

ROUTLEDGE FOCUS

# Dual Career Athletes

Policy and Programs

GRZEGORZ M. BOTWINA



# Dual Career Athletes

This is a concise and practical introduction to the topic of dual career athletes, those sportspeople who balance professional or elite sport with other career or educational pursuits.

This book defines the concept of dual careers in sport and explores its significance for athletes, sports organizations, and wider society. It considers why dual careers are increasingly significant in contemporary sport and analyzes the role of sports organizations in supporting athletes' dual career paths and implementing supportive measures. This book also offers practical tools and programs that sports organizations can use to develop effective policies toward dual careers and to facilitate the dual career development, helping both the athlete and the organization to perform at their best.

This book is invaluable reading for any athlete, manager, policymaker, or researcher with an interest in dual careers, career transitions, athlete welfare, organizational behavior, sport management, or sport policy.

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# **Dual Career Athletes**

## **Policy and Programs**

**Grzegorz M. Botwina**

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# Introduction

This book was written out of a shared belief that athletes deserve more than a singular focus on performance. Too often, sport systems have pushed young people into one-dimensional paths that leave them vulnerable when competition ends. By focusing on dual careers, we emphasize that athletes are whole persons whose identities, aspirations, and well-being depend on more than medals alone. Supporting athletes in combining sport with education or work is not only about preparing them for life after sport. It is also about enabling them to thrive during their careers, with balance, resilience, and confidence. It was written for a broad community of readers who influence or experience dual career pathways in sport. This will include athletes navigating the challenges of balancing education, work, and competition; coaches and sport staff who guide them; dual career advisors and educators who provide critical support; and policymakers shaping the systems that enable or hinder success. Whatever your role, you will find insights here that deepen your understanding of dual careers, including what they are, why they matter, and how they can be supported effectively. You will learn about the historical and global contexts that have shaped current approaches, the theories and frameworks that explain athlete development, the policies and institutional models that guide practice, and the practical strategies that make a difference on the ground. By the end, you will gain not only knowledge but also concrete tools and perspectives to strengthen dual career support in your own context.

In contemporary sport, elite athletes are often more than just competitors on the field; they are also students, interns, or working professionals. The simultaneous pursuit of sporting excellence alongside education or employment, commonly referred to as a dual career, has become increasingly prevalent. Over the past two decades, there has been growing recognition of the dual career phenomenon, especially in Europe, reflecting its rising importance for athlete development and well-being. Dual career pathways are now seen as a protective mechanism to ensure athletes' long-term welfare and success beyond sport. Managing a dual career is certainly challenging, but it is increasingly viewed as essential for athletes who aspire to thrive during their sports careers and to transition smoothly into post-sport life. Underlying the

## 2 *Dual Career Athletes*

dual career approach is a holistic philosophy that athletes should be supported as whole persons, not merely as athletic performers. This ethos has driven a wave of policy initiatives and support programs. In short, Europe's formal dual career discourse emerged relatively recently with major policy milestones in the 2000s, whereas countries like the United States have long combined education and elite sport without using the term 'dual career'. Appreciating these differing contexts helps explain how the dual career movement evolved and why it targets specific challenges in various sport systems.

In the following chapters, we explore the foundations and future of dual careers. We begin with the concepts and theories that help us understand how athletes develop across multiple life domains, before turning to the policies and systems that shape opportunities across different countries. We then examine practical tools and programs that make a difference on the ground, and finally, we look ahead to chart the way forward. By bringing together insights from research, policy, and practice, this book offers a comprehensive roadmap for athletes, coaches, educators, sport organizations, and policymakers to strengthen dual career pathways and ensure athletes can flourish both in sport and beyond.

Chapter 1 establishes the foundation by defining what a dual career entails and discussing why managing sporting and educational or work pursuits in tandem has become crucial for athletes. It provides a global and historical context, contrasting the European dual career approach with models elsewhere, and highlights how dual career pathways benefit athletes' personal development, well-being, and post-sport transitions.

Chapter 2 delves into the theoretical underpinnings of dual careers, presenting key frameworks that guide our understanding of athlete development. It outlines models such as the holistic athletic career model, which views an athlete's growth across multiple life domains and athletic transition models, which categorize the normative and unexpected changes athletes navigate, as well as concepts like international student-athlete mobility and dual career development environments. In doing so, Chapter 2 underscores the importance of structured, theory-informed support systems for athletes who are pursuing dual paths.

Chapter 3 then maps the policy and institutional landscape for dual careers. It surveys the evolution of dual career support in Europe, including seminal initiatives like the EU's 2012 dual career guidelines, and examines how different nations have implemented these ideas through diverse frameworks with case studies from countries such as the United Kingdom, Sweden, and Poland. This chapter also broadens the perspective to consider athlete support models in other parts of the world with examples from the United States' collegiate system and programs in Australia and New Zealand, identifying common best practices as well as persistent challenges. Through this comparative analysis, Chapter 3 illustrates how varied policy approaches can enable or

hinder athletes in combining sport with education or work, offering insights for strengthening dual career pathways across contexts.

In Chapter 4, the focus shifts to practical strategies for sports organizations and educational institutions to support dual career athletes. This chapter provides a toolkit of measures and examples for implementing dual career programs on the ground. It discusses how clubs, federations, schools, and universities can design and institutionalize support structures – for instance, by establishing dedicated staff roles, such as athlete career advisors or player development managers, forging partnerships between sport and academic entities, and embedding dual career considerations into their organizational policies. Key components of successful programs are detailed, including providing academic flexibility, tutoring and learning support, career planning services, life skills and mental health resources, and financial assistance for athlete-students. Chapter 4 also addresses methods for evaluating the impact of these programs using metrics like academic progress, dropout rates, and career outcomes, along with athlete feedback mechanisms, and highlights emerging innovations that are shaping the future of dual career support.

Chapter 5 looks ahead by synthesizing insights from the preceding chapters and charting a way forward. It reflects on the implications of dual career development for the key stakeholders, the athletes themselves, the sport organizations that work with them, and the policymakers who shape the environment, and it offers strategic recommendations to enhance dual career systems going forward. These include better integration of research and theory into on-the-ground practice, greater harmonization of policies and support standards across institutions, embracing technological innovations and inclusive approaches to reach all types of athletes, and amplifying athletes' voices in decision-making about their careers.

Taken together, the contributions in this book reinforce a central message that enabling athletes to develop in sport and in education or work concurrently is a shared responsibility and a long-term investment. Supporting dual careers is an evolving project, one that calls for concerted, unified efforts from sport, education, and policy stakeholders to build an environment in which athletes can truly 'win' both on the field and beyond.

# 1 What Is Dual Career of Athletes?

## Why Do Athletes Need Education?

The modern sporting landscape demands more from athletes than from physical prowess alone. Elite and aspiring athletes today must often juggle the intense requirements of training and competition with commitments in other life domains such as education or employment. This simultaneous pursuit of sport and another career path is commonly referred to as a dual career. Over the past two decades, there has been growing recognition of the importance of managing dual careers in sport, especially in Europe where the term ‘dual career’ has gained policy prominence. Athletes who embark on dual careers are effectively balancing two significant roles, for example, that of a high-performance athlete and a university student, and this balance can profoundly influence their development and future opportunities. The concept of dual career has thus emerged as a protective mechanism to ensure athletes’ well-being and long-term success beyond sports.

For many athletes, the motivation to pursue a dual career stems from a combination of personal ambition and practical necessity. On the one hand, education and vocational training can provide intellectual stimulation, additional skills, and a sense of purpose beyond the arenas. On the other hand, the uncertain nature of sporting careers, with risks of injury, non-selection, or early retirement, makes it prudent for athletes to invest in an ‘insurance policy’ for life after sports. Managing a dual career is challenging, but it is increasingly seen as essential for athletes who wish to thrive during their sports careers and transition smoothly into post-sport life. As we will explore in this chapter, dual career pathways can help athletes develop more well-rounded identities and coping strategies, which benefit both their sporting performance and their long-term personal growth.

Importantly, the dual career concept is underpinned by a philosophy that athletes should be supported as whole persons, not just as performers. This holistic view has driven policy initiatives and support programs across Europe aimed at enabling athletes to pursue education or work alongside sport. While the dual career notion has global relevance, it is particularly well developed in Europe, where institutions and governments have explicitly adopted the terminology

and frameworks of dual career support. In other parts of the world, similar ideas exist under different terms – for example, the ‘student-athlete’ model in North America integrates college sports participation with higher education, albeit in a distinct cultural context. This chapter will briefly situate the European dual career approach in a global context, noting that whereas the concept of a structured dual career is relatively new in Europe with major policy milestones in the 2000s, countries like the United States have long had systems for combining education and sport though without using the term ‘dual career’. Understanding these different contexts helps clarify why the dual career discourse in Europe has evolved as it has and why it addresses specific challenges apparent not only to the European sport and education systems.

### **Defining the Dual Career**

A dual career refers to a career with major foci on sport and studies or work (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019). In practical terms, a dual career athlete is someone who, while training and competing at an elite or high-performance level in sport, is also enrolled in an academic program such as secondary school, university, or vocational training, or working a job. The essence of a dual career is the combination of sport with a second sphere of development, so that the athlete is cultivating skills, credentials, and identities beyond sport. This stands in contrast to a ‘traditional’ sport career where an athlete might singularly focus on sport to the exclusion of other pursuits.

It is important to note that dual career does not mean merely having a hobby or occasional side interest. Rather, it implies a purposeful and managed commitment to two career tracks. One useful definition comes from Morris and colleagues: a dual career development environment is ‘purposefully developed systems that aim to facilitate athletes’ investment in combining their competitive sporting career with education or work, and, therefore include both (sporting and educational or vocational) career aspects within them’ (2021: 136). In other words, a dual career is enabled by support systems that acknowledge the legitimacy and benefits of athletes concurrently developing in sport and in academics or vocations.

For younger athletes, the dual career often manifests as being a student-athlete, balancing school responsibilities with training and competitions. For older or professional athletes, dual careers might involve part-time studies like distance university programs or employment, perhaps in a flexible job or business endeavor, alongside their sport schedules. The key is that in a dual career, both the sport and the ‘other’ career are significant and planned, each requiring dedication and, as evidence show, support. Dual careers are not one-size-fits-all. Athletes can engage in dual careers in different ways and with varying emphases at different times. Some athletes lean more toward their education while keeping sport at a competitive, but not all-consuming, level, others maintain sport as the primary focus and fit education around it.

Underlying the definition of dual career is an important conceptual point: a dual career is not simply two separate careers running in parallel without interaction. Instead, the dual career perspective emphasizes the integration and interaction between the athletic and nonathletic spheres. Successful dual career management means that an athlete's sport and education/work support each other to the extent possible, rather than one constantly undermining the other. For example, skills learned in sport, such as time management, resilience, and goal-setting, can benefit academic or work performance. Conversely, intellectual stimulation or social networks from education or employment can provide psychological benefits that enhance athletic performance and personal development. Indeed, athletes often report that engaging in studies or work gives them a 'mental break' from the pressures of sport and a broader identity to fall back on, which can improve their sporting focus and reduce stress. In this way, a well-managed dual career can create a virtuous cycle where success and learning in one domain positively influences the other.

The dual career concept has been formally recognized by the European Union and many European sport bodies, leading to official definitions and guidelines. For instance, the European Commission's European Union Guidelines on Dual Careers of Athletes (2012) defined dual careers in the context of policy, recommending that member states develop frameworks to enable athletes to successfully combine high-level sports participation with education or work.

## **The Importance of Dual Careers**

The rationale for supporting dual careers in athletes stems from the multifaceted benefits such a path provides and the challenges it helps to address. Engaging in a dual career pathway has been shown to promote psychological resilience, more balanced identity development, better adaptation during career transitions, and greater long-term life satisfaction for athletes. In essence, the dual career approach is about safeguarding athletes' holistic well-being and future prospects, rather than focusing narrowly on short-term performance (Wylleman & Lavalee, 2004; Wylleman et al., 2013). Outlined below are several key reasons why dual career management is increasingly seen as crucial in today's sports environment.

### ***Smoother Transitions and Career Longevity***

Athletes who have pursued education or vocational training alongside sport are generally better prepared for the transitions they will inevitably face, both within sport like moving from junior to senior level, coming back from injury, and out of sport to retirement (Stambulova, 2003). Research consistently shows that athletes with a dual career background handle the end of their athletic career more smoothly and experience more successful transitions to post-sport life than those who followed an exclusively sport-focused path. By having another qualification or career trajectory to step into, dual career athletes can mitigate the career

termination crisis that sometimes afflicts retiring athletes. Moreover, even during active sport years, having a parallel engagement can offer a mental ‘release valve’ during major transitions. For example, a teenager progressing to elite senior sport might cope better with the stresses of that jump if they also have academic goals and support in place. Studies have found that a dual career acts as a buffer during such transitions. Athletes with education or employment involvement have reported fewer feelings of uncertainty and greater confidence in handling change (Ryba et al., 2017; Stambulova & Ryba, 2015; Stambulova et al., 2015; Stambulova, 2016).

### ***Psychological Well-Being and Identity Balance***

A dual career can foster a broader, multidimensional identity for an athlete. Rather than seeing oneself only as an athlete, a dual career individual might also identify as a student of a particular field or as a professional in training. This broader identity is healthier in the long run because it reduces the risks associated with overidentification with the athlete role. Sport psychologists have long warned that a very exclusive athletic identity, while it can fuel performance when things are going well, can become a vulnerability if that athletic competence is threatened (for instance, by injury or deselection) (Brewer et al., 1993). Athletes who see themselves in only one dimension may struggle profoundly when that dimension is shaken or comes to an end. Dual career participation inherently encourages athletes to invest in multiple roles, which can lessen the blow if one role is temporarily or permanently curtailed. Empirical evidence shows that athletes who balance sport with other roles report better emotional regulation, greater life satisfaction, and fewer symptoms of distress compared to those who are singularly focused on sport. For example, Sorkkila et al. (2017) found that adolescent student-athletes with a well-integrated school and sport life had lower burnout rates in both domains. Engaging in education can give athletes a sense of achievement and progress outside of sport, which contributes to self-esteem and confidence. Conversely, positive experiences in sport can translate into academic motivation and discipline.

### ***Coping with Sport’s Demands and Uncertainties***

The life of an elite athlete is filled with stressors like intense training loads, competitions, public expectations, potential injuries, and fierce competition for selection. Dual career involvement can serve as a coping mechanism for many of these stressors. From a practical standpoint, having academic coursework or a job can provide a constructive distraction and stress relief. When an athlete has a rough day on the field or experiences a setback like being left off a team, having another sphere where they can still make progress helps maintain perspective. Research indicates that dual career athletes often credit their non-sport activities with keeping them grounded. They report that focusing on school or work tasks can give their mind a break from ruminating about sport,

reducing the risk of burnout due to over-immersion in that domain (Morris et al., 2021). Skills like time management, prioritization, and stress management are honed by necessity in a dual career context. These personal resources actually help athletes become more efficient and focused in their training. Some studies even suggest that dual career athletes may experience less burnout because the emotional investment is spread, and not all ‘eggs are in one basket’. On the flip side, the structure imposed by balancing two careers can force athletes to be more organized and can enhance their performance quality in sport. They tend to use their limited training time more effectively than those who have all day but procrastinate.

Additionally, in times of adversity such as serious injury or a performance slump, dual career athletes have been found to cope better (Aquilina & Henry, 2010). For instance, if an injury sidelines an athlete from competition for months, a dual career athlete can focus on their studies or job during recovery, thereby maintaining a sense of productivity and progress, whereas an athlete with nothing but sport might feel their whole life has stalled. Dual career also provides a built-in support network outside sport like teachers, classmates, or work colleagues, who can offer necessary support (Aquilina, 2013; Sorkkila et al., 2017). By having commitments and successes outside sport, athletes realize that a setback in sport is not the end of their world. This perspective often accelerates emotional recovery and fosters adaptability.

### ***Academic and Career Development Opportunities***

On a more straightforward level, pursuing a dual career means that athletes are making tangible progress in another field concurrently with sport. This has obvious long-term benefits. An athlete’s competitive career can peak in their 20s or early 30s, and very few can compete at elite levels beyond their mid-30s. With a dual career, by the time athletes retire from sport, they may already hold a university degree or have relevant work experience, which significantly eases their transition. In contrast, an athlete who forgoes education might find themselves starting from scratch academically or professionally in their 30s, which can be daunting and put them ‘behind’ their peers who pursued those pathways earlier. From a public policy perspective, supporting dual careers is also important because it prevents the waste of human capital. Athletes, who often have many positive traits and transferable skills like discipline and leadership, are better positioned to contribute to society after sports if they have qualifications.

### ***Reduction of Negative Outcomes***

A strong athletic identity that is not counterbalanced by other roles can lead to what psychologists call identity foreclosure, where an individual’s self-concept is prematurely and exclusively committed to the athlete role with limited

exploration of other identities or careers. Identity foreclosure in athletes is associated with difficulties when they leave sport – including feelings of emptiness, depression, or lack of direction. Dual careers actively counteract identity foreclosure by keeping athletes engaged in exploratory and developmental tasks outside sport. For example, an athlete who studies or works part-time is continuously reminded that they have interests and competencies beyond sport. This makes the eventual adjustment to a nonathletic life smoother. Empirical evidence supports this protective effect. Webb et al. (1998) demonstrated that athletes who placed the greatest importance on sport in their identity were more at risk of experiencing retirement-related distress than those who had other valued roles. Lally (2007) reported that athletes who proactively decreased the exclusivity of their athletic identity had healthier career transitions and fewer identity crises.

### ***Societal and Ethical Considerations***

Beyond the benefits to athletes themselves, dual career support is often framed as an ethical obligation of sports systems and educational institutions. There is a growing consensus that athletes, particularly young athletes, should not have to sacrifice their education for the sake of sport. In Europe, this is sometimes positioned as a matter of athletes' rights (Condello et al., 2019). The idea is that no young person with athletic talent should be forced into an 'either/or' choice between sport and education. They should be enabled to do both to a reasonable standard. By promoting dual careers, society affirms that an athletic career and education or vocational training can and should complement each other. It's also about the duty of care: sports organizations have a duty of care to ensure that athletes are not left unprepared for life after sport. Scenarios from past decades, where athletes would end their sports career with little education, no work skills, and sometimes lasting injuries, have prompted reforms where national Olympic committees, sports federations, and governments now invest in programs to avoid such outcomes.

