

# MENTORING TO SUPPORT ATHLETES' DUAL CAREER

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## ABSTRACT

**Aims:** The “Establishment of a Dual Career Mentor Centre in Latvia” project, which was carried out within International University Sports Federation (FISU) framework, aimed to research the opportunity for creating a dual career mentoring centre for higher education institutions (HEIs), taking into account feedback received from student-athletes. It also aimed to compare support priorities with similar studies carried out previously.

**Methods:** Theoretical method – study of theoretical sources. Empirical method – analysis of a dual career survey. The research comprised student-athletes from seven higher education institutions in Latvia. Results were analysed with the SPSS data processing software program.

**Results:** Data analysis allowed the authors to conclude that student-athletes need support for the provision of sports infrastructure ( $n=51$  before, 63%). Additionally, prior to starting studies, student-athletes need more information about study opportunities in higher education institutions in Latvia ( $n=61$ , 75%). It is confirmed by the fact that even though the information on education has mainly been sought on the internet ( $n=69$ , 88%), the respondents still could not find relevant information on dual career opportunities in any of the universities.

The results suggest that HEIs promote the development of dual career education centres, which would support dual career by providing information on study programmes, universities, and opportunities to do sports at high level adapted to high-performance athletes. Therefore, the project “Establishment of a Dual Career Mentor Centre in Latvia” could be of significance for the development of dual careers in Latvia.

**Keywords:** *dual career, higher education institutions, high-performance athlete, mentor, support.*

## Introduction

In Europe, high-performance sports are mainly structured at the club level, with limited access to education, which creates a peer gap. This results in talented high-performance athletes who are at risk of dropping out of education or sport. The Latvian Cabinet of Ministers' Regulations on Sports Policy Guidelines also indicates an emphasis on further developing the system of training centres for high-performance athletes,

while increasing the role of recognised sports federations in implementing the support programme (Ministru kabinets, 2022), although there is an absence of a focus on education. In recent years, the ‘dual career’ (DC) of athletes has been considered a priority in European sports strategy and policy (European Commission, 2007, 2012; European Parliament, 2015; 2017). Based on the material published in 2013 on dual careers for athletes, the term ‘dual career’ implies that an athlete is able to flexibly combine their sporting career, including high-quality training, with education and/or work (European Commission, 2013). In Latvia, the “Sports Policy Guidelines 2022–2027” were adopted in 2022, where it is stated in point 4.17 that “the awarding of sports scholarships to promote dual careers in sport needs to be supported” (Ministru kabinets, 2022). Athletes with higher education are competitive in the labour market, which contributes to the development of human resources. The report of the European Commission highlights that “every year, 30% of young people aged 10–18 who take part in sport give it up because they find that their sporting activities take up too much of their time” (European Commission, 2012). This is particularly relevant for high-performance athletes who are struggling to reconcile the demands of a sporting career with the challenges and constraints of the education system or the labour market. Research highlights this fact as a condition that sport is often not promoted as a career choice (European Commission, 2016). In 2021, the Erasmus+ project “More than Gold”, initiated by the University of Latvia in cooperation with universities in five other countries, was implemented with the aim to develop DC guidelines for higher education institutions (HEIs) and strengthen DC policies in all EU countries, especially in countries where DC policies are at an early stage of development, such as Latvia, Romania. The project highlighted best practices in support provision (i.e., career centre services, psychological services, mentoring programmes for students, etc.). As a result, a HEI methodology was developed which aims to share how existing HEI activities can be used to support DC. Responsibility for dual careers does not only depend on the microenvironment of student-athletes (gender, age, sports involved) but also on the macro (organisations, sports clubs/federations, and educational institutions), and global (international, national, regional, and municipal policies) dimensions, which are also influenced by several socio-cultural, media and economic mediators (Capranica & Guidotti, 2016). Therefore, supporting the bridging of education and sports processes for high-performance athletes largely depends on the interrelationships between multiple stakeholders, which require a well-structured collaboration and a systematic monitoring system in order to promote and implement effective dual career programme policies.

