴⁴ The underlying premise of this model implies that if an individual is able to effectively manage and cope with a transitional period in one domain of life, this would impact positively on other aspects.⁴⁵ This represents the first attempt to build a conceptual model that considered athletes' career transitions more holistically.

The value of such a model is in its ability to conceptualise how there are decisive moments with an athlete's life where a number of critical transitions are running parallel to each other, which can lead to challenges that need to be overcome in order to ensure a smooth career progression. Although the authors insist that the ages at which the transition can be expected in the model (see Table 2 below) are tentative, it is nevertheless useful to indicate when a particular transition is likely to take place which can help student-athletes to prepare for such an eventuality.

However, a limitation of this model is that it only includes 'normative' transitions that refer to those expected transitions such as progressing from junior-level to senior-level competition or from primary to secondary schooling. It, thus, lacks consideration of the likelihood of non-normative transitions that can include factors such as suffering a major injury or having to change coaches unexpectedly. Other types of transitions that are not

Table 2. A developmental perspective on transitions faced by athletes at athletic, individual, psychosocial and academic/vocational levels.

AGE	10	15	20	25	30	35
Athletic Level	Initiation	Development		Mastery		Disscontinuation
Psychological Level	Childhood	Adolescence			Adulthood	
Psycho-social Level	Parents Siblings Peers	Peers Coach Parents		Partner Coach		Family (Coach)
Academic Vocational Level	Primary Education	Secondary Education	Higher Education		Vocational Training Professional Occupation	

Note: A dotted line indicates that the age at which the transition occurs is an approximation. Source: Wylleman & Lavallee (2004, 516).

accounted for in the model have been highlighted by Schlossberg.⁴⁶ She terms these ‘non-events’ referring to those expected events that never materialised. Such examples within a student-athlete’s life include not being selected for a major sporting tournament despite initial expectations or failing to make a full recovery on coming back from injury. As with professional career transitions, non-events tend to be more problematic, given the athlete’s lack of control over decisions being made.

Research Findings: How Should It All Fit Together?

While the development of the student-athletes’ athletic careers is largely the responsibility of coaches and other professionals working within a university/national elite training centre environment, the development of their academic career lies almost exclusively with themselves. Universities typically operate within a relatively higher degree of freedom and therefore require from students a sustained ‘personal involvement’ to progress through their degree programme. This level of personal involvement varied across the interviewees as some committed a substantial amount of time and effort to gain excellent academic qualifications while others achieved the passing requirements.

McKenna and Dunstan-Lewis⁴⁷ highlighted the fact that establishing priorities of the ‘student’ and ‘athlete’ roles was one of the major areas of concern for student-athletes. Contrary to popular opinion that student-athletes were primarily focused on their sport and only marginally concerned with their education, their study illustrated how the athletes were ‘high achievers in both the sport and academic domains’. Therefore, this implied that in order to fulfil the responsibilities that these roles entailed, student-athletes had to find strategies that helped to establish priorities at various stages of their lives. In line with the conclusions of the research undertaken by McKenna and Dunstan-Lewis,⁴⁸ the research findings from this study consolidate their observations as 17 out of the 18 student-athletes interviewed have also reiterated the importance of achieving equally well in both their careers:

I am on a first (the highest degree classification) so I guess I am doing pretty well, but I work really hard. I am the kind of person that was not going to be happy to just get a 2.2 or a 2.1 if I could get a first. (Athletics UK)

Thus, in order to be successful in both careers, student-athletes interviewed had to find strategies that facilitated the way they managed their career demands. From the student-athletes’ accounts of such strategies, it is clear that there is not simply one coherent

approach to their prioritisation of tasks. Some interviewees had decided to give equal importance to both careers at all times, some gave priority to one career over another whenever it was possible and others opted to continue shifting priorities as they negotiated a dual career path. Given the variety of approaches described by interviewees as contributing to the successful management of a dual career, it is clear that there is not an 'ideal' strategy defined as successful by all, but rather strategies are contingent on a number of factors. One set of elements is inherent to the individual and includes aspects such as his/her general perceptions on education and elite sport, their age, stage of career (both athletic and academic), whether they were suffering from long-term injury or whether they were enjoying a period of significant sporting achievement. The second set of factors encompassed more external elements and included the demands imposed by both University education and elite sport, which the student-athletes had to fulfil.