### **Global and Cultural Perspectives on Dual Career**

While this book focuses mainly on European context, it is helpful to consider how dual career concepts play out in different parts of the world and within various sporting cultures. The notion of combining sport and education or work is universal in challenge, but the solutions and terminologies differ. In North America, for example, the prevailing model for developing elite athletes has long been through the school and university system. The term 'student-athlete' is entrenched especially in the United States, where collegiate sports are a major pipeline to professional and Olympic sports. American student-athletes essentially live a dual career by balancing academics with athletics, but this is rarely termed 'dual career' in American discourse; it's simply seen as part of the scholastic sport structure. The NCAA (National

Collegiate Athletic Association) supports athletes with academic services and the CHAMPS/Life Skills program to foster personal development and career readiness, covering areas like academics, athletics, personal development, community service, and career development. In that sense, the USA has long recognized the need for balance and support, even if the cultural narrative often emphasizes sports. One could say the dual career ethos is implicitly present in the North American system, but given the integrated structure of education and sport like school teams or college scholarships, they have not needed separate ‘dual career policies’ as such. In 2024 NCAA introduced the Student-Athlete Core Guarantees (NCAA, 2024), as part of a broader reform, that followed United States Supreme Court ruling in the case *NCAA v. Alston*. This is signaling a major adjustment of student-athletes rights in the American model (Grow, 2022).

In contrast, European countries historically had more separation between the sport system and the education system. Talented young athletes often faced a bifurcation: either pursue sport full-time or prioritize academics and perhaps drop out of elite sport. This traditional dichotomy has been changing, and Europe has arguably taken a more formal approach to bridging that gap. Since the early 2000s, European institutions have actively promoted ‘dual career’ as a policy agenda. The EU’s 2007 White Paper on Sport already highlighted the need to reconcile sports training with education for young athletes, and the European Union Guidelines on Dual Careers (2012) provided a blueprint for member states to develop supportive measures. It’s only in the last decade or so that many European academic institutions started significant programs to accommodate athletes.

Outside of Europe and North America, interest in dual career is also growing. In Oceania (Australia, New Zealand), the term ‘dual career’ is used and many initiatives parallel those in Europe. For instance, Australia’s Elite Athlete Friendly University network helps elite athletes study at university with flexibility. In Latin America, discussions of dual career are emerging, though historically the integration has been less systematic. Countries like Brazil and Argentina, influenced by international university sport movements and Olympic Solidarity programs, have begun to explore how to support athletes in education. In Asia, nations with strong sport systems such as Japan, China, and South Korea have traditionally emphasized education, and in recent years, they too are adopting more structured dual career-like programs, for example, special high schools or career training by national sport institutes (Jiang & Wang, 2025).

Despite regional differences, a common thread globally is the increasing professionalization of athlete support. Many nations, inspired by each other’s practices, are converging on the understanding that dual career support is a necessary component of athlete development systems. Knowledge transfer happens through international bodies like the International Olympic Committee, which runs the Athlete Career Programme globally focusing on employment and education resources for athletes. Even if not all countries use the term ‘dual career’, the underlying goals are similar: educate athletes, prepare

them for life beyond sport, and help them perform better by relieving the all-or-nothing pressure.

## **Policy Context and Institutional Models**

The recognition of dual careers has led to a variety of policy responses and structural models across different countries. The landscape of dual career support in Europe (and beyond) can be categorized into several distinct models, largely based on who takes the lead in providing support and how responsibilities are shared between the state, educational institutions, and sport organizations (Henriksen et al., 2020). Understanding these models provides a context for how athletes experience support or lack thereof, depending on where they live. Below, four broad approaches are outlined (Morris et al., 2020) to illustrate the range of dual career policy environments:

### ***State-Centric Regulation***

In some countries, governments use legal or regulatory measures to ensure that educational institutions accommodate elite athletes. A prime example is Spain, where legislation mandates universities and schools to offer flexible scheduling, exam rescheduling, distance learning options, and other adaptations for certified elite athletes. Under this model, the state explicitly recognizes athletes as a special category of students and enshrines their rights to dual career accommodations in law. The advantage of a state-regulated approach is that it creates obligations across the board – it’s not optional for institutions to comply. This can lead to widespread availability of support. Virtually all public universities might have to grant certain benefits to national-team athletes, such as tutoring or extended enrollment duration. However, a potential downside is that the quality of implementation can vary, and institutions might comply in letter but not spirit if not monitored. Still, state-centric models send a strong message that dual career is a national priority.

### ***State as Sponsor or Facilitator***

In this approach, the government does not mandate support through law, but actively promotes and funds formal agreements between educational institutions and sports organizations. This is seen in several Nordic countries like Denmark, Sweden, or Finland and others like Belgium. For instance, the government might create frameworks or certification systems for ‘elite sport-friendly schools’ or provide grants to universities that develop athlete-friendly programs. The state plays a coordinating role, perhaps establishing national guidelines or incentives, but stops short of imposing legal requirements. The Nordic example often features partnerships: schools or

universities partner with sports federations or Olympic committees to create dual career pathways. The lack of legal mandate means these programs rely on willing collaboration, but in these cultures, there is often a strong tradition of consensus and support for social programs, so uptake can be high. The benefit of this model is flexibility and innovation, programs can be tailored and adjusted without needing new laws, but a challenge is ensuring coverage is comprehensive.

### ***Sport Federations/Institutes as Intermediaries***

In some countries, it is the sports sector that takes the primary role in arranging dual career support, often on a case-by-case or programmatic basis. A good example here is the United Kingdom, which has a more decentralized approach. Rather than a single government program, multiple stakeholders are involved. National sport bodies and institutes act as intermediaries between athletes and educational providers. For instance, United Kingdom Sport funds programs like the Talented Athlete Scholarship Scheme (TASS) which is delivered through universities to provide scholarships and support services to student-athletes. At the same time, the English Institute of Sport and its counterparts in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, employ lifestyle advisors who negotiate with universities or employers on behalf of athletes. Similarly, sports federations in the United Kingdom often have their own education liaison officers who help individual athletes manage their schooling or higher education alongside training camps and competition. Other countries with elements of this model include the Netherlands and Germany. This model leverages the influence and knowledge of sports organizations to broker solutions for athletes, essentially acting as mediators. The advantage is that support can be highly individualized and sport-specific. The drawback is that without overarching policy, support might depend on the initiative of specific federations or even specific club programs, leading to inconsistency. Athletes in sports with wealthy or proactive federations may get excellent dual career aid, while those in less resourced sports might have little help and be left to navigate on their own.

### **Laissez-Faire or Individual Responsibility Approach**

At the far end of the spectrum, some environments historically provided little formal structure for dual career, placing the burden largely on the individual athlete to find their own way. Talented athletes and their families have to negotiate with schools or universities on a personal basis, or athletes would simply have to sacrifice one domain for the other. In *laissez-faire* systems, any dual career success stories are usually thanks to particularly accommodating teachers or the athlete's personal resolve, rather than systemic support. However, it's important to note that the trend is away from *laissez-faire* as the benefits of dual career support become more evident. Even countries that

once had this approach are developing policies. For instance, Slovenia in the last decade introduced some measures for flexible education for athletes and engaged in Erasmus+ projects to learn from others. The risk of a *laissez-faire* approach is clear: many athletes will struggle or drop out of either sport or education because doing both is too difficult without support. It tends to lead to lower rates of higher education attainment among elite athletes and a higher incidence of career problems after sport. Recognizing these issues, very few European countries remain entirely *laissez-faire* today, though disparities in support still exist.

In reality, each country might have a mix of these elements. For example, France could be seen as a hybrid of state-centric and state-as-sponsor. Poland until recently has been closer to *laissez-faire*, but there are now increasing conversations and some programs emerging (Poland will be discussed specifically as a case study in Chapter 3).

These models are not only evident in Europe. They resonate with structures elsewhere: for instance, Australia's approach is partly sport-led – the Australian Institute of Sport and state institutes mediate with universities, akin to the federation intermediary model, but there's also state funding for athlete education programs. The existence of these different models highlights why the dual career experience can vary widely. An elite swimmer in Spain might automatically receive academic flexibility because universities are mandated to accommodate athletes by law, whereas an elite swimmer in a country without such mandates might rely on personal arrangements with professors. A teenage basketball player in Denmark can attend a sports-friendly high school coordinated by Team Denmark, whereas a similarly talented player in another country might have to switch to homeschooling or reduce academic load with no formal guidance. European initiatives have tried to encourage convergence toward best practices. The European Union Guidelines (2012) do not force a single model but recommend that countries implement measures covering education, flexible study, career counseling, and job placement for athletes. They also encourage the creation of Dual Career support networks at national and European levels.

## Conclusion

The dual career concept, defined as the structured pursuit of both athletic and academic or vocational goals, has emerged as a crucial framework for supporting athletes' holistic development and long-term well-being. It acknowledges that elite sport alone is rarely sufficient to secure athletes' futures, and that education or employment can offer psychological balance, career resilience, and broader identity formation. Dual careers act as a safeguard against common athlete risks such as burnout, identity foreclosure, and difficult transitions out of sport. While the term and policies surrounding dual careers have gained particular prominence in Europe, analogous structures exist globally, such as the student-athlete model in North America. This chapter demonstrates

that successful dual career pathways depend on institutional support systems, cultural attitudes, and public policy frameworks that treat athletes as whole individuals. Ultimately, dual careers are not only a developmental choice but a social responsibility shared by educational institutions, sports organizations, and policymakers.

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## 2 Theoretical Foundations of Dual Career Thinking

### Introduction

Why are theoretical models needed to understand dual career pathways? In essence, models provide a ‘big picture’ framework for making sense of the complex journey that student-athletes undertake. Dual career athletes are navigating two demanding spheres, sport and education or work simultaneously, and their experiences can vary widely. Theoretical models distill common patterns, stages, and factors from both research and practice, offering a roadmap for athletes’ development. By identifying typical stages of athletic and academic development, as well as transition points and risk factors, models help practitioners anticipate challenges and provide timely support. In other words, models turn a complex, individual life path into a more structured narrative that coaches, psychologists, teachers, and policymakers can understand and use as a guide. They remind us to see the athlete as a whole person with interlinked development in sport, school, and other life domains – not just as a performer (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). Embracing this holistic, theory-driven perspective leads to better support programs, because interventions can be mapped to the athlete’s stage of development and specific transition needs (Stambulova et al., 2009). The sport psychology community has strongly advocated bridging theoretical knowledge and practice is crucial for advancing dual career support policies. In this chapter, we go through key frameworks and connect them to practice in a comprehensive manner.

### The Holistic Athletic Career Model

One of the most influential frameworks in dual career research is the Holistic Athletic Career (HAC) model, initially known as the ‘developmental model of transitions faced by athletes’ (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). Paul Wylleman and David Lavallee originally proposed this model to capture an athlete’s career as a series of stages and transitions not only in sport but also in other life domains. The core idea is that an athlete develops on multiple levels in parallel – and that transitions in sport are intertwined with changes in other

spheres of life. The original model delineated four levels of development: athletic, psychological, psychosocial, and academic/vocational. For example, an athlete might be in a transition from junior- to senior-level sports on the athletic level at the same time as moving from high school to university on the academic level, while also maturing emotionally on the psychological level and experiencing shifts in their support network of family, coaches, and peers on the psychosocial level. By charting these concurrent trajectories, the model encourages sport practitioners to view athletes holistically – acknowledging that sporting development does not happen in isolation from the athlete’s education, relationships, and mental growth. Over time, research supported the need to broaden this model. Studies showed that in addition to the original four domains, financial and legal factors also play significant roles in athletes’ careers, especially during major transitions like retirement. For instance, an athlete’s financial situation, like scholarships, sponsorships, and family support, can critically impact their educational choices or ability to continue in elite sport, and legal status, turning from minor to adult, determines schooling requirements and contract eligibility. Currently the expanded model consists of six interrelated layers: athletic, psychological, psychosocial, academic/vocational, financial, and legal (Wylleman, 2019). The updated model provides a comprehensive map of an athlete’s development from childhood through post-sport career, across all these domains simultaneously.

At its heart, the holistic model is layered by age and stage. It typically illustrates an athlete’s life in approximate age bands, showing key stages and transitions on each layer. For example, on the athletic level, an athlete progresses through an Initiation stage which is introduction to sport; a Development stage when they start specializing and becoming an elite junior; a Mastery stage which is their peak elite performance, often in early adulthood; and eventually the Discontinuation stage meaning retirement from elite sport. Parallel to that, the academic/vocational level might show stages like primary education, secondary education, perhaps higher education or vocational training, and then post-sport career employment. The psychosocial level would reflect changes in an athlete’s support system: for instance, in early years parents and teachers are central, whereas in later years a spouse or employer might be more prominent. The psychological level corresponds to general developmental stages (e.g., adolescence, young adulthood) through which the athlete’s personal maturity and identity evolve. Financially, the athlete might move from family support, to federation or sponsor support during elite years, to self-sufficiency or new income after sport. Legally, the key transition is reaching adulthood, which often coincides with new rights and responsibilities such as signing contracts.

By presenting all six layers together, the HAC model helps stakeholders visualize how an athlete’s ‘whole life’ develops in concert. A crucial insight of this model is that a change in one domain will ripple through the others. For example, when an athlete enters university (academic layer transition), it often

coincides with moving away from home and forming new peer relationships (psychosocial layer), adapting to a more autonomous lifestyle (psychological layer), possibly needing more financial planning (financial layer), and sometimes changes in coaching or club as they move to a senior sport context (athletic layer transition). The model alerts coaches and support staff to these overlaps, so they can better coordinate support. Rather than treating athletic performance issues in isolation, support personnel are encouraged to consider what else is happening in the athlete's life at that stage – exams, relationships, job training, etc. This aligns with the dual career philosophy that an athlete should be supported as a whole person, not just as a performer.

By 2019, the HAC model had become a cornerstone of European dual career policy and practice. It was explicitly cited in position stands, policy, and research as a guiding framework. Many athlete career programs and policies (e.g., the EU Guidelines on Dual Careers, 2012) implicitly reflect this model's principles, ensuring that initiatives address educational flexibility, career planning, psychological counseling, and life skills – not solely sports training. In practice, professionals use the model as a checklist to ensure that support services cover all domains. For example, a dual career program might include academic tutoring, career advice, mental health support, financial literacy training, and mentorship for life after sports. The HAC model provides both a diagnostic framework to understand an athlete's current situation and a planning tool to prepare for upcoming transitions.

### **The Athletic Career Transition Model**

If the HAC model maps out what an athlete's overall career timeline looks like, Stambulova's Athletic Career Transition model focuses on how athletes cope with the key turning points along that timeline. This model provides a framework for understanding transitions as a process that involves demands, coping, and outcomes. In simple terms, a transition in sport is any period of change that requires the athlete to adjust their mindset, behavior, and environment – for example, moving from junior to senior level, recovering from a major injury, or retiring from sport. Stambulova's model views each such transition as a potential crisis or challenge. It is a juncture at which the athlete's previous skills and habits may no longer be sufficient, thus requiring new coping strategies (Stambulova, 2003). Successfully managing a transition leads to healthy development both on and off the field, whereas failing to cope can result in problems like stress, poor performance, or even dropout.

A key contribution of this model is its categorization of different types of transitions. Initially, sport psychologists distinguished between normative and nonnormative transitions. Normative transitions are those that are predictable and happen as a natural part of an athletic career. They are normative in the sense that virtually all athletes in a given sport experience them, usually at similar career stages. Examples include the transition from youth competition

to senior elite competition, or the eventual retirement from elite sport. These are foreseeable changes that athletes and coaches know are coming. Because they are expected, athletes can often prepare for them in advance. For example, a junior athlete gradually increases training intensity to meet senior-level demands, or a veteran player plans for retirement by gradually exploring coaching or education opportunities. In contrast, nonnormative transitions are unexpected, unpredictable, and not tied to any set timetable. These include events like serious injuries, sudden coaching changes, being cut from a team unexpectedly, or personal crises. Nonnormative transitions can be especially challenging because the athlete is often caught unprepared. They represent disruptions that require urgent coping without much warning (Stambulova, 2003; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994).

However, as dual career research evolved, scholars recognized that not all transitions fit neatly into that binary. Recently, the concept of quasi-normative transitions has been introduced. A quasi-normative transition is one that only athletes in particular subgroups or contexts experience, and for those athletes it may be anticipated, even though it's not universal to all athletes. For example, consider an athlete from Europe who decides to pursue a university sports scholarship in the United States. This involves a major cultural transition including moving abroad, adapting to a new educational system and sport culture. Such a move is not a standard stage for every athlete, but for those who do follow that path, it's somewhat and they can plan for it. Other quasi-normative transitions might include things like an Olympic Games cycle which is relevant only for Olympians, with its own unique pressures every four years or military service requirements for athletes in countries with conscription. These transitions are specific to a certain category of athletes and lie between normative and nonnormative. They are foreseeable for athletes in that category, but irrelevant to others. By naming quasi-normative transitions, researchers like Stambulova and colleagues refined the model to better reflect the diversity of athletes' experiences in modern sport.

Stambulova's Athletic Career Transition model not only classifies transitions but also highlights the process of coping with transitions. It posits that when faced with a transition (normative or otherwise), an athlete encounters a set of demands or challenges specific to that transition, for example, increased competition level, time management challenges, and identity questions. The athlete then mobilizes various resources like personal coping skills, social support, and financial means to deal with these demands. The balance between demands and resources will determine the outcome: a successful transition where the athlete adapts and perhaps even grows from the experience or a crisis transition where the athlete struggles to cope, potentially suffering negative consequences like burnout or dropout. For instance, the junior-to-senior transition brings demands such as stronger opponents, possibly relocating to a new city or club, and coordinating sport with higher education. An athlete who has good social support, realistic expectations, and time management

skills may navigate this transition smoothly – we would say they successfully coped with the transition. Conversely, an athlete who lacks support or has underdeveloped coping strategies might experience performance slumps or anxiety, or consider quitting sport, indicating a transition crisis that needs intervention (Stambulova et al., 2024). The model encourages proactive support. If we know a normative transition is coming, we can prepare the athlete by boosting their resources (e.g., training mental skills before a major career jump). And if a nonnormative shock occurs, the model guides support staff to quickly identify what resources the athlete needs to cope.