## Methodology

The research was aimed to compare support priorities with similar studies carried out previously, and to explore the opportunity for creating a dual career mentoring centre in Latvia for higher education institutions (HEIs), taking into consideration feedback received from student-athletes.

Methods: study of theoretical sources and documents and analysis of a survey results.

The survey was carried out using data collection methods. During the development and implementation of the study, the authors considered the fundamental ethical principles of the study. It was clearly stated that anonymity was maintained for the participants involved in the study, i.e., the research sample – the personal data of the respondents (first, last name) was encrypted. The research instruments were approved by the Ethics Commission of the Faculty of Education, Psychology and Art (FEPA) of the University of Latvia on Research with Human Involvement.

The questionnaire as a data collection tool was developed based on similar published studies on DC issues (Abelkalns, 2014; Sánchez-Pato et al. 2017). A questionnaire was developed for student-athletes in Latvia, which included specific questions based on the overall project vision related to DC processes and the management of support opportunities. Therefore, the results obtained within the project provide a holistic view of the problem through its exploration. The purposeful recruitment of participants attained, in total, 81 high-performance athletes ( $F = 37$ , 45%;  $M = 44$ , 54%; age range: 19–25 yr.). All the respondents engaged in full-time academic education and competitive sports (e.g., national, international), with 53 (65%) representing individual sports such as athletics (10), wrestling (1), while 27 (35%) represented team sports such as volleyball (5), football (6), floorball (5), etc.). Most athletes ( $n=44$ , 54%) studied in bachelor's programs, master's programs ( $n=8$ , 10%), doctoral programs ( $n=2$ , 2%). The range of the respondents' study areas was broad, but sports science ( $n=31$  38%), economics ( $n=9$ , 11%) and military ( $n=8$ , 10%) could be identified as the most popular education fields. The survey focused on the provision of support from a DC perspective and identified athletes' needs in relation to DC implementation. Questionnaire data was collected and processed using SPSS statistical processing software. The following statistical methods were used for data processing: descriptive and inferential statistics, factor analysis.

## Results and discussion

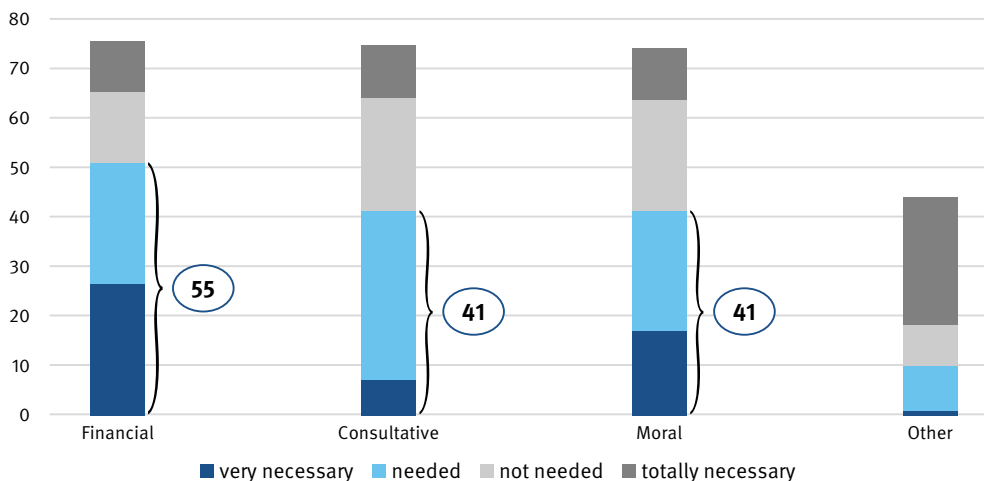
At the beginning of the study, the authors researched and analysed experiences of different countries in DC governance (Australia, the United Kingdom, France, etc.) in order to find out which models would be more suitable for Latvia (Athlete Career and Education [ACE], 2022; Dagley, 2004; France's National Institute of Sport, Expertise, and Performance [INSEP], 2022; The Talented Athlete Scholarship Scheme [TASS], 2023). Researchers took notice that in Australia there are athlete career education (ACE) programmes managed at the national level by the Australian Institute of Sport, which aim to help high-performance athletes to access education or career and personal development opportunities while striving to achieve better results in sport and education. ACE offers a wide range of services including career and education counselling, a variety of programs, services designed to help athletes cope with DC, and services related to personal development. These services are provided through one-to-one consultations with ACE counsellors or through group training courses (Dagley, 2004).