The above observations highlight two important factors: one is that student-athletes need to learn how to prioritise their time, while the second relates more to the challenges that balancing the demands of academia, sport and personal/social life presents to individuals such as the participants interviewed in this study. There is a general consensus in the literature that in order to be successful at both, student-athletes must learn how to balance priorities when managing their educational and sporting commitments.⁴⁹ Although the literature as such does not provide a definition for 'balance', it is clear that it does not mean that the student-athlete should invest equal amounts of time, commitment and resources in the various components (sporting, academic and social) of his/her life. From the readings, it can be concluded that finding the right balance for a student-athlete depends to varying degrees on the individual's personal characteristics, his/her sport and specific choice of lifestyle. However, the underlying premise reiterated by leading researchers in this area is that a degree of balance must be attained in order for the student-athlete to deal effectively with the demands of a dual career.

This research findings suggested that defining 'balance' as a concept was a highly subjective matter and although the concept was readily understood by all participants, what constituted balance differed from one student-athlete's account to another. Perhaps, the critical emphasis here for this network of people to understand is that the notion of balance is important to student-athletes, but there is not a single universal definition. Notwithstanding, understanding the notion of balance and the feeling of having a balanced lifestyle from a student-athlete's perspective is crucial to the overall management of a dual career.

In a report commissioned by UK Sport, Douglas and Carless⁵⁰ observed that athletes' perception of balance in life differed in relation to age and experience:

Some younger athletes take the perspective that other aspects of life must be and were being sacrificed in the interest of their sport career. More experienced athletes take the perspective that balance is essential in regard to both performance and life as a whole.

These observations are congruent to the findings of this study as the more experienced interviewees claimed to have had achieved a more balanced lifestyle. However, it is important to note at this stage that younger student-athletes still appreciated the value of striking a balance in life and they had strived to ensure that they achieved this. During the course of the interviews, student-athletes conceded that they were not solely responsible for that achievement and in fact depended on a supporting network of people, who were willing to help them cope with the demands of a dual career (as illustrated in Figure 1). This network of people, which, from the observations made in this study, constituted parents, coaches, peers, academic staff and other professional staff within sports, had to

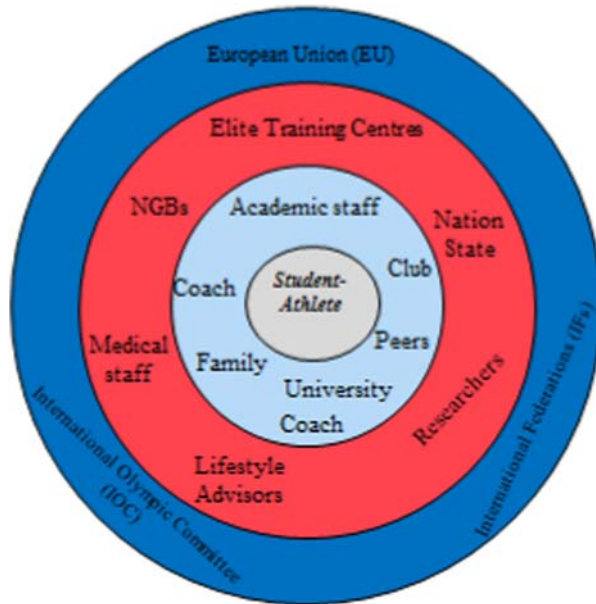


Figure 1. Supporting networks for student-athletes at personal, national and international level.

endeavour to cater for specific needs that student-athletes had. All interviewees acknowledged their gratitude that when help was sought, whether it was for emotional, financial, academic, psychological or physical assistance, it had been granted. This resonated well with the observations made in the literature by Miller, Salmela and Kerr⁵¹ who argued that maintaining a balanced lifestyle should not only be the responsibility of the student-athlete but also the wider network of people surrounding him/her.