In practical terms, Stambulova's model has inspired the development of transition support services as a key part of dual career programs. For example, many sport academies and universities now have designated lifestyle advisors or career counselors who work with athletes during known transition periods like the first year of university, or as retirement approaches, helping them develop coping strategies and use available support networks. The model's influence is also seen in workshops that teach athletes general skills for transition coping such as resilience, stress management, or planning for dual career transitions like moving abroad or balancing internship work with training. By conceptualizing transitions as processes that can be managed rather than as random events that simply happen to athletes, the Athletic Career Transition model gives both athletes and practitioners a sense of agency. Transitions are challenges that can be prepared for and overcome, rather than full-blown crises to fear.

Another strength of the model is its applicability to nonathletic transitions that dual career athletes face. For student-athletes, some of the toughest transitions are academic or vocational like entering university, graduating, or job hunting, which occur simultaneously with sport transitions. Stambulova's framework can be extended to these as well. We can analyze, for instance, the demands of starting university with new city, tougher academics, and new social environment, and see how those might compound the athletic demands of, say, joining a professional club. It urges support providers to coordinate efforts. Academic tutors, coaches, and sport psychologists ideally should communicate during such dual transitions so that the athlete isn't overwhelmed. The Athletic Career Transition model provides a systematic approach to understanding and aiding athletes through the many changes of a dual career. By classifying transition types and emphasizing coping processes, it complements the HAC model. The first one gives the big picture of stages, whereas the other zooms into the critical junctures between those stages.

## **International Dual Career Pathways**

Dual career pathways are challenging even within one country, but they can become even more complex when an athlete's journey spans multiple countries and cultures. In today's globalized sports world, many athletes take

transnational dual career pathways, for example, a European athlete moving to the United States to compete in college sports or an athlete training abroad in a professional club while continuing education online. Ryba and colleagues (2015) have introduced the concept of transnationalism in dual careers, examining how mobility across borders impacts an athlete's career development. An athlete who pursues part of their education and sport in another country faces not only the usual dual career challenges but also cultural and linguistic transitions, different academic systems, and the need to adapt to new social environments. These additional layers of transition mean that international dual career athletes often experience demands that domestic athletes do not.

Researchers have conceptualized this by identifying distinct patterns of international dual career pathways. In a study of European student-athletes who migrated for sport or education, they found three main narrative patterns.

### ***The 'Sport Exile' Pathway***

This refers to athletes who move within Europe or within a similar cultural zone primarily in search of better sport opportunities while continuing their studies. They are dubbed sport exiles because they leave their home country's system due to limited opportunities there. For instance, a track athlete from a small country moves to a training center in a larger European nation that also allows them to enroll in university. These athletes often maintain ties to their home and sometimes plan to return after their sport career but must integrate into a new sport system and perhaps a new language or education style in the interim. They face challenges like loneliness or culture shock, but within the EU context, academic credits and qualifications might be more transferable, easing the educational transition somewhat.

### ***The 'Sport Mercenary' Pathway***

This pattern was observed in athletes who moved to the USA for university sports, primarily motivated by the athletic and scholarship opportunities. The term 'mercenary' here is not pejorative but highlights that sport considerations such as access to superior facilities, coaching, or competition in US college sports are front and center. These athletes often see the US college system as a means to further their sport career and get a free education as a bonus. They might plan to use the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) system to launch a professional career or reach higher performance levels than they could at home. The dual career in this case is structured. American universities provide a fairly integrated sport-academics environment, but the athlete must adjust to American college life, different academic expectations, and being far from home. Common demands include language proficiency, if English is not their first language, adapting to a different coaching style or training intensity, and being independent at a relatively young age in a foreign country.

There are also opportunities as many European athletes thrive in the NCAA, enjoying top-notch support and a culture that celebrates student-athletes.

### ***The ‘Nomadic Cosmopolitan’ Pathway***

This was another pattern among those who went to the USA, but with a twist. These athletes embraced a cosmopolitan identity, often moving multiple times or engaging with multiple cultures. They might have started their sport in one country, pursued university in the USA, and then perhaps moved again for graduate studies or a professional sport contract elsewhere. Their motivation blends athletic and personal development. They seek out international experiences as part of their growth. They become ‘citizens of the world’, comfortable in navigating different cultural settings. For these athletes, mobility is a lifestyle. The dual career journey is highly individual and rich in cross-cultural learning, but it can also mean repeatedly rebuilding one’s social network and support system from scratch with each move.

These patterns underscore how cultural transitions overlay on dual career transitions. Moving to a new country for sport or education entails learning new norms. Athletes frequently report that such moves, while challenging, broaden their horizons. They gain language skills, independence, and resilience from adapting to new cultures. These benefits are the opportunities side of international pathways, as they can enhance personal growth and even athletic development by exposing athletes to different coaching and competition styles.

On the other hand, the demands are significant. Culturally, the athlete might face isolation or identity conflict. They may lack the usual safety nets as family is far away, and academic or sport support might not initially understand their background. From an academic standpoint, there could be differences in curriculum or academic credit systems to navigate. For example, European students in the USA might need to take general education courses unfamiliar to them, while American athletes in Europe might find fewer support services like academic advisors dedicated to athletes. There are also practical issues including visas, eligibility rules, and logistics of moving. All these mean that planning and support for transnational dual careers are crucial. Recognizing this, the European Union’s dual career guidelines explicitly call for international cooperation, recommending that sports and educational institutions across countries collaborate to support mobile student-athletes. For instance, exchange programs or agreements can help athletes continue schooling when training abroad.

In terms of theoretical framing, international dual careers exemplify the earlier concept of quasi-normative transitions. A cultural transition is predictable for those who choose that path, and athletes can prepare by learning about the new culture or even doing short visits beforehand. But despite preparation, it remains a profound transition that requires significant adaptation

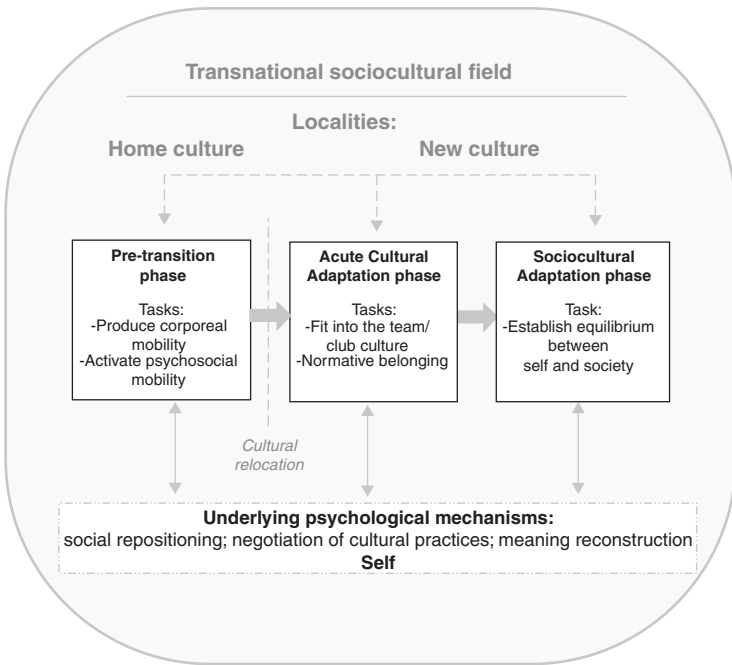


Figure 2.1 The Cultural Transition Model.

Source: Ryba et al. (2016), Copyright © 2016 Ryba, Stambulova and Ronkainen

resources. Researchers have suggested using approaches like the Cultural Transition model (Ryba, et al., 2016, see Figure 2.1) to properly support these athletes, meaning practitioners should be culturally competent and consider the athlete’s cultural context in their support plans.

### Dual Career Development Environments

While the previous models focus on the athlete and their individual pathway, another crucial perspective is to look at the environment surrounding the athlete. Researchers have proposed a taxonomy of dual career development environments (DCDEs) (Morris et al., 2021), building on the holistic ecological approach and DCDE models introduced by Henriksen and colleagues (2020), to classify the types of systems that support or fail to support dual career athletes across different countries. The premise is that an athlete’s success in balancing sport and education is not only about their personal efforts or coping skills, but also about the environmental structure, so the policies, institutions, and cultures either facilitate or hinder a dual career. A DCDE can be thought

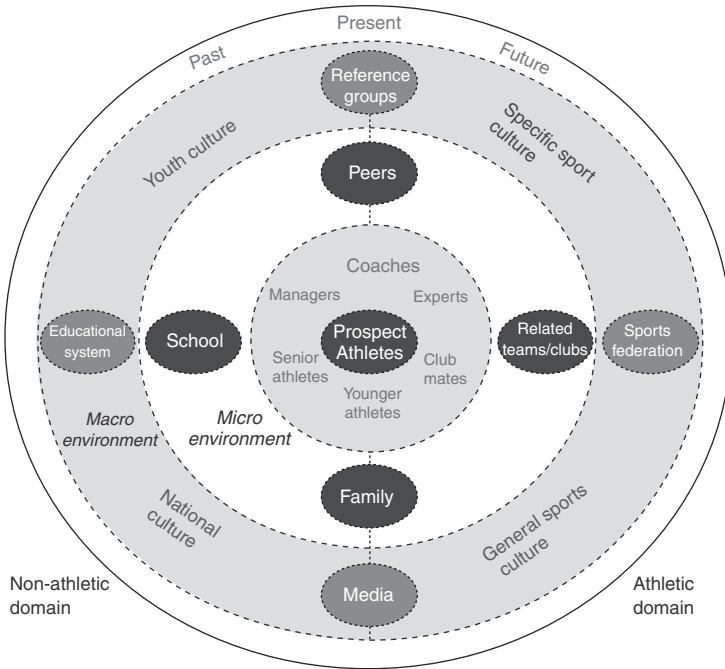


Figure 2.2 DCDE Model.

Source: Henriksen et al. (2023), copyright © 2023 International Society of Sport Psychology, reprinted by permission of Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group, www.tandfonline.com on behalf of International Society of Sport Psychology

of as the ecosystem that envelops the athlete including schools, universities, sport clubs, federations, families, and even governments. Understanding the variety of these environments helps stakeholders identify what structural support is in place and what might be missing (Figure 2.2).

Morris and colleagues (2021) conducted a European-wide analysis and identified eight distinct types of DCDEs that were present in different proportions across countries. These types can be grouped by who leads or drives the dual career support.

### ***Sports-Friendly Schools***

These are secondary schools that adapt their schedules and requirements to the needs of talented young athletes. For example, they might offer flexible timetables, distance learning options, or tutoring for students who miss classes due to training and competitions. Many European countries have designated

‘sport classes’ or specialized schools so that athletes can complete high school without sacrificing training.

### ***Elite Sport Schools or Colleges***

Similar to sports-friendly schools, these institutions are often wholly dedicated to athlete education and training, often at the high school level, sometimes extending to college. They integrate daily training into the curriculum and are typically run in partnership with sports authorities. For instance, some countries have national sports academies or Olympic high schools where students are grouped by sport and receive sports science support on campus.

### ***Sport-Friendly Universities***

Universities in this category make significant accommodations for elite athletes pursuing higher education. They might allow part-time enrollment, extend deadlines during competition seasons, offer e-learning, or have mentors to support student-athletes. These universities often sign agreements or earn certifications (e.g., ‘Elite Athlete Friendly University’), indicating their commitment to dual careers. A key feature is that although flexibility is provided, there may not always be formal coordination with sports federations and the support is mainly on academic-side, relying on professors’ understanding.

### ***Professional and/or Private Sport Club Programs***

In some cases, sports clubs, especially professional clubs in sports like football, basketball, run their own education or career programs for athletes. These might include hiring tutors to travel with youth teams or partnering with local schools to create custom class schedules for academy players. Private academies might also fall here, for example, a tennis academy that arranges online schooling for its trainees. The club or sport organization is the driving force, ensuring athletes get some form of education alongside sport.

### ***Combined Dual Career Systems***

This is perhaps the ideal model – an integrated system where sport and education providers work hand in hand to support the athlete in a coordinated way. In a combined system, there are formal agreements bridging schools or universities and sports federations or institutes. For example, a national Olympic committee might oversee a network where every athlete in the system has both a sport mentor and an academic or career mentor communicating regularly. The Talented Athlete Scholarship Scheme (TASS) in the UK

and Team Denmark's setup with universities are such examples. They ensure standardized support across institutions, covering everything from training adjustments to exam flexibility. Combined systems often enjoy state involvement or funding to glue the parts together.

### ***National Sports Programs***

These are initiatives by national sport federations or institutes focusing on dual career support. For instance, a national sports institute might provide education counseling or remote schooling options for athletes on national teams. They might not cover all sports, but within their sports, they aim to support education or career by offering language courses, job internships, or scheduling training camps to avoid exam periods. Such programs might also include military or police athlete programs where athletes are employed in the armed forces or law enforcement but essentially allowed to train full-time.

### ***Defense Forces Programs***

In a few countries, the military or defense forces run special programs for elite athletes, effectively hiring them as servicemen/servicewomen but with duties primarily related to training and representing the military in competitions. These programs provide a salary and often education or training opportunities within the military structure. While not widespread, they exist. They rely on the understanding that sport is a temporary career, after which the athlete can transition to a regular role in the military or use the skills gained.

### ***Players' Union Programs***

Athletes' union or player associations are especially common in professional team sports, sometimes offer education and career services to their members. For example, the players' association in sports like football, rugby, or basketball might fund scholarship programs, online courses, or career counseling for players, knowing that athletes need to prepare for life after pro sport. These programs are typically driven by the athletes' collective organizations, complementing whatever support their clubs or leagues provide (Figure 2.3).

What is the value of thinking in terms of environments? First, it shifts the focus from athletes shouldering all the responsibility to a more shared responsibility with institutions. A strong DCDE can buffer athletes from the dual pressures, a combined system where a university and sport federation coordinate will ensure an athlete does not have to choose between a championship and an exam. The structures are in place to accommodate both. On the other

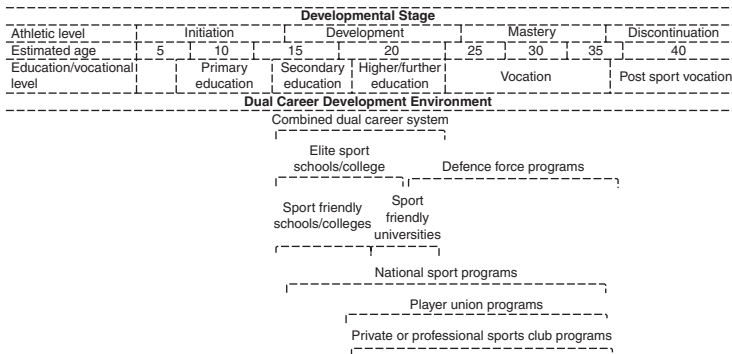


Figure 2.3 DCDE Taxonomy.

Source: Morris et al. (2021), copyright © 2020 European Association for Sport Management, reprinted by permission of Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group, www.tandfonline.com on behalf of European Association for Sport Management

hand, in a weak or absent environment, the athlete is on their own, negotiating individually with coaches or teachers for every accommodation (Aquilina & Henry, 2010). Research shows that in countries or contexts with robust DCDEs, athletes report less stress and better outcomes in both sport and studies, because the system has their back (Morris et al., 2021). It underlines that dual career success is not just an individual achievement but a systemic one.

Identifying one’s environment type can highlight gaps and opportunities. For example, if a country realizes most of its support is sport-led but there is little integration with schools, that might explain why some athletes still drop out of education. Perhaps schools do not understand their needs. This recognition can drive policy change, such as creating liaison programs between sport bodies and schools shifting toward a combined model. In practice, the taxonomy helps policymakers and sport managers to ask: Do we have all eight types covered? Which are we strong in, and which are missing? It also fosters international learning – a country with a predominantly *laissez-faire* past can look at neighbors with state-supported or combined systems to develop its own programs.

The DCDE concept also complements the holistic and transition models by adding a contextual layer: even a well-prepared athlete will struggle if their environment is inflexible. Conversely, a supportive environment can compensate for some individual shortcomings. For instance, an athlete who lacks time management skills might cope if their school gives them a lighter course load during competition season. That is the environment stepping in to adjust demands. Environment-based thinking encourages us to cultivate settings around athletes that proactively facilitate dual careers, rather than expecting athletes to constantly swim upstream.

## **Consensus and Guidance in Dual Career Development**

The development of dual career support has been strongly shaped by collective efforts to translate research into practice. Over the past decade, professional bodies such as the European Federation of Sport Psychology (FEPSAC) and the International Society of Sport Psychology (ISSP) have provided and updated position stands that outline shared understandings and recommendations for supporting athletes. These statements reflect a growing consensus in the field and serve as reference points for policymakers, sport organizations, and educational institutions.

Across these position statements, several themes stand out. Athletes are described as whole persons, whose lives extend beyond sport to include education, work, and family. Development is understood as holistic and multidimensional, with changes in one area, such as education or social life, inevitably influencing sport and vice versa. The environment is also holistic as athletes' careers are shaped not just by coaches and peers but by schools, universities, federations, and broader cultural contexts. The athletic career is part of a life career. Doing sport is not only about striving for medals but also about building capacities and identities that will serve athletes throughout life. In this light, career transitions, whether normative, nonnormative, or quasi-normative, are turning phases that can reshape the athlete's pathway.

Another important message is that dual career support is a shared responsibility. Sport federations, schools, universities, governments, and families each play a role in creating environments that enable athletes to succeed in both sport and education. Moving from ad hoc solutions to more coordinated systems is key to reducing unnecessary barriers and ensuring smoother transitions.

Both FEPSAC (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019) and ISSP (Stambulova et al. 2009, 2021) encourage practitioners to anchor their work in established frameworks such as the HAC model and the Athletic Career Transition model. By mapping athletes' circumstances onto these frameworks, support providers can anticipate needs and design interventions aligned with international best practice.