In the United Kingdom (UK), the Talented Athlete Scholarship Scheme (TASS) is a national support organisation. TASS is a UK publicly funded body which is a unique partnership structure between talented young athletes and colleges and universities. TASS aims to help its athletes to balance academic life with high-performance sports. TASS supports more than 500 athletes in 38 different sports nominated each year by their national governing bodies (TASS, 2023). There are a few DC centres in the country, with support provided in different regions ranging from partial financial support to full support, including financial and academic support and sports work. The decision to provide support generally depends on the amount of funding available, strategic priorities and the potential of athletes. Many universities prioritise sports and provide additional support for athletic students (Morris et al., 2020).

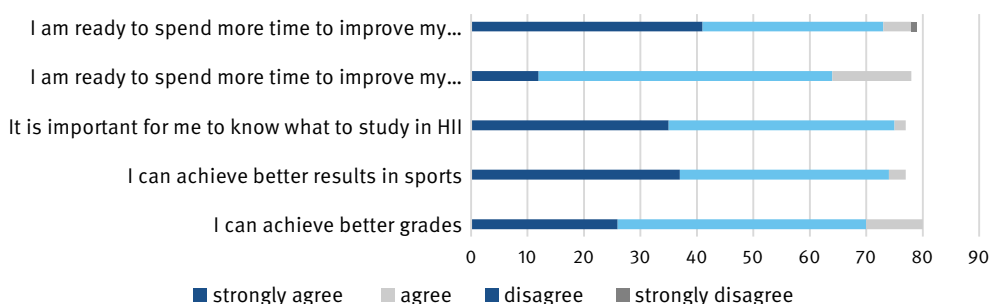
In Portugal, as in several European countries, high-performance athletes can study at any university (with which cooperation agreements have been concluded). In Portugal, 2.15% of all students are high-performance athletes (Fernandes & Camps, 2007). Student-athletes are free to change universities between the partner universities, continuing their studies in the programme of their choice. High-performance athletes receive support in four main support blocks: academic, psychological, medical and sport (Fernandes & Camps, 2007).

In this research a survey for student-athletes in Latvian HEIs was developed and carried out, the survey consisted of four parts: introduction, education, sport, and dual career. In order to better understand student-athletes' views on combining academic education with sport, the authors compared the results with data from similar studies conducted 5 to 10 years ago (Abelkalns, 2014; Kravalis & Abelkalns, 2017; Abelkalns et al., 2021). The results of the survey showed that 19 (23%) of the student-athletes had a training experience of 12 to 15 years and 45 (55%) of the athletes trained 5–6 times per week. It should be noted that only 8 (10%) athletes receive DC support for tuition fees, 41 (51%) study with state budget funds, while 24 (30%) study with their own financial means. If we compare these results with the previous ones, we can conclude that DC support for athletes is gradually increasing, while self-financed studies remained at the previous level of 35% (Abelkalns, et al., 2021). High-performance athletes responded that 30 (37%) of them received a sports scholarship at their university, which is also regarded as DC support. One of the key questions was related to the type of support needed to improve the DC process. Respondents were given a choice of financial, moral, consultative, and other types of support, see Figure 1.

As shown in Figure 1, most respondents ( $n=55$ , 67%) answered that financial support is highly needed, while 41 respondents (50%) indicated that moral and consultative support is needed in order to successfully balance academic performance and sport. On the other hand, comparing the data with the study conducted by Abelkalns (2014), it can be concluded that younger athletes need relatively less support. From the surveys of high-performance athletes, it can be concluded that both sports and education are important for these young people. As can be seen in Figure 2, athletes are willing to pay more attention to achieve better results in education ( $n=64$ , 79%) and in sports ( $n=73$ , 90%).