Other important aspects that interviewees emphasised were the environmental factors characterising the sporting and academic institutions and to what extent they were conducive to managing a dual career successfully. The five French student-athletes who were trained at INSEP regarded their elite training centre as an 'ideal' environment to be able to train and study simultaneously as it provided quality academic opportunities alongside elite training programmes. It was argued that the proximity of high-performance training facilities and classrooms, having a flexible academic programme that took into consideration the requirements of elite sport together with an established support network of academics and sporting staff, all contributed to the successful management of a dual career. These factors play a key role in the development and achievement of student-athletes and therefore all institutions which are accommodating elite athletes, are ensuring that they incorporate all of these elements. Data from this research study has illustrated various initiatives found in the three nations, whether through a scholarship system or through a legal acknowledgement of the student-athlete status that ensured that flexible services were provided.⁵²

Mutual Benefits of Pursuing a Dual Career

The pursuit of academic and sporting excellence simultaneously might be regarded by some performance directors/coaching staff as highly conflicting. This is often the case in certain cultures of sport, typically football and combat sports whereby education is seen as

a threat to the sporting development of their talented athletes.⁵³ The conclusions drawn by Conzelmann and Nagel⁵⁴ supported these claims as they have argued that it has become increasingly difficult for elite athletes to manage their time well due to the increasing demands of training and competition placed upon them. It has also been observed that sport is very rarely the aspect of an athlete's life that is compromised and instead athletes opted to forego other aspects first. The account of the French swimmer participating in this study resonates with the report findings contributed by Conzelmann and Nagel⁵⁵ as he argued how his sporting demands have dictated his choice of lifestyle, leaving him with no other alternative than having to sacrifice his academic studies. Despite these initial setbacks, 17 out of the 18 student-athletes interviewed agreed that they needed to have both careers in their lives for a number of reasons as outlined in Table 3.

The first justification provided was the importance of trying to keep things in perspective in their lives. Interviewees explained how sometimes it was very easy to get consumed by the demands of either one of their careers to the point that it engulfed their whole life. Although some athletes might argue that if their sporting career was developing according to plan, this was not too great a risk; the student-athletes warned that it could make life very difficult at critical times, when unforeseen things occur. Therefore, they were strongly in favour of keeping things in a balanced perspective even on a daily basis as learning how to deal with smaller challenges would eventually help surmount the tougher experiences in the long run.

The French synchronised swimmer valued the intellectual stimulation that her academic career afforded her, which helped her to break from the often-regimented training sessions in her sport. She explained how there were moments when it was difficult to keep up the level of concentration and commitment during the long training sessions, especially when she had to work through what seemed to her as endless mechanical repetitions until a sequence is perfected. By having her academic degree to focus on outside her sport helped her to stay motivated and to sustain these challenging requirements inherent to her sport in the longer term.

Another motive strongly argued by the two judokas revealed that being in education helped them perform better at their sport. The Finnish athlete took a more pragmatic approach and argued that through combining her education and elite sport she was able to access some grants from the Finnish government that enabled her to live comfortably without having to work to sustain herself, which allowed her ample time to dedicate to her sport. The French athlete on the other hand discussed her reasoning from a more psychological angle as she genuinely believed that being in education and especially being under pressure academically helped her concentration levels during competition.

The fourth justification stems from a strong belief held by some of the student-athletes that in fact their two careers supported each other. As the Finnish football player argued, there were skills that you learn in one sphere of your life can successfully be transferred to the benefit of another. From his extensive experience, he observed how in both careers learning was an ongoing process as there is an upward curve that one has to follow as a student-athlete. He concluded that over time as he learnt to draw on the strengths of these two aspects of his life more consistently, he became a better student and athlete as a consequence.

The rationale provided by two of the female student-athletes in wanting to combine their elite sport with university education was based on their conviction that there were other worthwhile pursuits in their life alongside sports. Although both the Finnish basketball player and the British tri-athlete acknowledged that they dedicated significant amounts of time to their sport, this did not mean that other aspects in their lives were not equally important. For the British tri-athlete, this realisation came soon after she suffered

from recurring long-term injuries, which not only hindered her athletic career development but also led to more serious psychological issues as she struggled to come to terms with her injuries. She described how this proved to be the most testing period she had ever endured as she lost all perspective in life. Having 're-discovered' her artistic side in the interim period before her recovery, she explained how art had helped her regain some perspective in life and she was determined to maintain this newly found balance.