## **Conclusion**

Dual career athletes live in two fast-paced worlds at once, and helping them succeed requires understanding the full complexity of that journey. The theoretical foundations described in this chapter provide a multidimensional lens to see the athlete not just as a competitor or a student but as a whole person navigating life. Each model adds a layer of insight: the HAC model reminds us to account for all facets of development and how they interrelate. The Athletic Career Transition model alerts us to the critical moments and coping needs during changes. The DCDE taxonomy emphasizes that the context around the

athlete can greatly enable or hinder dual career paths, and the transnational perspective broadens our view to include cultural adaptation as part of some athletes' stories.

For practitioners and policymakers new to dual career management, these theories might initially seem abstract, but they have very practical implications. They teach us, for example, that a 19-year-old athlete entering university and senior sport simultaneously is at a known crossroads; thus, we should proactively offer academic flexibility and psychological support at this time rather than reacting after a crisis occurs. They show that if an athlete is struggling, we should not only train them harder or tutor them more, but also look at their support environment and check if their coaches and teachers coordinate. Are their financial needs met? The models collectively advocate a preventive, athlete-centered approach that anticipates transitions, bolsters support around the athlete, and treats athletic and academic development as parts of a cohesive whole. This is a shift from older approaches that might have seen education as a threat to athletic performance or vice versa. The theoretical foundations of dual career thinking argue instead for synergy. Success in sport and success in education can fuel one another if managed holistically.

This chapter also highlights how these models are not just academic exercises but increasingly embedded in high-level recommendations and policies. When the leading experts through FEPSAC, ISSP, and the European Commission emphasize holistic development and transition support, it sends a clear message that supporting dual careers is about more than providing a bit of tutoring or a flexible schedule. It's about adopting an entire mindset and structure that values the athlete as a developing individual with multiple identities and a life after sports. The payoff for adopting this theoretical lens is evident in research as athletes with well-supported dual careers tend to be more resilient, have more balanced identities, cope better with sport retirement, and contribute positively to society post-sport.

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# 3 Overview of European and International Dual Career Policies

## Introduction

For athletes balancing sport with education or work, supportive policies can make the difference between thriving in a dual career and having to choose one path at the expense of the other. While personal dedication and time management are crucial, the broader policy framework and institutional support in place are equally important. As the European Commission has noted, not only are high levels of motivation and resilience required from athletes, but also ‘special arrangements are needed to avoid the situation where talented and elite sportspeople are forced to choose between education and sport or work and sport’ (European Commission, 2012). In other words, effective dual career development hinges on coordinated efforts by schools, universities, employers, and sports bodies to create conditions in which athletes do not have to sacrifice their education or vocational training for athletic success. Policy matters in dual career development because it provides the structure and resources such as flexible schooling, scholarships, or career services, which allow athletes to pursue high-performance sport and build a future beyond sport simultaneously.

Over the past decade, the importance of dual career support has been formally recognized in Europe. The European Union’s EU Guidelines on Dual Careers of Athletes (European Commission, 2012) urged Member States to adopt measures that enable athletes to succeed in sport and prepare for life after sport. These guidelines were aimed at policymakers as a catalyst for action – encouraging countries to develop national dual career strategies, raise awareness among institutions, and provide a ‘legal and financial framework’ for supporting athlete-students. In response, many European countries have introduced policies or programs to support dual careers, often with backing from EU initiatives. Funding through Erasmus+ and related programs has further bolstered these efforts by facilitating dual career projects, exchanges, and the sharing of good practices across countries. Overall, the EU framework has helped shape opportunities for athletes by promoting a culture in which education, employment, and athletic development are seen as complementary rather than conflicting pursuits.

Table 3.1 European Dual Career Policy Comparison

<i>Country</i>	<i>Legal Framework</i>	<i>Government Funding</i>	<i>Coordination Body</i>	<i>Academic Support (Universities/ Schools)</i>	<i>Sport-School System</i>	<i>Psychological/ Mentorship Support</i>
The United Kingdom	No, dedicated dual career law; supported by policy frameworks	Yes – Sport England funds TASS and other programs	TASS (Sport England + SportsAid partnership)	Accredited universities and colleges; lifestyle advisors; flexible study plans	No separate sport-school system; athletes supported in mainstream schools	Lifestyle advisors (EIS, TASS) provide mentoring, mental health, and career counseling
Sweden	Yes, national guidelines by RF and the Ministry of Education	Yes – public funding through RF and municipalities	RF in partnership with the Ministry of Education	RIU (National Sports Universities) and EVL (Elite Sports-Friendly Universities) with coordinators, tutoring, and flexible exams	Strong system of sport schools (RIG and NIU) at the secondary level	Dual career coordinators; access to sport psychologists; mentorship and transition support
Poland	Partial, framework for sport schools and MSiT programs; no overarching dual career law	Yes – MSiT funds ACSS and PZS programs	AZS (Academic Sports Association) and MSiT	ACSS centers at universities; IOS in some universities	Sport schools and SMS nationwide	Emerging mentorship via AZS; limited structured psychological services but growing emphasis in ACSS and federation programs

Belgium Flanders	Yes, elite student-athlete contracts (since 2003)	Yes – Flemish government funds topsportschools and university contracts	Flemish Ministry of Sport and Education	‘Topsport and Study’ departments at universities; flexible pacing and tutoring	Six topsportschools across 17 sports	Sport psychologists and athlete counselors embedded in Topsport and Study services
France	Yes, athlete status ( <i>sportif de haut niveau</i> ) recognized in law	Yes – state funding via the Ministry of Sport and INSEP	INSEP	University partnerships; flexible admission and study	<i>Sport-études</i> schools at the secondary level; INSEP as national hub	INSEP provides integrated psychology services; mentoring networks for high-level athletes
Italy	Yes, 2017 law formally recognizing student-athletes	Yes – the Ministry of Education and Sport funding	Italian Olympic Committee or Comitato Olimpico Nazionale (CONI) with the Ministry of Education	Sport-friendly schools and universities; flexible study loads	Dedicated high schools for sport; integration with clubs	Mentorship programs (e.g., ex-athletes as tutors); psychological counseling in the CONI network
Finland	Yes, national policy through the Ministry of Education and Culture	Yes – significant state support	Finnish Olympic Committee + Urhea network	Dual career services in sport academies and universities	Strong network of sport schools and academies coordinated nationally	Sport psychologists and mentors available via Urhea network and Olympic Committee

This chapter offers a comparative look at how dual career policies have been implemented across Europe and beyond. It begins with an overview of the European dual career landscape, including the role of EU-level initiatives and guidelines in guiding national approaches. We then delve into three country case studies – the United Kingdom, Sweden, and Poland – to explore how different national contexts translate the dual career concept into practice. These examples highlight how factors like educational systems, sporting culture, and government support influence the design of dual career programs in each country. Following the case studies, a broader comparative analysis examines common trends and variations in dual career policies across various European nations, with key features summarized in Table 3.1.

Beyond Europe, this chapter broadens its scope to consider how other parts of the world support athletes' dual careers. We discuss dual career models in New Zealand, Australia, and the United States, illustrating approaches such as the US collegiate 'student-athlete' system and athlete support networks in Oceania. Finally, this chapter synthesizes insights from all the systems reviewed, highlighting good practices that contribute to successful dual career pathways as well as ongoing challenges and gaps. By comparing European and international dual career policies, the reader will gain an understanding of how different frameworks can support athletes' education and life beyond sport, and what lessons can be learned to inform more effective dual career support for student-athletes and elite athletes worldwide.

## **European Overview of Dual Career Policies and Frameworks**

### *European Policy Context*

The concept of the 'dual career' refers to athletes pursuing sport at a high level while simultaneously investing in education or work. It has gained significant policy attention across Europe over the past two decades. The European Commission issued EU Guidelines on Dual Careers of Athletes in 2012, recognizing that elite athletes' lives span multiple domains, namely sport, education, employment, and health, and thus requires coordinated support across sectors. In practice, this means a cross-sectoral, interministerial approach is needed – for example, cooperation among sports authorities, educational institutions, employers, and health services to ensure athletes can develop in sport without compromising academics or future employability (European Commission, 2012). The EU Guidelines emphasize 'joined-up' policy efforts so that athletes' long-term needs beyond sport are met, while also encouraging national adaptations rather than a single imposed model. Different countries have indeed taken different approaches, ranging from state-centric frameworks backed by legislation to formal agreements between schools and sports bodies, to more decentralized or *laissez-faire* arrangements. For instance,

France, Finland, and the UK have each tailored dual career policies to their local systems through cooperation across government levels, sport federations, and educational sectors. This diversity reflects varied national sport cultures and education systems – yet across all models the common goal is to help athletes succeed in both their sport and post-sport careers.

### ***Widespread National Initiatives***

In the wake of the EU guidelines, most European countries have implemented some form of dual career support. These include specialized sports schools, flexible academic programs, and athlete support services. Many countries with strong sport traditions have long operated sports schools at the secondary level, which integrate enhanced training into the curriculum. For example, Belgium developed a system of six ‘Topsportschools’ (elite sports schools) in Flanders starting in 1998, which currently centralize about 639 adolescent athletes across 17 sports, providing high-level coaching and facilities while enabling them to complete their secondary education. Early-specialization sports, like gymnastics or swimming, even allow talented youth to begin in primary school partnered with these centers. Similarly, France’s sport-études programs and Italy’s sport high schools integrate daily training with schooling. At the university level, some countries have introduced charter programs or scholarship systems to encourage athletes to pursue higher education. In Flanders, for instance, the government since 2003 has offered elite student-athlete contracts that lay out academic and athletic criteria – providing financial support and flexible pacing for athletes to obtain a degree alongside sport. The Belgian approach also established dedicated university departments like Vrije Universiteit Brussel’s ‘Topsport and Study’ office in 1987, to offer academic flexibility, tutoring, and sport-science services to student-athletes (Wylleman, P., De Bosscher, V., & De Knop, P. (2015)). These examples illustrate the broader European trend: dual career policies have become an integral part of athlete development, viewed as beneficial for sporting success, athletes’ personal growth, and their employability after sport (Aquilina, 2013; European Commission, 2012). Significant EU funding (e.g., Erasmus+ Sport projects) and networks such as the European Athlete Student (EAS) network have further spurred the exchange of good practices across countries (López-Flores et al., 2021). Today, while models differ, the principle of supporting a dual sport+education pathway is widely accepted as a pillar of athlete welfare and ‘duty of care’ in sport (Grey-Thompson, 2017).

### ***Common Elements and Challenges***

Across Europe’s varied policy landscape, several common elements emerge. Many national programs focus on flexible education arrangements – for example, adapted school schedules or distance learning options for athletes

who must train and travel for competitions. Nearly all dual career frameworks involve some form of financial assistance or scholarship, whether through state funding, Olympic solidarity programs, or university sports scholarships, to offset the cost of combining studies with sport. Additionally, support services, often termed ‘athlete lifestyle’ or ‘career support’, are a key component. Sports schools and universities frequently provide access to sport psychologists, academic advisors, career counselors, and medical/physio staff who understand athletes’ needs. Despite these efforts, research and policy reviews have identified persistent challenges. One major issue is ensuring that dual career programs truly balance both pursuits – in some cases, well-intentioned sport-focused schools end up prioritizing athletic results at the expense of education. Studies have noted that athletes in intensive elite sport programs often struggle with time for studies and report stress or burnout if support is insufficient. There is also significant variation in implementation as some regions or sports provide excellent dual career pathways, while others lack formal support, leaving athletes to manage on their own. A 2021 review of European dual career support environments found that structured support at secondary school and university level exists in many countries, but access is uneven and often limited for non-elite or junior athletes (Lopez-Flores et al., 2021). Furthermore, bridging the gap between education and employment remains a concern. The EU guidelines highlight the importance of preparing athletes for post-sport careers through vocational training or internships, but not all national policies extend to that stage. These common challenges will be discussed later in this chapter. First, we examine in depth country case studies of the United Kingdom, Sweden, and Poland, which illustrate a range of policy approaches and offer insights into good practices and gaps.

## **National Policy Case Studies**

### ***The United Kingdom: Partnership Programs and Education Flexibility***

The United Kingdom provides a notable example of a dual career support framework built on partnership between the sport sector and educational institutions. Unlike some European countries, the UK does not have a nationwide system of sport-specialized secondary schools. Instead, efforts have focused on supporting student-athletes in mainstream schools, colleges, and universities through targeted programs. One flagship initiative is the Talented Athlete Scholarship Scheme (TASS), a Sport England-funded program launched in 2004. TASS was created to help athletes aged 16 and above ‘balance sport within the rest of their lives’, especially their education and career development. Since its inception, TASS has supported more than 6,000 athletes across around 30 sports, enabling these young sportspeople to

pursue college or university studies without giving up their sporting ambitions. The scheme operates via a nationwide network of accredited universities and colleges – over 40 institutions in England are now recognized as ‘Dual Career Accredited’ TASS delivery sites. This accreditation indicates a commitment to providing flexible study arrangements and support services for student-athletes. As TASS National Director Guy Taylor explained, ‘Dual career support is at the forefront of what TASS does... the Accreditation Scheme recognises those institutions who place precedence on their athletes’ education too’.

### ***Program Structure and Services***

TASS is structured as a partnership between stakeholders. National sport governing bodies (NGBs) nominate talented athletes on their performance pathways for TASS support, and partner universities or colleges deliver the support services. Athletes must be in full-time education and at a performance level defined by their NGB to be nominated (Talented Athlete Scholarship Scheme [TASS], n.d.). Once accepted, a TASS award provides the athlete with a comprehensive package valued up to ~£3,500 per year, which is not a cash scholarship for tuition, but rather a bundle of services and expert support. For example, TASS athletes receive access to training facilities and coaching; sports science and sports medicine support including physiotherapy, nutrition counseling, sport psychology, as well as lifestyle mentoring; and academic flexibility arrangements. Steph Houghton, captain of England’s national women’s football team and a TASS alumna, recalled that ‘being on TASS meant having that extra security – a support network around you. I had physio treatment... nutrition and lifestyle services... It also helped with communication between football and uni, allowing extra flexibility’ (Sport England, 2017). Indeed, a key element of TASS is facilitating communication between the educational institution and the athlete’s coaches or NGB, to ensure academic obligations can be adjusted when training camps or competitions conflict. Flexibility measures may include things like rescheduling exam dates, extending assignment deadlines, remote learning options, or permission to sit exams at alternate locations when athletes are abroad. TASS-accredited universities typically have a dedicated point of contact – a coordinator or tutor for athletes and policies such as ‘flexi-student’ status for national-level athletes, which enable the dual career to function smoothly. For instance, at Solent University (a TASS partner), student-athletes can access online lecture notes when traveling, arrange makeup classes with faculty, and even get modifications to class attendance requirements in busy competition periods. These accommodations are balanced with the expectation that athletes remain in good academic standing – reflecting TASS’s dual goal of athletic success and educational achievement.

Beyond TASS, the UK sport system offers additional career and education support through institutes and charities. The UK Sport, the nation's elite sport agency, and the Sports Institutes provide lifestyle advisors and personal development programs to funded Olympic and Paralympic athletes. These advisors, many of them former athletes or sport psychologists, work one-on-one to help athletes with time management, career planning, and transitions. For example, the UK Institute of Sport employs athlete lifestyle and education advisors as part of its World Class Performance Programme services (Park et al., 2013). The British Olympic Committee participates in the 'Athlete Career Programme' in partnership with the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and Adecco, focusing on career transition and job placements for retiring athletes. At the younger ages, UK schools are increasingly aware of dual career needs. The 2017 Duty of Care in Sport review explicitly recommended that schools and universities be supported and recognized for accommodating talented athletes (Grey-Thompson, 2017). In response, Sport England launched a Talented Athlete Apprenticeship Scheme pilot and expanded TASS accreditation into some sixth-form colleges to reach the 16–18 age group. There are also nongovernmental initiatives like SportsAid's grants for teenage athletes and the Youth Sport Trust's programs that encourage academic institutions to be 'athlete friendly'. All these efforts in the UK share a philosophy of flexibility and individualized support rather than segregating athletes into separate sport schools.

### ***Outcomes and Impact***

The UK's dual career support approach, especially through TASS, is often cited as a good practice example within Europe. By teaming up education providers and sports bodies, it leverages existing educational infrastructure while injecting resources to make them flexible for athletes. TASS reports that each year over 600 student-athletes nationwide receive its support, and many alumni have gone on to significant sporting success including Olympic medalists and professional athletes, while also obtaining university degrees. A Sport England report noted that over half of England's 2017 women's football Euro squad were TASS alumnae, underscoring the role of education-friendly support in developing elite talent. Still, the UK faces challenges as support is not universal, it tends to concentrate on Olympic sports and those in talent pathways, and athletes outside these schemes or in non-elite tiers might struggle. There is also the ongoing issue of combining professional sports with education – for instance, young footballers entering pro club academies at 16 often forsake higher education, which is a gap the UK system continues to grapple with. Nonetheless, the UK's dual career policies exemplify strong integration between sport and education sectors. Good practices from this case include the formal accreditation of educational institutions creating an incentive for colleges to develop athlete-friendly policies and the provision of

comprehensive support services like sports science and academic mentoring, through a single coordinated program TASS.

### **Sweden: Sport Schools and National Framework for Dual Careers**

Sweden's approach to dual careers is often regarded as a model in the Nordic context, characterized by a structured sport school system and an emphasis on holistic development. Unlike the UK, Sweden has implemented specialized sports programs within the school system for talented athletes, particularly at the upper-secondary (high school) level. Since the 1970s, Sweden has run designated sport schools known as Riksidrottsgymnasier national sports upper-secondary schools and more recently NIU – Nationellt godkända idrottstutbildningar nationally certified sports programs at local schools. Today these are formally categorized into two tiers of dual career support in secondary education: Dual Career Support – International Level (DCS-IL) schools, and Dual Career Support – National Level (DCS-NL) programs (Nyberg et al. 2023). Students are selected into DCS-IL schools based on an assessment that they have the potential to reach senior international elite level in their sport, whereas DCS-NL programs cater to athletes deemed likely to achieve at least national elite level. In practice, the DCS-IL corresponds to a limited number of fully residential sport academies, often one per sport, drawing top prospects from across the country, while DCS-NL programs are offered in numerous regional schools allowing strong athletes to train in their locale. These sports schools form the backbone of Sweden's talent development system, integrating daily training sessions, adjusted course schedules, and sport science support into the students' school life. A sport school student might train each morning as part of their curriculum, attend academic classes with flexible scheduling, and receive support like physiotherapy or study tutoring arranged by the school. The underlying policy is supported by the Swedish Sports Confederation in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, ensuring that curricula are adapted (e.g., extending the high school program from three to four years if needed) to accommodate both academic requirements and intensive training.