**Figure 1** Type of support required

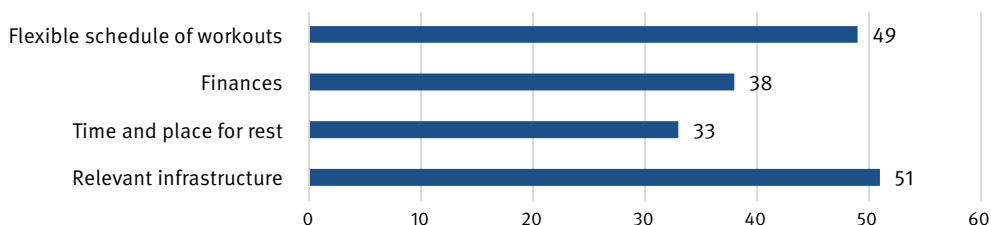


**Figure 2** Athletes' opinions about the importance of sports and education in their lives

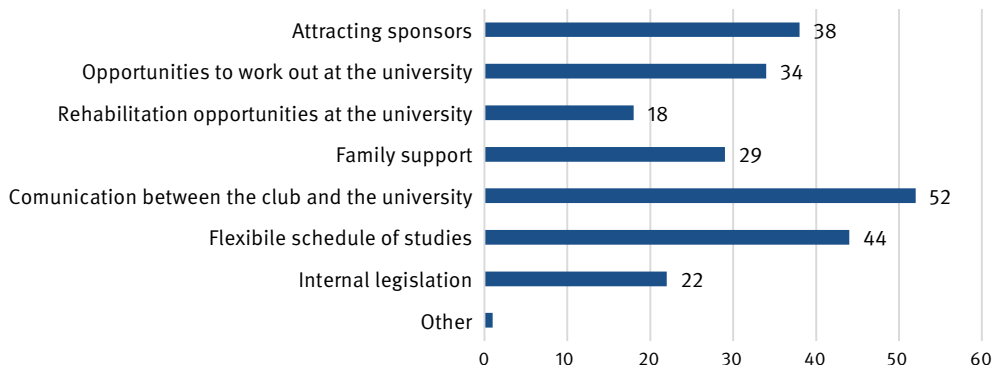
There is a slightly prevalence in favour of sport, and more respondents answered strongly agree than agree. A similar situation emerges in the part of the question of whether athletes are confident that they can achieve higher results in studies ( $n=70$ , 86%) and in sports ( $n=74$ , 91%).

The authors conclude that if athletes can devote time and energy to both academic learning and athletic achievement, this implies that the drive towards DC excellence is there, but time management needs to be improved.

The study went on to further analyse the needs of athletes in sport to achieve better results. As shown in Figure 3, the main problems stem from the lack of adequate infrastructure. 51 athletes (63%) believe that there is no adequate infrastructure for training near universities, and 49 respondents (60%) would like to be able to plan their training schedules to fit in with their studies. The third most important factor is the time and facilities for rest at the university after the first/morning training ( $n=33$ , 40%).



**Figure 3** Basic needs in sport (n=81)



**Figure 4** Solutions of support (n=79)

When we asked about more necessary areas of DC centre support for students-athletes, we received several recommendations related to sports activities. In Figure 4 we can observe that most of the student-athletes ( $n=52$ , 66%) believe that there is a need to improve communication with sports clubs/federations and higher education institutions. If we compare the results with previous studies (Kravalis & Abelkalns, 2017), where 31% of athletes underlined mutual communication. The authors conclude that athletes now feel a greater need for communication, which is perhaps a consequence of Covid-19, but based on Dagley's (2004) research, the activities of the DC Centre could improve the situation.