For those student-athletes who had already, successfully or otherwise, dedicated all of their time exclusively to sport, focusing on their academic development became paramount. Both gymnasts and the French swimmers had admitted that they had been tempted to focus solely on their athletic career as they all had previously thought that having more time to train would make them better athletes. This kind of decision was usually taken following promising results in an international competition when expectations by both the coaching staff and the athlete rise. All of these athletes conceded that simply having more time does not necessarily lead to improved athletic performances; on the contrary as the two gymnasts found out, their decision impacted negatively on their sport as they started to 'waste' time and get distracted. Therefore, they decided to take up education once again.

Another justification in favour of a dual career was because student-athletes understood that they needed a contingency plan in case their athletic career did not develop in the way they expected. All student-athletes were aware of the risks entailed if they focused all of their time entirely on sport. The reasons for such an eventuality were plenty but the ones that concerned this set of student-athletes the most were those aspects that they felt they had no control over, such as injuries or failing at the national team trials at the highest level as two of the British athletes and the French badminton player attested. Student-athletes were painfully aware of the ruthless nature of elite sports, where at times what had separated them from the other national team athletes that made the squad was a fraction of a point (gymnastics) or a second (swimming). Hence, having an academic career to fall back on not only served as a 'safety net' but also took their mind off the 'harsh' realities of their sport.

The final preoccupation that these student-athletes voiced was in relation to the imminent end stage of their athletic career and their potential post-athletic career direction. By being already in education, they strongly believed that they were optimising their chances in being able to secure the employment of their choice when it came to choosing a full-time profession. As the French rugby player observed, not all professional players make realistic plans for their inevitable transition out of sport, which can create serious psychological and financial problems at a later stage in life.

As has been illustrated in the preceding section, this research study supports this claim and has demonstrated that when student-athletes took responsibility of managing their own career plans, they had benefited from such a decision as they were successful in both. This has implications not only for the way they managed their current dual career but also in the way they planned for their post-athletic careers. It is thus argued that the student-athlete should assume a greater responsibility for how both his/her careers are to be managed. By becoming more independent, self-reliant individuals, they can develop expertise in deciding and negotiating arrangements for the progression of their dual career, which should in turn have a positive impact on their lifestyle more broadly. Such expertise can be potentially enhanced through the development of life skills, which equip the individual with the right tools to effectively manage and cope with the demands of a dual career.

Table 3. Mutual benefits of pursuing a dual career as experienced by student-athletes interviewed.

1. The need to focus on more than one aspect of life which relieved the intensity of pressure emanating from both sport and from educational performance helping to put things in perspective	'It has been a little hard to explain to our national coaches that I'm playing judo but also studying. He wants me to stop studying now and then perhaps continue later. We had some discussions about this and I tried to explain why I need to do it this way because I am that kind of person I want something more than just judo.' (Judo FIN)
2. Belief that skills learned in one area were transferable and valued	'I think it's important because when you are interested in going to school in developing yourself and getting to know new things you develop your analytical ability and that's what you need in football and you also need the hard work in the long-term. If you think of a football player it takes years to learn how to play football and it's the same with school, there's a learning curve you follow and I think those two things support each other.' (Football FIN)
3. Intellectual stimulation to accompany the physical challenges of training and performance, helping to maintain interest and commitment: more sustainable in the longer-term	'When I was finishing the Baccalaureate it was very hard to juggle everything at the same time so then in my second year I decided to focus on sport over education, since we got all the good results. I stopped classes for a semester but it was not a good option! I needed to study because I was going a bit crazy!' (Synchronised swimming FRA)
4. A sense of 'balance' in recognising that there is more to life than sport, social comfort in mixing with peers	'One of the most important thing for me was that I love basketball of course but it wasn't something that I wanted to do my whole life. There's always been something else important for me and obviously I cannot say that basketball was just a hobby because I worked really hard at it but in a way it is, it's not all what my life is about!' (Basketball FIN)
5. Frustration with the experience of having dedicated time exclusively to elite sport in the past, neglecting education, but with minimal improvement in sporting performance	'After my 'A' levels I took a year out and just trained full-time twice a day for a year but the improvement was minimal. It was definitely not as much as I expected. So I thought I've been at my club for 13 years, maybe it was time to try something else so I came to university.' (Gymnastics UK)
6. Feeling more secure and hence performing better with the 'safety net' of gaining appropriate qualifications, preparing for future life stages and in particular for post-athletic careers.	'I definitely came to university for two things, yes I was good at running but I also wanted to get a degree just in case the running did not work out. As I said before I never wanted to just run! Mum always said that you need something to fall back on because you might get injured, break a leg for example and take ages to come back or not come back at all. You definitely need something to fall back on! I came to university to get a degree, it just worked out well that running was such of high quality here as well so I could do both.' (Athletics UK)