#### ***Higher Education and Employment Support***

At the university level, Sweden historically had a more *laissez-faire* approach. Talented athletes would enroll in universities of their choice and manage studies alongside sport, sometimes with informal support from coaches or sport-friendly professors. However, awareness of dual career issues has grown. Several universities like Göteborg, Stockholm, and Halmstad now have 'elite sport-friendly' policies or coordinators for student-athletes. Additionally,

Sweden has programs for athletes' vocational and post-sport training. For instance, the National Sports Confederation offers career coaching for retiring athletes and runs job placement initiatives with companies a program akin to 'Talent Program' where corporations commit to hiring former athletes. A notable initiative is 'Elitidrottsvänligt lärosäte' certification, which designates universities that meet standards in accommodating elite athletes similar in spirit to TASS accreditation, though not as widespread. Despite these efforts, it is the high-school-level sport schools that remain the flagship of Sweden's dual career policy, aiming to set athletes up for both sporting excellence and a foundation in education.

### ***Successes and Challenges***

Sweden's sport school system has produced many world-class athletes, and it is often praised for fostering a 'dual identity' in youth. Students see themselves as both athletes and students, which can moderate the risks of an exclusive athletic identity. Research shows that dual career athletes in Sweden enjoy broad social networks and a more balanced lifestyle and often handle transitions out of sport more smoothly due to having an education (e.g., Aquilina, 2013). However, recent studies have also brought a nuanced perspective on the effectiveness of these programs. A 2023 survey of 274 former Swedish world-class athletes revealed that over half of them did not attend any sport school during their youth. In fact, only 31% had attended a DCS-IL (national elite sports school), indicating that reaching the international elite is possible even outside the formal dual career school system. This finding suggests that while sport schools are a valuable tool, they are not a guaranteed pathway to elite success – nor are they the only route. The study also found no significant differences in university education attainment or employment status between those who had attended sport schools and those who had not (Nyberg et al., 2023). In other words, many Swedish athletes managed to complete higher education and find post-sport careers regardless of sport school attendance.

More concerning, some evidence points to unintended drawbacks of the sport school model. One longitudinal study of a Norwegian sport high school (comparable to Sweden's) found that the majority of athletes' performance expectations actually decreased over their three years at the school, and most reported intending to quit sport after graduation (Sisjord & Sorensen, 2018). Similarly, a Dutch study noted that only about 8% of athletes from sport-focused secondary schools went on to reach the international senior elite level in their sport (van Rens et al., 2015). These outcomes underline a critical transition point, when athletes finish secondary school around age 18–19 and move to either senior sport or further studies, many struggle to continue in elite sports. In Sweden, this transition from junior to senior level, often coinciding with starting university, is known to be a high-dropout phase. Contributing factors include increased academic workload, loss of the structured

support that the sport school provided, and the higher competitive standards in senior sport. If an athlete does not immediately break into the top senior ranks or secure sport funding, they may choose to focus on university or work instead. Swedish sport authorities have recognized this gap and have been working to strengthen support for the 18–23 age group. For example, projects have been introduced to provide mentorship for young athletes who move to university cities, and collaborations between sports federations and universities aim to give continued coaching and training opportunities for students. Still, researchers Stambulova et al. (2015) argue that upper-secondary sport programs need to better coordinate sport and study development, to truly fulfill the dual career mission. That might mean adjusting training loads or providing more academic tutoring in the final school years to prepare athletes for the self-directed nature of university study. Additionally, emphasis on individualized support is growing – recognizing that each athlete’s trajectory is different, and some may need more help with academic motivation, while others need career counseling or psychological support to handle dual pressures.

In short, Sweden’s dual career policy is anchored by its sport school infrastructure, which is a clear good practice in terms of early integration of sport and education. The schools benefit athletes by normalizing a dual career lifestyle from a young age and providing professional-level training within an educational setting. The case of Sweden also highlights common challenges: ensuring that the dual aims of such programs are both met, preventing athletic identity foreclosure, and supporting athletes through the post-school transition so they do not drop out prematurely. Swedish stakeholders are actively addressing these issues, and the country continues to be a leading voice in Europe’s dual career discourse, often sharing its experiences through research and policy forums (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019). Notably, Sweden was among the countries that helped develop the EU’s dual career guidelines, advocating for a holistic athlete development perspective including attention to mental health, life skills, and post-sport employability. These values are evident in Sweden’s policies, even as implementation evolves to meet new challenges.

### **Poland: Structured Pathways and New Initiatives in a Transition-Prone System**

Poland offers a dual career landscape that has traditionally been structured around sports schools at the secondary level and is now being supplemented by pilot programs at the university and federation levels. During the socialist era and beyond, Poland, like many Eastern European countries, established sport schools (*szkoły sportowe*) and sports championship schools (*Szkoły Mistrzostwa Sportowego, SMS*) to develop young athletic talent. These institutions still form a key part of Poland’s sport system. Sport schools are generally integrated into the public school system and allow pupils (often from age 10 onward) to follow the national curriculum with additional sport training

sessions each week. SMS, on the other hand, are elite boarding high schools (usually grades 9–12) often run in cooperation with specific sport federations. For example, there are SMS dedicated to track and field, swimming, soccer, volleyball, etc., where selected students, typically junior national team members or top prospects, live and train under professional coaches while completing their secondary education. The SMS model in Poland is somewhat analogous to Sweden's Riksidrottsgymnasium eng. national sports' secondary school (RIG) or France's National Institute of Sport, Expertise, and Performance (INSEP) schools. It concentrates talent in one place to provide top coaching, sports science, and competition opportunities. Crucially, these schools also ensure students can obtain a high school diploma. They provide tutoring or adapted class schedules to accommodate training camps and competitions. In practice, however, the academic flexibility in SMS can vary. Some former attendees report that while schools tried to be accommodating, heavy training and travel meant they had to take matura (final exams) with adjusted timelines or get extra help to catch up on coursework (Włoch et al., 2015). Nonetheless, SMS and sport schools have been effective in producing many of Poland's elite athletes over the years and remain a cornerstone of dual career support up to age 19.

The critical point for Polish athletes often comes at the sport transition from junior to senior level, typically around ages 18–20. Studies and sport officials in Poland have noted an alarmingly high dropout rate in this transition phase. Many athletes leave competitive sport after finishing school, a phenomenon attributed to multiple factors: some do not receive sufficient financial support or sports results to justify continuing, others prioritize university studies or entering the job market, and some experience burnout or injuries. In fact, research by Graczyk et al. (2017) tracking a cohort of Polish elite youth athletes found that nearly 30% had dropped out of their sport within just a few years after their junior years (late teens). Most of these dropouts were from individual sports, and a majority were female athletes, highlighting that certain sports and demographics are more vulnerable. This dropout is a major concern for Polish sport, as it represents lost potential and investment. To address it, Polish policymakers have developed new programs in recent decade focusing on the dual career at the post-secondary stage – essentially picking up where the sport schools leave off.

### ***University-Level Support – Akademickie Centra Szkolenia Sportowego and National Academic Representation (NRA)***

A central actor in Poland's student sport arena is the Academic Sports Association (AZS – Akademicki Związek Sportowy), a nationwide organization that oversees university sports clubs and competitions. AZS, which has chapters at most universities, has long provided training and competition opportunities for student-athletes primarily through the academic championships system. Recognizing the need for more structured support, AZS in partnership with the Ministry of Sport launched the Academic Center for Sports Training program, known

by its Polish acronym ACSS (Akademickie Centra Szkolenia Sportowego). The ACSS program, initiated in the late 2010s, aims to create high-performance training groups for talented athletes enrolled in university, thereby extending the dual career pathway into higher education. Funded by the Ministry of Sport and Tourism (MSiT; from a dedicated national sport fund), ACSS had a budget of about 3.5 million EUR in 2023 and operated at academic clubs in multiple cities. As of 2023, over 1,200 student-athletes were training under ACSS across various AZS-affiliated clubs (e.g., AZS-AWF Warsaw, AZS-AWF Katowice, AZS Gdańsk, AZS Poznań, etc.). The goal of ACSS is ‘to support the training of athletically gifted university students who are preparing for major international competitions such as the World University Games (Universiade), World University Championships, and ultimately the Olympic Games’. In practical terms, ACSS provides these athletes with professional coaching, access to facilities, training camps, and sport science services while they study. It essentially mirrors the environment of an elite national team training center but situated at universities. For the athletes, ACSS helps maintain training quality and competitive level, reducing the risk that enrolling in university leads to a decline in athletic performance. For example, an ACSS track and field squad at AZS-AWF Warsaw might have joint practices, medical care, and a coach coordinating with the university’s schedule. Importantly, ACSS also often includes a scholarship or stipend component funded by the ministry to alleviate financial pressures on student-athletes. The presence of ACSS has started to yield positive results – Polish athletes in sports like judo, fencing, and athletics have medaled at Universiades and continued to progress in senior international competition while pursuing degrees, an outcome the program was designed to facilitate. By offering a ‘bridge’ between youth sports school and full adult professional sport, ACSS addresses a key gap where previously many athletes were lost.

Since 2020 the Ministry of Science and Higher Education introduced a program of National Academic Representation (~3 million EUR per annum) for higher education institutions to finance additional costs related to dual career athletes including tutoring, individual study programs, academic support, and other related expenses. Universities may apply and facilitate the participation of elite athletes regardless of their sport discipline and academic focus. This program has been continuously operating for five years, however its outcomes and continuation are still under scrutiny.

### ***Federation Dual Career Programs***

In parallel, Poland’s MSiT rolled out an initiative directly targeting national sports federations (Polskie Związki Sportowe, PZS) and their national team members. In 2015, MSiT commissioned a comprehensive study (‘Dual Career of Athletes in Poland – Diagnosis’, Włoch et al. 2015) which identified obstacles Polish athletes face in combining education with sports. Building on its findings, the Ministry in recent years launched annual grant

competitions to co-fund dual career programs within each sports federation. The aim is to ensure that athletes on national teams of Olympic and non-Olympic sports, including athletes with disabilities, have opportunities to gain new qualifications and prepare for life after sports while still competing. Specifically, the ministry-funded federation programs focus on providing national team athletes with things like educational workshops and courses (e.g., language classes, coaching certifications, or vocational training), career counseling, and an information hub about dual career opportunities. For example, the Polish athletics federation (PZLA) and yachting federation (PZZ) have used these grants to set up career counseling points where athletes can consult advisors about academic choices or job internships and to run seminars on topics such as sport management, finances, or entrepreneurship. The Ministry explicitly calls for creating online platforms and hiring consultants to ensure athletes are aware of the support and flexible options available. The overarching goal, as stated in the 2025 program announcement, is ‘to provide national team members with knowledge and skills for a smooth transition to professional work, particularly in occupations related to sport’ (Ministry of Sport and Tourism (Poland) [MSiT], 2025). In essence, Poland is encouraging each sport governing body to take responsibility for its athletes’ education and career development, under a co-funded scheme. This is a significant policy shift – from previously expecting athletes to navigate school and work on their own, to now institutionalizing dual career support as part of athletic development. This program, even though providing high flexibility in design of activities, is still very scarcely utilized with less than 10% of federations participating.

### ***Persistent Issues***

Despite these structured pathways, Poland still faces considerable challenges in retaining athletes through the 18–23 age bracket. Statistics from sports schools show a steep drop in athlete numbers after the matura (high school graduation) – many do not continue to elite sport unless they secure a place in a senior national team or a professional club. The high drop-out rate is driven partly by educational pressure. University admissions in Poland are competitive, and historically there were few formal mechanisms for universities to accommodate athletes (unlike in the US National Collegiate Athletic Association [NCAA] system). The 2015 report noted that the term ‘dual career’ was not widely understood among Polish athletes or university administrators at that time, and many athletes felt they lacked institutional support in college (Włoch et al., 2015). Complaints included rigid class schedules, professors unsympathetic to sport-related absences, and zero credit given for sporting achievements in academic settings. Some

of these issues are gradually being addressed. A few leading universities (e.g., Gdańsk, Warsaw) have introduced formal policies such as justified absence for national team athletes or individualized study programs (IOS – Indywidualna Organizacja Studiów [Individual Organization of Studies]) which allow a stretched timeline for degree completion. The Ministry's push via PZS and AZS programs also seems to be shifting the culture. Athletes are beginning to expect and request flexibility, and educational institutions are starting to see elite athletes as an asset, for example, universities taking pride when their students compete internationally, which in turn encourages supportive measures.

In terms of good practices, Poland's multilevel strategy is noteworthy. By providing support at the secondary level (sport schools), tertiary level (ACSS at universities), and career transition level (federation programs), the country is attempting to build a continuous dual career pathway. The ACSS program in particular has been lauded as an innovative solution to the 'college gap', effectively creating mini sport academies on university campuses and keeping athletes engaged through their early 20s. Another strength is the involvement of AZS – a long-standing student sports organization – as it taps into existing structures (sports clubs, competitions like Akademickie Mistrzostwa Polski) that athletes are already part of, rather than building entirely new systems. Early indications show ACSS athletes have improved performances at the World University Games and some transition into national senior teams, suggesting the program may be paying off in both sporting and educational terms.

Nonetheless, gaps remain. Funding is always a constraint – the sustainability of these programs depends on government budgets, and smaller sports or lower-tier athletes might not benefit if funds are concentrated on top talents. Not all universities are on board yet with some athletes still transfer to foreign universities (or the US collegiate system) to find a better sport-study balance. There is also the issue of reaching athletes outside national team structures – for instance, a talented junior who is not (yet) on a national team might fall through the cracks since the PZS programs target those already in the system. Polish stakeholders are aware that a cultural change is needed so that pursuing education is not seen as detrimental to sports performance. Positive messaging and role models are helping. For example, multiple Olympic champions like Anita Włodarczyk (track and field) and Justyna Kowalczyk (cross-country skiing) who earned university degrees are highlighted to show that dual success is possible. As of 2025, Poland's dual career policy is very much a work in progress, but it demonstrates a comprehensive effort: from specialized sports schools and championship schools, through academic centers and scholarships, to career counseling for life after sports. If these elements coalesce effectively, they could significantly reduce the athlete dropout rate in Poland's crucial 18–23 transition and serve as a template for other countries with similar challenges.

## **International Landscape**

### *New Zealand*

The New Zealand approach to dual careers has developed as part of a wider commitment to athlete welfare and holistic development, with High Performance Sport New Zealand (HPSNZ) playing the central coordinating role. Its Performance Life programme provides athletes with structured support that goes beyond the immediate demands of training and competition. Dedicated career and education coaches work alongside athletes to help them manage study, vocational training, or employment, while at the same time preparing for transitions out of sport. The scheme is not limited to elite medal contenders; it is part of HPSNZ's broader Tailored Athlete Pathway Support (TAPS) system, which in 2023 distributed over NZD 160 million in investment across performance, health, and life domains. Athletes are also able to draw on the Prime Minister's Scholarship programme, which in recent years has funded several hundred athletes annually to pursue tertiary education or professional development opportunities alongside sport. Universities and secondary schools cooperate by offering flexible learning arrangements such as distance courses or adjusted timetables, ensuring that athletes can sustain their academic progress even during periods of heavy travel or training. Important to notice, mental health and psychosocial support are embedded as equal priorities, reflecting the New Zealand policy ethos that elite performance and personal development are inseparable. This emphasis on balance, rather than a narrow focus on medals, distinguishes the New Zealand model in comparative perspective.

### *Australia*

The Australian dual career system has been built over several decades as an integral part of its centralized high-performance framework. The Australian Institute of Sport (AIS), established in 1981 quickly became the focal point for coordinating athlete development across the country. By the mid-1980s, the AIS introduced the Athlete Career and Education (ACE) program, which has since become a global reference point for dual career support. The program provides structured career counselling, academic guidance, and vocational planning, enabling athletes to prepare for life beyond competition while still pursuing performance goals. Support is not centralized; state and territory institutes of sport have adopted and localized the model, creating a nationwide network of career advisors and educational liaisons. The reach of this system is significant. Over 5,000 athletes have accessed ACE services since its inception, with hundreds supported annually through one-on-one career development planning and group workshops. Financial and institutional resources underpin the system's durability. Federal investment in the AIS regularly

exceeds AUD 250 million across Olympic cycles, a proportion of which is allocated to athlete well-being and career services. In parallel, universities and vocational providers operate formal partnerships with sport institutes, offering flexible enrolment, deferred examinations, and scholarship schemes designed specifically for elite athletes. Recent figures suggest that more than 1,200 athletes are currently studying at Australian universities under dual career arrangements, many supported by targeted bursaries. This integration reflects a policy philosophy that dual career provision is not merely supplementary but essential.

At the school level, Australia has developed a network of specialist sport schools that combine secondary education with elite training opportunities. These exist in most states; for example, the New South Wales Sports High Schools Association currently supports ten dedicated sports high schools, each offering flexible timetables, on-site coaching, and tailored academic support so pupils can balance study and sport. Similar models exist in Queensland, where the Queensland Academy of Sport collaborates with secondary schools to provide targeted programs for talented youth athletes.