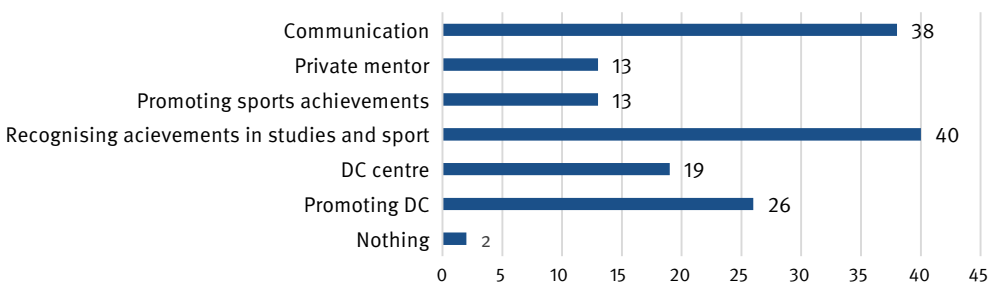
In the study, student-athletes were asked to identify individuals who could provide solutions to the problems analysed above. The results show that the responsibility lies with HEI decision-makers ( $n=44$ , 55%), followed by coaches ( $n=39$ , 49%). Naming sports club managers ( $n=34$ , 43%) and dual career counsellors ( $n=31$ , 39%) in third place. The authors here draw attention to the fact that Latvian HEIs do not officially have dual career counsellors, but on a voluntary basis, the sports clubs of each institution try to provide the necessary counselling to athletes. Athletes also provide relevant answers on how to obtain information. Respondents mainly obtained information about study programmes from internet resources ( $n=69$ , 88%). However, when answering about the source of DC information, only a few ( $n=3$ , 3%) athletes found the expected information. In this context, however, the authors remind us that currently, only the University of Latvia website provides information on DC. The analysis of the results showed that

the study process is also important for high-performance athletes. 58 respondents (73%) have chosen their study programme to develop their knowledge and skills that will help them to improve their performance in sports. 48 respondents (60%) believe that studying at university will enhance communication skills and 39 respondents (49%) believe they will acquire the ability to make responsible decisions. These results are in line with previous studies, which indicate that it does not matter which study programme athletes choose, but it is important that the overall level of intelligence is developed in the studies (Capranica L, Guidotti F., 2016).

Having previously clarified the difficulties student-athletes must overcome in sports, with the next question the authors wanted to find out what difficulties they have to face in the study process. The main problem is that due to the heavy training load, athletes cannot attend all lectures ( $n=39$ , 53%) and cannot devote enough time to prepare well for seminars (35, 47%). Sometimes this causes stress that can interfere with both academic and sporting achievements. Looking at the overall factors that mainly hinder the success of the DC, lack of time ( $n=49$ , 67%) and scheduling of training and studies ( $n=43$ , 59%) are highlighted first.

Once the problems were identified, the authors of the study identified what would need to change in HEIs in order to introduce or improve DC management mechanisms. As can be seen in Figure 5, the conditions should first be created so that DC is promoted, and student-athletes can obtain the necessary information in a timely and simplified manner. Once again, the emphasis is on communication, where the authors conclude that communication skills, one of the cornerstones of the DC management process, have declined among young people.

Athletes expressed their own options, such as “the sports law needs to be reformed”, “university sports facilities need to be built”, “more information about studies should be accessible”, “DC should get more publicity in universities, in schools and in sports schools”, “students should be taught more about how to plan their time better”, etc.



**Figure 5** What must be changed to improve dual career ( $n=81$ )

## Conclusions

By analysing the experiences of DCs in different countries, the authors conclude that DC support centres have been established in many countries around the world and in Europe, all with the common goal of helping athletes to access education or careers and personal development opportunities while striving to achieve better results in academics and sport.

In Latvia, guidelines have been established for the implementation of DC in HEIs, but the development of DC processes is passive and changes in the education law would be needed. Surveys of athletes suggest that both sports and education are important to young people. Financial support is now more needed than moral or counselling support for athletes, but the weight of counselling support has slightly increased compared to previous studies.

In the current situation, athletes feel a greater need for communication with peers, professors, and sports officials, which is perhaps a consequence of Covid-19. Athletes believe that studying at university fosters their communication skills and they gain the ability to make responsible decisions, which can lead to better results in education and sport. Lack of time to attend lectures and prepare for seminars is mentioned as an important problem. Opportunities should be created to promote DC and informal education courses on time management should be organised.

The results suggest that HEIs promote the development of dual career education centres, which would support dual careers by providing information on study programmes, universities, and opportunities to do sports at a high level adapted to high-performance athletes. Therefore, the project “Establishment of a Dual Career Mentor Centre in Latvia” could be of significance for the development of a dual career in Latvia.

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