Table 3 - *continued*

7. Consideration to life after sports – Transition into post-athletic career	'Not a lot of professional handball players are in education, most of them prefer to go back to education after their handball career is over, usually they are about 30 years old. But I was afraid that at 30 I would not want to go back to school so I was determined to get my certificate now. This is what real life is about, real life is work not sport! Yes we do earn quite a bit of money now but it will not last you for long after your career is over.' (Handball FRA)
8. Simply performing better in sport in an academic environment which is sport friendly:	'I think I just understood that the more under pressure I was at university the better I performed at judo which is quite interesting actually. In my second year I started to understand this so I guess my vision of university started to change and became much more important. For example if I was in exam period with competition in the middle or the end I did better at judo than if it was just a random period. I don't know whether it was because I was more concentrated during this period or because I was even more organised. It could be that I was confident with my exams or confident in my sport.' (Judo FRA)

Conclusion

The findings of this research paper have a dual role in informing both policy and practice. Since the late 1990s, there has been a shift in policy research towards a more evidence-based practice. While it is recognised that most practitioners are unlikely to be involved in formal theory-driven academic research, they are likely to be involved in planning and implementing educational programmes for student-athletes. This research study has sought to make a significant contribution to the establishment of a stronger evidence base within this field to inform practice. Douglas and Carless remarked that to date 'the majority of studies have segregated and individual's "sport" from their personal values and lives with the simplistic idea that "a really focussed athlete" can simply switch off those factors and outside influences'.⁵⁶ This is reflected in the rhetoric used by performance directors, particularly in the UK, who insist that all elite athletes have to be 'obsessed' with their sport relentlessly in order to succeed on the world sport performance stage.⁵⁷ This may come at a cost as elite athletes are continuously expected to put the rest of their life 'on hold' for the sake of their sport. In contrast, this research study suggests an alternative perspective to these partially informed ideas expressed by some performance directors. The rationale provided in this paper outlined eight reasons (as illustrated in Table 3) that student-athletes identified to justify their decision to pursue a dual career path. This is an important contribution to this field of research as to date there has been hardly any evidence that claims that the two careers were not simply mutually compatible but in fact mutually complementary.

Notes on Contributor

Dawn Aquilina received her PhD degree from Loughborough University in 2009 after receiving a B.Ed. degree from the University of Malta and an M.Sc. degree from Loughborough in Sport and

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Notes

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2. Miller, *Researching Life Stories and Family Histories*.
3. Baillie and Ogilvie, "Working with Elite Athletes," 395.
4. Stambulova, Stephan, and Japhag, "Athletic Retirement."
5. David, *Human Rights in Youth Sport*; Miller and Kerr, "Athletic, Academic and Social Experiences."
6. David, *Human Rights in Youth Sport*.
7. Miller and Kerr, "Athletic, Academic and Social Experiences."
8. Miller and Kerr, "Role Experimentation of Intercollegiate Student Athletes," 351
9. Miller and Kerr, "Conceptualising Excellence," 144.
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24. Aquilina, *Degrees of Success*.
25. Coalter and Radtke, *Elite Sports Schools*.
26. Aquilina, *Degrees of Success*.
27. Merikoski-Silius, *Critical Evaluation of Aspects of the Athletes*, 6.
28. Coalter and Radtke, *Elite Sports Schools*, 32.
29. Kanerva, "Finnish University System."
30. Aquilina, *Degrees of Success*.
31. Merikoski-Silius, *Critical Evaluation of Aspects of the Athletes*, 58.
32. Merikoski-Silius, *Critical Evaluation of Aspects of the Athletes*, 59.
33. Smith and Sparkes, "Men, Sport, Spinal Cord Injury;" >McGillvray and McIntosh, "Football is My Life;" Roderick, "Adding Insult to Injury."
34. Sparkes, "Athletic Identity."
35. Miller, *Researching Life Stories and Family Histories*.
36. Atkinson, *Life Story Interview*, 8.
37. Amara et al., *Education of Young Sportspersons*.
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