### ***The United States***

In the United States, the dual career model is fundamentally shaped by the collegiate sport system, where the role of the student-athlete has become both an identity and a structural framework. Athletic participation is governed primarily by the NCAA, which ties eligibility to academic enrollment and progress toward a degree. This arrangement obliges athletes to pursue full-time study while training and competing at levels that often mirror professional sport in terms of time and intensity. To help manage overload pressures, universities provide a range of academic services, from tutoring and study centers to specialized advisors who monitor compliance with eligibility rules and ensure athletes can continue progressing toward graduation. This pathway, however, begins well before college. High school athletics form a crucial part of the US system, with more than 8.2 million students participating in interscholastic sports in 2024–2025, according to the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS, 2025). These programs provide structured competition, access to coaching, and a school identity strongly tied to sport, while also serving as the primary recruitment pool for collegiate athletics. The dual demands of study and sport are already present at this stage, with athletes expected to maintain grades to remain eligible, while balancing daily training and extensive travel schedules. For many families, success in high school sport represents a gateway to securing college scholarships, reinforcing the integration of education and athletics, but also putting immense pressure on young athletes. In this sense, the US dual career model operates as a continuum, beginning in adolescence and reaching its most institutionalized form within the NCAA, before feeding into professional leagues.

The financial foundation of this system rests on athletic scholarships, which provide access to higher education for tens of thousands of athletes each year. In 2023, more than 180,000 student-athletes received NCAA athletic scholarships across all divisions, with total awards exceeding USD 3.5 billion annually. For many, this funding is the only viable route into higher education, while for universities, it binds athletic performance to the institution's academic mission. Yet this model has also drawn criticism for its contradictions. Universities often benefit from substantial revenues, particularly in football and basketball, while student-athletes are left balancing uncompensated athletic labor with academic responsibilities. Despite these tensions, the US framework remains globally distinctive. It is one of the few contexts where higher education institutions function simultaneously as elite sport development centers and as academic providers, making the student-athlete pathway central to the country's dual career landscape.

## **Good Practices, Common Challenges, and Gaps in Current Policies**

### *Good Practices and Effective Strategies*

#### *Early Integration of Sport and Education*

One of the most successful models is integrating athletic training into the formal education system from an early age. Dedicated sport schools as seen in Sweden, France, Belgium, Poland, etc., or flexible sport classes in mainstream schools allow athletes to develop sports skills and academic foundations simultaneously. These programs reduce the need for young athletes to choose one path over the other. Good practices include providing adjusted schedules, tutoring support, and boarding facilities so athletes can train optimally without falling behind in school. For example, Belgium's topsports-schools and Poland's SMS system demonstrate that with government backing and federation cooperation, student-athletes can achieve academically while undergoing high-level training. The crucial element is flexibility in academic delivery – successful schools often extend the duration of schooling (e.g., a four-year high school track for athletes instead of three years, as in some Nordic countries) and schedule classes around training times. This structured dual career environment, when done well, nurtures time management skills and a dual identity in athletes from adolescence.

#### *Holistic Support Services*

Dual career programs that offer a suite of support services tend to yield better outcomes in athlete well-being and success. The UK's TASS program is a prime

example, where athletes receive not only financial aid but also sport science services, medical care, lifestyle coaching, and academic mentoring. A good practice is to assign each athlete a dedicated support team or advisor who monitors both sports progress and academic or work progress. Regular check-ins can catch issues early. For instance, if an athlete is struggling with coursework or considering dropping out of university, the advisor can liaise with the institution to find solutions such as tutoring or deadline extensions, rather than letting the athlete quit. Providing psychological support in a form of counseling or mental skills training is also vital, as dual career athletes face stress from balancing two demanding roles. Programs like TASS and Sweden's sport schools have integrated sport psychologists who can help athletes develop coping strategies and resilience. Mentoring in a form of linking younger athletes with older former dual career athletes is another effective support mechanism seen in some programs (e.g., Finland's 'Dual Career Café' sessions where alumni share experiences). In essence, the best dual career systems treat athletes as 'whole persons', attending to their athletic, academic, psychological, and social needs in a coordinated way (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004).

### ***Cross-Sector Partnerships and Policy Coordination***

As emphasized by the EU Guidelines, having different sectors work together is a cornerstone of effective dual career support. Good practice countries establish formal agreements or networks that link sports federations, educational institutions, and sometimes private companies or military for employment opportunities. The UK's partnership model, where Sport England provides funding, universities deliver services, and NGBs identify athletes, ensures everyone is invested in the dual career success. In Finland and the Netherlands, cooperation between ministries of education and sport has led to national accreditation systems for sport-friendly schools and universities (e.g., Finland's Urhea network). When such partnerships are formalized through contracts, MOUs, or accreditation standards, they create accountability MOU-Memorandum of Understanding and clarity of roles. For example, a university that signs onto a dual career network commits to certain accommodations for athletes, and in return might receive government funding or recognition. State legislation or policy can underpin these partnerships. For example, Italy passed a law in 2017 recognizing the status of 'student-athlete' in the secondary school system, which mandates schools to offer distance learning or tutor support to nationally ranked athletes. In general, the more 'institutionalized' dual career support is, the less it relies on individual goodwill and the more it becomes a guaranteed right for athletes. Therefore, integrating dual career considerations into education and sport policy at the national level, like including it in national sports strategies or education acts, is a good practice for sustainability.

### ***Personalized and Flexible Pathways***

Successful dual career programs recognize that one size does not fit all. Athletes have different academic strengths, career interests, and sport trajectories. Good practices involve individualized plans for athletes, for instance, tailoring a study load per semester to an athlete's competition calendar or Olympic cycle, or providing alternate pathways like part-time study, online courses, or short-term vocational training certificates if a traditional university route is not suitable. The case studies show multiple examples like UK universities allowing part-time enrollment for athletes, Flemish community in Belgium offering individualized pacing contracts for elite athletes in higher education, and Poland's for athletes at universities. Moreover, offering choices beyond academic education, such as apprenticeships or job training, can engage athletes who are less academically inclined but still need dual career support. This is sometimes called a 'dual career in vocational track'. The underlying principle is flexibility.

### ***Career Transition and Post-Sport Planning***

A hallmark of a mature dual career policy is attention to athletes' post-sport careers, not just during their sporting years. Good practices here include career counseling services, networking opportunities with employers, internships or job placements arranged for athletes, and educational programs specifically geared to life after sport. The idea is to leverage athletes' skills and fame into second careers. For instance, Germany and France have long had systems where athletes can join the military or police in special sport units, effectively giving them a parallel vocation and income while they compete, and a possible stable career afterward. While not every country uses that model, many now run athlete career skills programs focusing on Curriculum Vitae (CV) writing, interview prep, and translating sports competences to the business world. The Polish federation programs (supported by MSiT) are notable for explicitly including career transition in their mission, by encouraging athletes to gain qualifications like coaching licenses, sport management diplomas, or language proficiency, which will serve them later. Similarly, the UK's British Olympic Association (BOA) Athlete Career Programme and elite sport institutes often set up athlete internships with partner companies; for example, British Athletics has a partnership with a financial firm to offer short-term work experience to athletes. Athletes who engage in such planning tend to have smoother retirements and better mental health approaching retirement (Stambulova et al., 2021).

### ***Common Challenges and Gaps***

#### ***High Dropout during Transitions***

As repeatedly noted, the transition from junior to senior level and that from sports to post-sport career are 'at-risk' periods. Many countries struggle with

athletes quitting sports in these phases, sometimes because dual career support that existed in one stage (e.g., high school) does not carry over to the next (e.g., university or working life). For example, in Sweden and Poland, a large proportion of athletes do not continue sport after finishing secondary sport schools, leading to a talent drain in early adulthood. Gaps in support contribute to this as an athlete may lose their coach or structured training, face increased academic difficulty, or simply feel overwhelmed without the close-knit environment they had as juniors. Addressing this gap requires targeted interventions like Sweden's efforts to support freshman athletes in university or Poland's ACSS program, but not all countries have fully bridged this divide. Additionally, the final transition, that is, retirement from elite sport, is often not prepared for sufficiently. Some athletes postpone thinking about life after sport until they are forced to retire due to age, injury, or deselection, at which point if they have no education or work experience, the adjustment can be extremely difficult. Making career transition support systemic or at least routine, for example, by requiring athletes on scholarships to attend career workshops, is still a gap in many systems.

### ***Academic Rigor vs. Athletic Demands***

A perennial tension in dual careers is between meeting academic standards and sports demands. Even in programs designed to be flexible, athletes often encounter periods where training camps, international competitions, or simply the hours needed for practice conflict with exams and assignments. Some educational systems are more flexible than others. For instance, Anglo-Saxon universities often offer more distance learning or leniency, whereas other systems have strict attendance and exam rules that are hard to bend. Athletes report that individual professors or teachers can make or break their experience. A supportive teacher might offer makeup exams, while an unsupportive one might fail a student for missing class due to a championship. Inconsistent implementation of supportive measures is thus a challenge. Even within one country, policies may differ by institution or region. National guidelines such as Italy's decree on student-athletes or France's status of elite athlete (*sportif de haut niveau*) which grants university flexibility aim to formalize accommodations, but not everywhere has such rules. Ensuring that all educational institutions recognize and support dual career athletes remains a gap. The EU's recommendation for a 'quality framework' for dual career services is an attempt to set minimum standards, but adoption is voluntary.

### ***Resource Disparities***

Effective dual career support can be resource-intensive. Not all sports or regions receive equal support, leading to disparities. Typically, athletes in Olympic sports or those in well-funded professional sports get the lion's share

of assistance, whereas athletes in smaller or less funded sports might have minimal support. For example, a football academy player might have tutors and club-arranged schooling, but a top gymnast in the same country might have to home-school or rely on personal arrangements. Smaller nations or developing sport systems also struggle to finance dual career programs. Even within a program like TASS (UK) or ACSS (Poland), there are limited slots and budgets, meaning not every deserving athlete is covered. This creates selection dilemmas and potential unfairness as some athletes get comprehensive support while others with similar potential do not. Athletes with disabilities or athletes who have career breaks due to child birth represent groups that require attention and resources to support their dual career, or female athletes who might have career breaks due to maternity, are additional areas that require attention and resources. The financial strain on athletes is another aspect. Pursuing higher education can be costly and time-consuming, which some athletes find incompatible with earning a living or the expenses of training. Scholarships and funding address this to a degree, but many athletes still cite financial pressure as a reason for dropping one of the two careers. Sustainable funding models like engaging private sponsors or employers to invest in dual career athletes are still not widespread, representing a gap and an opportunity for improvement.

### ***Cultural Attitudes and Awareness***

A less tangible but important challenge is the cultural mindset around dual careers. In some sport cultures, there remains an old-school attitude that an athlete must be '100% dedicated' to sport to succeed, implying that pursuing education or work could be a distraction or a lack of commitment. Such attitudes can come from coaches, federations, or even athletes themselves, and they undermine dual career efforts. Some athletes fear that if they ask for academic accommodations or take time for studies, they will be seen as less serious and might be cut from teams. Conversely, in academic circles, a lack of understanding about sports careers can lead to low support. For instance, a university department might not grasp why an athlete cannot attend an exam due to the Olympics or might not value sports achievements as legitimate rationale for flexibility. Overcoming these perceptions requires education and advocacy. Countries that have seen success typically have strong buy-in from high-level stakeholders. When Ministers of Sport and Education publicly champion dual careers, or star athletes speak about the importance of education, it helps shift culture. The situation is improving, as evidenced by more coaches encouraging education and more schools celebrating student-athletes. Yet, in some places, athletes still hide their studies from coaches or underplay their athletic identity at university, reflecting a cultural gap. Continuous awareness campaigns, training of coaches and academic staff about dual career benefits, and showcasing role models can address this challenge.

### ***Monitoring and Evaluation***

Finally, a cross-cutting gap is the lack of systematic monitoring and evaluation of dual career programs. Because these policies involve multiple domains, it can be unclear who is responsible for tracking outcomes. There is a need for better data on questions like: How many athletes are utilizing dual career services? What is the graduation rate of athletes versus nonathletes? What percentage of supported athletes continue in sport versus dropout? How do dual career athletes fare in the labor market post-sport? Without solid data, it is challenging to refine programs or prove their value. This represents a gap that academics and policymakers are now increasingly addressing, often collaboratively as seen by the growing body of dual career research in Europe, for example, the ‘Gold in Education and Elite Sport (GEES)’ project findings.

### ***Insights for Effective Policy Frameworks and Future Directions***

The examination of dual career policies and connecting them to theory yields several insights into what constitutes an effective framework for supporting athlete dual careers.

#### *Adopt a Holistic, Athlete-Centered Framework*

Policies should view athletes as more than just medal producers – they are individuals with educational, professional, and personal development needs. A holistic framework (endorsed by the International Olympic Committee and the EU) means providing resources for all facets of an athlete’s career. This includes mental health support, life skills training, and mentorship in addition to academic or vocational opportunities. An effective policy framework embeds this holistic philosophy at every level, from youth academies emphasizing school-sport balance to national Olympic committees having departments for athlete career programs.

#### *Ensure Continuity and Flexibility through Transitions*

As noted, transitions are vulnerable points. A robust dual career system offers continuous support as athletes move from one stage to the next. This might involve creating ‘transition programs’ such as bridging modules when athletes finish secondary sport school or preretirement planning sessions for those about to leave elite sport. Flexibility is crucial, allowing athletes to step in and out of education or training as their sport schedules allow. The modularization of education and recognition of prior learning can help, athletes might accumulate credits over a longer period, and universities can recognize learning or competencies gained through sport as part of a degree portfolio.

In employment terms, promoting flexible work arrangements or part-time internships for national team athletes can similarly keep them engaged in dual development.

#### *Multi-Stakeholder Governance and Clear Roles*

Effective dual career frameworks often have a dedicated coordinating body or at least a defined coordination mechanism. This could be a national dual career commission that includes representatives from the sports ministry, education ministry, athlete associations, and academic institutions. By bringing stakeholders together, such bodies can set nationwide standards and share information. The EU Guidelines advocate for athletes and their representatives to be involved in policy design as it leads to more responsive policies. Going forward, frameworks should continue to empower athletes in governance, treating them as partners in crafting dual career solutions rather than passive recipients.

#### *Leverage Technology and Innovation*

The landscape of education and work is changing with technology, and dual career policies can leverage this to benefit athletes. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated acceptance of online learning and remote work. Those tools are immensely helpful for athletes who travel frequently. Effective frameworks can formalize access to online education platforms for athletes. Similarly, career support can be delivered via online mentorship networks or job matching portals specifically for athletes. Embracing technology can reduce some barriers of distance and scheduling that have historically hindered dual careers.

#### *Promote Dual Career as a Norm and Strength*

The ultimate goal for dual career advocates is cultural change. Achieving a norm where pursuing education or a parallel career is seen as the standard for elite athletes, not an exception. When coaches, sports administrators, and athletes themselves view dual career engagement as a strength, the policies have their best chance to succeed. Policymakers should highlight success stories and data showing that dual career athletes often have longer athletic careers and smoother transitions. Framing dual careers as a competitive advantage, rather than a distraction, is a powerful narrative that can be supported by evidence and should inform policy messaging.

Looking ahead, the continuous sharing of experiences across countries will help refine dual career policies. As noted, one size does not fit all and each country must tailor its approach to its educational system and sports context. But the core principles of flexibility, support, and valuing athletes' broader

development are universal. In Europe, there is now strong momentum to professionalize and improve dual career support. By implementing frameworks that incorporate the good practices and by actively addressing the remaining gaps, policymakers can improve athletes' well-being and performance during their sports careers and set them up for success in life after sport. In turn, this will make sport systems more sustainable, as fewer athletes will drop out prematurely and more will become ambassadors for sport in other sectors after they retire. Dual career policy is thus a win-win investment, benefitting individuals and strengthening the overall sport culture with educated, versatile athlete citizens.

## Conclusions

In this chapter, we mapped the landscape of dual career policies across Europe, highlighting how regions and nations have responded to the challenge of combining elite sport with education or work. The examples of the UK, Sweden, and Poland demonstrate that while contexts differ, the fundamentals of effective support are shared: collaboration between sport and education, flexible opportunities, and comprehensive support centered on the athlete's needs. Good practices are emerging, yet common challenges like transition dropouts and resource gaps need ongoing attention. The insights gained underscore that dual career support is not just a policy add-on but a necessity for ethical and successful sport development. By continuing to learn from each other and innovate, countries can further enhance their dual career frameworks, ensuring that athletes do not have to sacrifice their future for their sport, and vice versa. In Chapter 4, we will delve into practical examples of tools to implement in sport organizations, building on these policy frameworks and theoretical underpinnings (Chapter 2) to facilitate positive impact on athletes' personal experiences and career trajectories.

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## 4 Practical Tools and Programs for Dual Career Support in Sports Organizations

### Why Should Sports Organizations Support Dual Careers?

Sports organizations have a vital role in enabling athletes to succeed both on and off the field. By investing in dual career support programs, clubs and federations not only foster athletes' personal development but also enhance their well-being and long-term prospects. Research indicates that helping athletes balance sport with education or work can reduce stress and burnout, improve mental health, and lead to greater career satisfaction during and after athletic life. From the organization's perspective, dual career programs can yield more disciplined, well-rounded athletes who are better equipped to handle the pressures of elite sport. Athletes who receive educational and career support often feel more secure about their futures, which can translate into improved focus and performance in sport. In short, supporting dual careers is a win-win: it protects athletes' welfare and prepares them for life after sport, while also cultivating more resilient individuals who can contribute positively to the team or sport's culture. Recognizing these benefits, many sport bodies now view dual career support as a strategic priority rather than an optional add-on. Indeed, international sport authorities and governments increasingly expect organizations to have such measures in place. For example, the International Olympic Committee has begun evaluating sports federations on whether they integrate dual career programs as a 'must-do' component of athlete support. The codes of good governance for sport organizations that emerged in the past two decades almost unanimously consider dual career programs as a basic standard for sport organizations. This underscores that dual career development is becoming an essential aspect of good governance in sport. In the remainder of this chapter, we provide practical guidance on how sports organizations can design effective dual career support programs, what tools and services these programs typically include, how to evaluate their impact, and what new innovations are on the horizon.

## **Designing and Implementing Dual Career Support Programs**

Establishing a dual career program within a sports organization begins with a clear commitment at the policy level. Sport organizations, whether clubs, national federations, or academies, should explicitly define dual career support as part of their mission and strategic planning. This involves recognizing that the athletic career pathway must include provisions for education and vocational development. A first step is often to appoint a dedicated staff member or unit, for example, a ‘player development manager’ or academic advisor or a single point of contact (SPOC). That person or group is responsible for coordinating dual career services. Organizational policies may be reviewed or updated to require the development of dual career arrangements for all elite and aspiring athletes. For example, a federation might adopt a set of guidelines that every youth training center must collaborate with local schools or universities, or a professional club might include clauses in athlete contracts guaranteeing access to education and career resources. Such policy measures set the tone that pursuing education or job training alongside sport is not only acceptable but encouraged.

Effective dual career programs rely on cross-sector collaboration. Sports organizations should build partnerships with educational institutions including schools, colleges, universities, and possibly employers to create a supportive network around the athlete. This could mean formal agreements with universities for flexible admission and scheduling of athlete-students, or ties with companies willing to offer internships and part-time jobs tailored to athletes’ availabilities. Engaging coaches and families is equally important. Coaches need to buy into the dual career ethos and allow flexibility in training when academic demands peak, and parents should be informed partners in younger athletes’ education plans. Many successful programs form steering committees or working groups that include representatives from sport like coaches or athlete mentors, from education like teachers or academic counselors, and sometimes from government or athlete associations if the organization is significantly numerous. A coordinated approach ensures that athletes receive consistent messages and that stakeholders work hand in hand to solve conflicts like exam versus competition scheduling.

When designing the program, sports organizations should tailor support to the athlete’s development stage. Athletes’ needs evolve from school age through university and into professional or retirement transitions. For more information on the holistic development model (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004), see Chapter 2. A comprehensive dual career program will map out clear pathways covering these stages. For instance, a youth academy might focus on secondary education completion and basic life skills; a support program for collegiate or pro athletes might emphasize career planning and flexible higher education options; and for those nearing retirement, the focus may shift to job placement and retraining.

It is advisable to outline these pathways formally. Some organizations create individual development plans for each athlete, which document both sporting and educational goals year by year. Such plans are flexible and account for different rates of athletic development. Some talents peak later and can spend longer in education, whereas early bloomers might need intensive support to finish minimum schooling if they turn professional as teens. In all cases, the athlete's personal growth and aspirations outside sport should be a central consideration. By identifying common transition points like end of high school, first senior national team selection, first major injury, or approaching retirement and planning support around them, organizations can ensure no phase of an athlete's journey is neglected (Stambulova et al., 2024). For more information on transitions, see Chapter 2. The European Union's guidelines on dual careers specifically recommend that sport bodies define 'clear pathways from the beginning of sport to the highest level and retirement' (European Commission, 2012) with flexibility to accommodate individual needs and late or early development. In practice, this might mean offering multiple education tracks like full-time, part-time, or distance learning, so that both a 16-year-old junior and a 28-year-old pro can find suitable options.

Another design principle is to embed ethics and inclusion into dual career programs. All athletes should have access to support, regardless of gender, background, or disability status. Organizations may need to adapt programs for particular groups for instance, athletes with disabilities might require specialized career pathways or additional resources if mainstream options are not fully accessible. Ensuring equal treatment and avoiding discrimination in selection for support services is paramount. A transparent policy such as an Athlete Charter or code of conduct can help communicate how athletes qualify for and benefit from dual career assistance. Involving athletes in the governance of these programs can strengthen their effectiveness. Some organizations establish athlete committees or feedback panels so that athletes can voice their needs and contribute to decision-making. This inclusive approach not only empowers athletes but also keeps programs relevant and responsive. For example, having former or current athlete representatives help shape dual career services can ensure the offerings stay tuned to real-world challenges. Indeed, providing leadership or employment opportunities to athletes within the organization, such as internships in management, coaching apprenticeships, or roles in youth development, can be a form of dual career support in itself. It helps retiring athletes transition and shows younger ones that their sport has a place for them beyond competition.

Possible solution is adoption of an already existing dual career program. There are tools available for sport organizations and education institutions that are universal, but can be a starting point if an organization has limited resources and knowledge of the topic. Such tools include handbook, courses, and other online solutions, which were developed within the framework of Erasmus+ Program of the European Union.

## **Dual Career Programs Funded by the European Union**

Since the publication of the EU Guidelines on Dual Careers of Athletes in 2012, numerous EU-funded projects under Erasmus+ Sport have been launched to help elite athletes balance sport with education or work. Each of these projects addressed a unique aspect of dual careers, from improving support services and competencies, to easing education-sport transitions, to engaging families and institutions. Below we explore their goals, key developments, and how their results can be utilized by sports bodies, educational institutions, or policymakers.

### ***Gold in Education and Elite Sport (GEES, 2015–2016)***

The GEES (Gold in Education and Elite Sport) project was a two-year Erasmus+ Sport collaborative partnership aimed at improving how athletes can successfully combine elite sport with education. It involved a consortium of renowned dual career experts across nine European countries. The central goal of GEES was to ‘boost athletes’ employability through the optimization of their competences and the development of the services supporting them’ (Wylleman et al., 2017). In other words, GEES recognized that elite athletes need not only talent in sport but also personal and academic competencies for life beyond sport, and that better support services are essential to foster those competencies during an athletic career.

A major outcome of GEES was the identification and validation of core competencies needed for a successful dual career and the tools to enhance support services. The project brought together academic researchers and sport institutes to develop the Dual Career Competency Questionnaire for Support Providers. This tool contains 38 competency items such as dual career management, self-regulation and resilience, social skills, career planning, and other competencies, which collectively define what skills coaches, tutors, and mentors need to effectively support student-athletes. By surveying and training Dual Career Support Providers across Europe, GEES produced a Handbook for Dual Career Support Providers that outlines best practices and competency profiles for those guiding athletes. For example, follow-up studies in GEES identified 33 key support-provider competencies grouped in categories like advocacy and cooperation, organizational skills, awareness of the athlete’s environment, and relationship-building. These findings provide a clear framework of skills and roles that organizations should cultivate in the people who work with dual career athletes (Wylleman et al., 2017).

The GEES project’s outputs are directly useful for sports organizations and educational institutions that work with elite student-athletes. The competency framework and handbook can be used to train coaches, academic tutors, and career counselors in how best to mentor dual career athletes. National Olympic Committees (NOCs), sports federations, or universities can audit their

current athlete support services against the GEES competencies to identify gaps in support. For policymakers, GEES demonstrated the value of investing in the professional development of those who support athletes, ensuring that mentors and support staff have specific training in dual career issues like time management, psychological support, or academic advising.

***B-WISER (Be a Winner in Elite Sport and Employment, 2017–2018)***

B-WISER was another Erasmus+ Sport project, formally titled ‘Be a Winner in Elite Sport and Employment before and after Athletic Retirement’. Running from 2017 to 2018 and coordinated by Vrije Universiteit Brussel, B-WISER focused on the employability and employment of athletes during three key career stages: while they are active in elite sport, when they retire and prepare for their first post-sport job, and when they are settling into employment after sport. The project gathered 13 partner organizations from six EU countries including universities, Olympic committees, and career support experts, and involved over 50 dual career experts. The overarching goal was to optimize athletes’ transition to the labor market by identifying what support and skills are needed at each phase of the athletic career (B-WISER, n.d.).

B-WISER took a comprehensive, evidence-based approach. First, it mapped the existing support structures in Europe related to ‘elite sport and employment’, to understand what services like job placement programs, career counseling, or educational accommodations were already available to active and retiring athletes. Next, the project team researched the competences athletes need to successfully find employment, both while competing and when transitioning out of sport. For instance, B-WISER identified competencies such as teamwork, communication, resilience, and time management that athletes develop through sport and that are valuable in the workplace. The project also examined the perspective of employers, investigating the added value that hiring former athletes can bring to companies, for example, strong work ethic or leadership skills.

Building on this research, B-WISER then developed practical tools and best practices to bridge the gap between sports and the labor market. By the end of the project, it had created empirical data, conceptual models, and evidence-based practices to help stakeholders create optimal conditions for athlete employment. One tangible output was the ‘Dual Career Toolkit’, an online resource that includes self-assessment tools for athletes to evaluate their career skills and for employers to better understand athletes’ profiles. Each participating country in B-WISER also implemented pilot programs or workshops to test these tools and gather feedback on matching athletes with job opportunities. By evaluating these pilots, the project compiled a set of best practices including effective methods to mentor athletes for job interviews, to educate employers on athletes’ strengths, and to structure flexible

job programs for active athletes. Those are all available to use by any person or institution (B-WISER, n.d.).

The outcomes of B-WISER are highly relevant to organizations preparing athletes for life after sport. Sport federations and player associations can use B-WISER's findings to design better career transition programs, for example, integrating employability workshops into national athlete development plans and knowing exactly which competencies to foster. Anyone can have access to the B-WISER toolkit and research reports, which provide data-driven arguments to convince employers to hire former athletes by highlighting how an athlete's elite sports career builds desirable workplace skills. Policymakers at the national or EU level can draw on B-WISER's best practices to encourage dual career-friendly employment policies such as incentives for companies that offer flexible work arrangements for athletes or that participate in athlete internship programs.

### ***ECO-DC (Developing Dual Career Environments across Europe, 2018–2019)***

The Ecology of Dual Career (ECO-DC) project took a research-driven look at the broader environments surrounding dual career athletes. ECO-DC's goal was to develop a comprehensive understanding of dual career development environments (DCDEs) across Europe, and to provide guidelines and tools to improve these environments for talented and elite athletes. The term 'dual career development environment' refers to the entire ecosystem that supports or hinders an athlete's dual career including the school or university, sport club, family, peer group, coaches, support services, and policy context. ECO-DC recognized that even if an athlete is personally motivated and skilled, their success in dual career often depends on external factors in their environment that need to be aligned and supportive. It developed a taxonomy of dual career environments, finding that there are indeed multiple types, and each can be successful if certain conditions are met. For more information on DCDEs, see Chapter 2. ECO-DC aimed to pinpoint factors that contribute to an environment's effectiveness. Through in-depth case studies of selected exemplary environments in participating countries, the project explored elements like organizational culture, dual career, and the role of dual career support providers in that environment.

One of the most practical outputs of ECO-DC was the creation of a Dual Career Development Environment Monitoring Tool. This is a self-assessment tool that organizations or partnerships can use to evaluate how well their environment supports dual careers. By piloting this tool, ECO-DC enabled schools, clubs, or national sport centers to identify weaknesses in their environment. Finally, the project compiled its findings into guidelines for developing and optimizing DCDEs.

The ECO-DC project's contributions are especially useful for policymakers and sport-education program designers at a systemic level. ECO-DC's classification and effectiveness criteria can be used to decide which dual career model to adopt or fund in their country. The guidelines and recommended 'environment features' help ensure that whichever model is chosen, it includes the critical components like mentorship, academic flexibility, and career planning services, which the research identified as success factors. Sport academies and Olympic training centers can apply the DCDE Monitoring Tool as a diagnostic instrument. By doing so, they can pinpoint areas for improvement (Liverpool John Moores University, n.d.).

### ***Education Model for Parents of Athletes in Academics, 2018–2020***

While many dual career initiatives focus on athletes or institutions, EMPATIA shifted attention to a crucial support group of parents and guardians of young athletes. The EMPATIA project is short for Education Model for Parents of Athletes in Academics. It was set out to develop an online educational program specifically for parents of dual career athletes. The rationale is that parents play a key role in an athlete's ability to juggle school and sport, yet parents themselves often lack guidance on how to best help.

EMPATIA's team conducted research to gather information about the roles of parents and guardians of athletes in their dual careers and used those insights to produce guidelines and an educational platform. The project consortium included universities, sport institutes, and networks from four countries. The team first surveyed and interviewed families to identify common challenges parents face and later experts in sports psychology and education created a structured online course for parents, available in multiple languages to ensure wide accessibility. The EMPATIA program was organized into modules covering key questions parents have about dual career, labeled as Why, What, How, and Who. The team developed a platform EMPATIA containing these modules, along with downloadable guides and video testimonials for parents. For instance, one module educates parents on the typical development pathways of student-athletes, helping them understand transitions like moving from secondary school to university while in sport. Another module provides tips on communicating effectively with coaches and teachers to advocate for their child's dual career needs. EMPATIA also produced a research-based European framework of parental needs essentially guidelines summarizing what support or information European parents most frequently need to assist their athlete children.

The direct beneficiaries of EMPATIA are parents of young athletes, who can access the online course and resources to become better supporters of their children's dual career ambitions. Sport clubs and federations, and schools can

leverage EMPATIA by integrating these parent education modules into their programs. The fact that EMPATIA is multilingual and pan-European means it can be adopted in various countries, especially those where formal dual career support is still emerging (University of Lubiana, n.d.).

### ***More Than Gold Project (2019–2021)***

The More Than Gold project addressed dual careers from the standpoint of higher education institutions (HEIs). Its main aim was to create a set of Dual Career Guidelines for HEIs and to strengthen dual career policies across EU countries. In earlier chapters, we noted how the transition from high school to university is a critical ‘bottleneck’ in athletes’ careers. Often, young athletes quit elite sport when starting university due to the lack of support or flexibility. More Than Gold set out to help universities remove this bottleneck by providing them with proven strategies and policy recommendations to support student-athletes.

The project began by collecting best practices from across Europe on how different universities support their student-athletes. This included looking at various activities and services that help young athletes commence and continue their studies successfully. Those included, for example, career center services oriented to athletes, psychological counseling programs, peer mentoring schemes, flexible class scheduling, distance learning options, or cooperation agreements with sports clubs. By analyzing these examples, the project identified which measures are most effective in preventing athletes from dropping out of either sport or school.

The core output of More Than Gold was the ‘Dual Career Guidelines for HEIs’, essentially a methodology and set of recommendations that any college or university can follow to become more athlete-friendly. These guidelines cover institutional policies like adopting official dual career policies, support services, and cooperation models such as partnerships between universities and sports federations to share information on athlete-students. The project produced a comprehensive Methodology Handbook for universities, illustrating how they can implement or adapt existing student support activities to serve dual career students. For example, it shows how a standard university career center can tailor its counseling to include career planning for athletes or how mentorship programs can pair freshman athletes with older student-athletes to learn coping strategies. Educational policymakers can incorporate these guidelines into accreditation or quality standards, thereby encouraging all universities to become ‘athlete-friendly campuses’. Sports governing bodies and Olympic committees can reference the More Than Gold outcomes when negotiating with educational institutions, for example, using the guidelines as a starting point to establish national certification for dual career-supportive universities. Furthermore, the compilation of best practices serves as a database for sport organizations and clubs to collaborate with local universities.

### ***Dual Career for Junior Athletes, 2020–2022***

The Dual Career for Junior Athletes (DCJA) project focused squarely on the younger age group of 15–19 years, where the risks of dropping out of either sport or education are particularly high. Coordinated by a consortium of universities, clubs, and sport organizations, DCJA mission was to increase awareness, prepare athletes early, and build the support networks around them – from parents and coaches to teachers and clubs. DCJA focused on raising awareness of long-term planning, informing junior athletes about domestic and cross-border educational opportunities, engaging parents, teachers, and coaches, mapping and disseminating good practices, and highlighting the transferable skills that sport nurtures for future employment. The project team created a Good Practices Report compiling effective interventions across Europe: two MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) – one for athletes and one for their support providers – and a Handbook for Junior Athletes, offering practical advice and tools for balancing school, sport, and personal life.

The practical value of DCJA lies in its early-stage intervention approach. Junior athletes gain not only information but also agency, learning to plan their futures rather than react to crises when choices become limited. Parents and coaches, often overlooked in formal dual career strategies, were given targeted training through the MOOCs to better understand how to encourage and guide young athletes. For schools, clubs, and federations, DCJA offered a repository of proven practices and adaptable tools, making it easier to adopt support measures without reinventing the wheel. For policymakers, the project provided a strong case for embedding dual career considerations into youth sport policy, ensuring that investment in talent development does not come at the cost of education or long-term well-being (Dual Career for Junior Athletes [DCJA], n.d.).

### ***Olympic Committees for Dual Career, 2022–2023***

The Olympic Committees for Dual Career (OCDC) project represents one of the most systematic efforts to embed dual career awareness and services directly into the structures of NOCs. Its starting point was a comprehensive needs analysis of athletes and stakeholders, which mapped out the major barriers faced by Olympic athletes across different national contexts. The research identified gaps in awareness, structural support, and communication between sport and educational systems, while also highlighting promising good practices already in place. A central innovation of OCDC was the pilot introduction of ‘SPOC’ within each participating NOC. These designated officers were tasked with offering counseling, organizing workshops, and serving as dedicated reference points for athletes seeking support. The SPOC model was designed to ensure that dual career issues became an institutionalized responsibility of NOCs, not just ad hoc projects. Alongside this, OCDC developed two tailored MOOCs for junior athletes and for senior athletes.

Table 4.1 Dual Career Support Projects

<i>Project Name</i>	<i>Focus Area</i>	<i>Activities/Outputs</i>	<i>Website/Source</i>
OCDC (Olympic Committees for Dual Career)	Dual career awareness in NOCs	SPOC implementation handbook, MOOCs for junior and senior athletes, roadmap handbook	olimpijski.pl
DCJA (Dual Career for Junior Athletes)	Awareness of dual career among teen athletes (15–19) and their support networks	Baseline report, good practices report, MOOC for athletes and support staff, handbook	dcja.eu
GEES (Gold in Education and Elite Sport)	First large-scale mapping of EU dual career support systems	Identified key success factors, compared policies across eight EU countries, produced guidelines for universities and sport bodies	dualcareer.eu
AMID (Athletic Migration: Dual Career and Qualification)	Dual career support for migrating student-athletes across borders	Toolkit for migrant athletes, integration criteria, partner university collaboration	eusa.eu

The team also prepared a Handbook for NOCs and Federations, a roadmap that details how organizations can implement SPOCs, integrate dual career services, and create sustainable awareness campaigns (Polish Olympic Committee, 2023) (Table 4.1).

### **Key Support Services and Tools in Dual Career Programs**

When developing a dual career support structure, sports organizations typically offer a menu of services that address academic, career, and personal development needs. The exact mix of services can vary, but most effective programs include several of the following components.

### ***Academic Support and Flexibility***

Providing resources so athletes can keep up with education is fundamental. This can involve tutoring services, academic advisors who understand sport constraints, and negotiated flexibility with educational institutions. For example, some sport academies coordinate with partner schools to allow adapted class schedules or remote learning options for athletes. Likewise, coaches and administrators should plan training and competition calendars in a way that integrates important academic periods, for instance, scheduling lighter training loads during exam weeks. In cases where athletes must travel or relocate for training, programs can facilitate distance learning through online courses or e-learning platforms, so that schooling continues uninterrupted. Flexible arrangements like gap years, compressed or extended degree timelines, and online coursework are invaluable tools to help student-athletes progress in their studies while pursuing sport.

### ***Career Guidance and Work Experience***

Most dual career programs offer dedicated career services to prepare athletes for employment and life after sports. This often includes one-on-one career counseling like helping athletes identify interests, psychological profiles, and potential career paths, as well as practical support like résumé-building workshops and interview preparation. Many organizations partner with businesses or leverage alumni networks to create internship or job placement opportunities for athletes. Gaining real work experience during off-seasons or through part-time or distance engagements can significantly smooth the eventual transition out of competitive sport. One example is the Athletes Career Programme run by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in cooperation with Adecco, which facilitates job placements and training for elite athletes globally. Since 2005, it has helped over 15,000 athletes from more than 100 countries gain career training and employment opportunities (IOC, n.d.). On a local level, clubs can arrange short internships with sponsor companies or mentorship shadowing programs. Such experiences not only build professional skills but also show athletes that their sport-developed strengths like discipline, teamwork or leadership are valued in the workplace.

### ***Life Skills and Personal Development Training***

Beyond formal education and career preparation, supporting athletes as ‘whole persons’ means teaching life skills that enable them to thrive in dual roles. Workshops or seminars on topics like time management, stress management, communication, networking, nutrition, and financial literacy are common in well-rounded dual career programs. These practical skills help athletes navigate the challenges of a busy schedule and plan for their future. Notably,

some programs are leveraging technology to deliver life skills education in engaging ways. For example, at the Youth Olympic Games, the IOC's Athlete Career Programme introduced a mobile app and interactive workshops to train young athletes in time management and networking skills. By learning to 'act on your time' and utilize support networks effectively, athletes can better juggle training, competitions, and studies. Life skills training also covers areas like goal-setting, decision-making, and balancing identities, which are all crucial for personal growth. Some organizations teach their athletes how to cook their own meals in a healthy manner, which is a useful skill and supports empowerment. Sports organizations might invite experts or veteran athletes as guest speakers to share lessons on these topics, creating a culture where continuous learning is valued alongside sports performance.

### ***Financial and Academic Assistance***

Dual careers can impose financial strain like tuition fees, reduced earning potential while focusing on sport, and logistical hurdles. To mitigate this, sports organizations often provide financial support or incentives for education. This may include scholarships or grants to cover tuition, textbook stipends, or agreements with schools for reduced fees for athletes. Some professional clubs have education funds for their youth players, and national sporting bodies might offer scholarships for university athletes or those in vocational training. Additionally, organizations can assist athletes in securing flexible part-time employment that complements their training; for example, a national team athlete might work a few hours at a sponsor company, club, or federation with an understanding that competition travel comes first. In some cases, dual career programs also provide housing or meals like dormitories or cafeterias at training centers to ease the burden on athlete-students. Financial planning services are another tool. Teaching athletes budgeting and money management helps them reducing stress related to transitions.

### ***Health and Psychological Support***

Balancing sport and studies can be mentally and physically burdensome, so comprehensive dual career programs include health services to keep athletes holistically well. This can entail access to sports medicine and physiotherapy to manage training load alongside school stress, as well as nutritional guidance to maintain energy. Importantly, mental health and psychological counseling should be readily available. Sport psychologists or counselors can help athletes develop coping strategies for stress, prevent burnout, and maintain a healthy sport-life balance. An athlete-centered approach ensures that support is responsive to personal circumstances. Sports organizations should foster an environment where seeking help, whether for a physical injury or

academic anxiety, is encouraged and stigma-free. Regular check-ins, mentorship programs, or designated welfare officers can further strengthen the safety net around dual career athletes.

### ***Mentorship and Peer Support***

A valuable tool in dual career development is connecting less experienced athletes with mentors who have walked the same path. These mentors could be retired athletes who completed their education or older active athletes successfully balancing sport and university. Mentors provide guidance, share practical tips, and serve as relatable role models who prove that dual careers are achievable. Some programs formalize this by creating a mentorship program or alumni network. For example, the IOC's Athlete 365 involves Olympic champions as mentors called Athlete Role Models, to counsel young athletes. Sports organizations can replicate this on a smaller scale; for instance, a club could invite former players who earned degrees to speak with current juniors or pair each incoming student-athlete with a senior teammate who can help them navigate scheduling conflicts and set priorities. Peer support groups, where athletes in the program meet to discuss their challenges and share solutions, are another low-cost yet effective practice. They build a sense of community and understanding. Athletes also may realize they are not alone in their struggles to finish an assignment on the road or to explain sport commitments to a professor. By leveraging the experiences of those who have successfully managed dual roles, mentorship initiatives inspire confidence and provide very personalized advice to current athletes.

In implementing these services, it's important that sports organizations remain athlete-focused and flexible. Not every athlete will need every service. Some might require intensive language tutoring if they study abroad, while others might need extra mental health support during a particularly stressful season. The best programs allow customization, for example, through an individual action plan or a menu of supports an athlete can tap into as needed. Regular communication between the athlete and the support staff helps adjust the support mix over time. Additionally, confidentiality and trust are key, especially for counseling services. Athletes must feel that using these resources will not be held against them in selection decisions or lead to labeling. By thoughtfully combining the tools above, a sports organization can create a robust support system that addresses both the 'sport' and 'non-sport' aspects of an athlete's development. As highlighted in Table 4.2, each tool serves to address specific challenges: flexible academics counteracts scheduling conflicts, career services tackle future uncertainty, life skills help juggle daily tasks, financial aid relieves pressure, health services prevent burnout, and mentoring combats isolation. The next section will examine how to assess whether these efforts are delivering the intended benefits.

*Table 4.2 Athlete Support Components, Purposes, and Examples*

<i>Support Component</i>	<i>Purpose and Examples</i>
Academic flexibility and tutoring	<p>Allows athletes to progress in education so they don't have to sacrifice schooling for sport.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adjusted class schedules</li> <li>• Online courses</li> <li>• Tutoring during competitions</li> <li>• Dedicated DC liaison</li> <li>• Partnership with club or SGB</li> <li>• Implementation of recognized education and sport frameworks</li> </ul>
Career counseling and internships	<p>Prepares athletes for post-sport careers.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CV and interview workshops</li> <li>• One-on-one career planning</li> <li>• Internship placements with partner companies</li> <li>• Internship placements within the sport organization structures</li> <li>• Job shadowing</li> </ul>
Life skills training	<p>Develops personal competencies to manage dual demands delivered in hybrid mode.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Time management</li> <li>• Networking workshops</li> <li>• Coping skills</li> <li>• Budget planning and financial literacy</li> <li>• Cooking classes</li> <li>• Basic legal training</li> <li>• Marketing and personal branding training</li> </ul>
Financial support and scholarships	<p>Eases economic burdens of dual careers and teaches financial planning for long-term security.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Education scholarships</li> <li>• Stipends</li> <li>• Part-time job arrangements, for example, with partners or at the sport organization</li> <li>• Pairing with sponsors</li> </ul>
Health and psychological services	<p>Maintains athlete well-being.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Medical care</li> <li>• Nutrition advice</li> <li>• Confidential psychological counseling for stress or burnout prevention</li> </ul>
Mentoring and peer networking	<p>Provides role models and emotional support.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pairing with older dual career athletes or alumni mentors</li> <li>• Regular peer meet-ups to share experiences</li> <li>• Pairing with experienced leaders based on career plans</li> </ul>

## **Evaluating Dual Career Programs: Performance Metrics and Feedback**

Designing and running dual career initiatives is only part of the process. Sports organizations should also evaluate the impact of these programs to ensure they are effective. Evaluation involves both quantitative metrics like numbers and qualitative feedback like personal experiences, to show a full picture of outcomes. Establishing clear key performance indicators (KPIs) at the outset can help in tracking progress. Common KPIs for dual career programs may include the following.

### ***Academic Achievement***

Are athletes succeeding in their studies? Metrics might include high school graduation rates for youth athletes, university GPA, and degree completion rates for student-athletes, or the number of certifications or vocational qualifications earned by athletes in the club. An increase in the proportion of athletes obtaining educational credentials is a strong indicator that support measures are working.

### ***Athletic Performance and Retention***

It is also important to monitor if dual career support correlates with athletes maintaining or even improving their sport performance or at least retaining athletes in high-level sport longer. For instance, tracking the dropout rate from sport could reveal if fewer athletes quit prematurely due to academic pressure. If an organization sees more athletes reaching elite level and finishing their education, that's a win-win outcome of a successful program. This metrics should be linked with qualitative feedback.

### ***Career Transition Outcomes***

Perhaps the ultimate test of a dual career program comes when athletes retire from sport. Evaluators should look at what athletes go on to do, for example, the percentage who secure employment or enroll in further education within 3–12 months after retiring. Positive outcomes such as athletes smoothly moving into jobs, new careers in sport, or entrepreneurial ventures suggest the program prepared them well. Some organizations conduct alumni surveys to measure employment rates, job satisfaction, or how useful ex-athletes found the support in hindsight.

### ***Athlete Well-Being and Satisfaction***

Gathering direct feedback from current athletes is essential. This can be done through anonymous surveys, regular check-in meetings, or focus group

discussions. Athletes can rate their satisfaction with various services and report on whether they feel the program reduces their stress or improves their ability to balance tasks. High satisfaction and self-reported are signs of a program meeting its objectives. Conversely, feedback can highlight areas needing improvement. Perhaps athletes desire more flexible exam scheduling or better communication between coaches and teachers. Many programs implement an annual evaluation survey where athletes and even parents can provide input on the support system's strengths and weaknesses.

### ***Utilization and Engagement***

It's also informative to track how extensively the offered services are being used. Metrics like the number of tutoring sessions given, counseling hours logged, workshop attendance rates, or scholarship funds disbursed can indicate whether athletes are engaging with the program. Low usage of a service might mean it's not needed, not well promoted, or not well structured. In any of the cases, it flags something to investigate. Ideally, as a dual career program matures, awareness grows and more athletes take advantage of the opportunities, which often correlates with better outcomes.

To implement these evaluations, sports organizations should set up a monitoring and evaluation system as part of the dual career program management. For example, a national sports federation might produce an annual dual career support report with statistics like those KPIs above and testimonies from athletes. Some also compare their results with benchmarks or other institutions, for instance, how does University X's athlete graduation rate compare to national averages or how many national team members have degrees now versus before the program launched.

Evaluation should not be about box-ticking. It is about continuous improvement. A feedback loop should be in place where insights from evaluation lead to adjustments in the program design. If athletes report difficulties managing time, the organization might introduce a time management workshop or a digital tool for scheduling. Perhaps surprisingly, evaluation might even reveal positive unintended effects, for example, coaches noticing that athletes in education demonstrate better discipline and planning, which could be another 'metric' to acknowledge qualitatively. On the other hand, if an objective measure like academic results is consistently poor for athletes in a certain training group, it signals the need for intervention maybe more tutoring or a talk with the coach about training-study balance. Evaluation tools help ensure the dual career program remains accountable and athlete-centered. They provide evidence to stakeholders like funders or school partners, that resources are making a difference, and they highlight success stories that can be used to advocate for maintaining or expanding support. As an example, if a club's dual career program can show that 90% of its youth academy players finish high school versus, say, 60% before the program, this is a powerful justification for the investment and a selling point when recruiting young talent and their families.

Feedback mechanisms deserve special mention. Beyond surveys, organizations can establish more direct channels for athlete input. Some have athlete representatives or leadership groups who meet with management regularly to discuss issues including dual career matters. Others hold open forums or Q&A sessions where athletes can speak openly about their challenges in balancing sport and study. The advantage of these dialog initiatives is that they can catch problems early and build trust as athletes see that their voices influence program decisions. Incorporating athlete feedback aligns with the idea that athletes should be partners in their own development. It reflects a shift from a top-down provision of services to a more collaborative model, where athletes help cocreate solutions.

### **Emerging Trends and Innovations in Dual Career Support**

Dual career support for athletes is an evolving field, and sports organizations are continually experimenting with new approaches to enhance their programs. One notable trend is the increasing digitization of dual career services. As education and career development tools move online, many programs are adopting digital platforms to support their athletes remotely. For instance, the proliferation of online courses and degree programs means athletes can now attend university from anywhere in the world, on a schedule that fits around training. This has opened doors for those who train abroad or have irregular competition hours. In this new circumstance, an athlete can take evening or asynchronous classes and access lectures online at their convenience. Some sports organizations have started partnering with online education providers or developing bespoke e-learning modules for their athletes. Additionally, mobile apps and web portals are being used to centralize support. Athletes might log into a portal to contact tutors, access time management tools, or complete career aptitude assessments. The IOC's introduction of a dedicated app to teach time management and networking skills to young athletes is an example of how technology is being leveraged to make life skills training more engaging. We can expect more innovation in this space, such as virtual mentorship sessions, artificial intelligence (AI)-driven academic coaching like study planning apps and online mental health resources tailored to athletes. Embracing technology not only provides flexibility but can also personalize support. For example, data analytics might help identify which athletes are at risk of academic difficulties so staff can intervene proactively.

Another emerging development is the move toward formalized quality standards and certification for dual career programs. As the concept gains prominence, stakeholders in Europe and beyond have recognized the value of establishing clear quality criteria for what good dual career support entails. UK TASS program introduced such certification. In the near future, we might see sports academies being officially accredited as 'dual career friendly' or universities advertising themselves as certified dual career institutions. For

sports organizations, aligning with such standards can provide a clear road-map to improving their programs. It also ensures consistency, so an athlete moving from one club or country to another should ideally encounter a similarly high level of support if both adhere to the emerging guidelines. Furthermore, a quality label can reassure athletes and parents of the program's credibility. As dual career support becomes more professionalized, we may see dedicated training and certification for the support providers themselves.

There is also a growing emphasis on a holistic and inclusive approach in dual career programs. While early dual career initiatives often focused heavily on academics for able-bodied athletes, modern programs are broadening their scope. Mental health and wellness are receiving heightened attention. Some sports organizations now embed mindfulness training, stress management coaching, or on-call counseling as regular features of athlete support. The conversation around athlete mental health in recent years, spurred by high-profile athletes speaking out, has reinforced that academic or career support and mental health support go hand in hand. Inclusion is another key theme. Dual career strategies and programs are being tailored to groups like female athletes who might face unique career breaks such as maternity or different post-sport opportunities and athletes with disabilities who may need additional assistance to access both sport and education on equal terms. The goal is to ensure every athlete, regardless of background or personal circumstances, can benefit from dual career opportunities.

Another innovation area is strengthening networks and partnerships on a larger scale. The complexity of dual careers, sitting at the intersection of sport, education, and employment, means no single entity can cover everything. We are seeing the rise of national and international networks dedicated to dual careers. In Europe, the EU has called for the establishment of dual career networks that bring together sports bodies, educational institutions, player associations, and businesses to share best practices and create synergies like European Athlete Student (EAS) network. On the business side, multinational companies that sponsor sports are increasingly interested in offering career opportunities to athletes as part of their corporate social responsibility, effectively creating a pipeline from sport to workforce.

Finally, an emerging trend is the notion of making dual career support a lifetime concept, not just something for active athletes. Support structures are gradually extending to former athletes, helping them remain connected and continue developing after sports. Alumni networks but also programs specifically for those in career transition are being set up by players' unions and federations. These might offer, for example, entrepreneurship training for ex-athletes looking to start businesses or fast-track sport instructor training for those who want to go into sport on another side. By viewing dual careers as an ongoing process, sports organizations create a legacy of care that can attract future talent. Moreover, retired athletes who have been beneficiaries of good dual career support often become the next generation of coaches, administrators, or mentors, thus feeding back into the system. This sustainability angle ensures the dual

career ethos becomes part of the sport culture, continually reinforced by those who experienced its value.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the landscape of dual career support is dynamic, with technology, policy, and cultural shifts all influencing how programs are run. Sports organizations that stay attuned to these innovations are best positioned to offer world-class support to their athletes. From online learning and apps to quality standards and holistic wellness initiatives, the tools for supporting dual careers are more powerful and varied than ever. The common thread is an athlete-centered mindset, recognizing that nurturing the person beyond the athlete is both morally right and strategically smart for sporting success. As we move to the last chapter (Chapter 5), the focus will shift to a broader discussion of how these practices and trends can be integrated into overarching sport policy and the collective effort of stakeholders to foster dual careers at all levels of sport.

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# 5 Dual Career Athlete – The Way Forward

## Introduction

Throughout this book, we have explored the multifaceted concept of the dual career in sport. We began by defining what a dual career entails and why it matters for athletes' holistic well-being and post-sport transitions. We then examined theoretical models and frameworks that shed light on how athletes navigate simultaneous sporting and non-sporting pathways (Chapter 2), surveyed the evolving policy landscape and institutional systems that enable or hinder dual career pursuits (Chapter 3), and highlighted practical tools, support services, and organizational programs making a difference on the ground (Chapter 4). Having established this foundation, we now turn to a forward-looking perspective. A 'way forward' is needed because the dual career field, while significantly advanced in recent years, continues to face gaps and new challenges. The landscape is dynamic so theory must continually inform practice, policies must adapt to emerging realities, and practices on the ground often generate insights that should loop back into theory and policy. In this chapter, we synthesize the lessons learned so far and discuss how to better integrate these domains. The goal is to chart actionable directions for all stakeholders – athletes, support organizations, and policymakers – to collaboratively enhance dual career development. In doing so, we aim to reinforce a central theme of this book, that supporting athletes in education, work, and life alongside sport is a shared responsibility and an evolving project, one that requires unity of purpose across theory, policy, and practice.

## Synthesis of Key Insights

### *From Theory to Policy to Practice and Back*

One of the clearest insights from our journey is that theory, policy, and practice are not isolated silos but deeply interlinked and mutually reinforcing. Dual career research and theory have given us a vocabulary and conceptual models to understand athletes as 'whole persons' with multiple developmental

trajectories, not just performers on the field. For example, dual career has been succinctly defined as ‘a career with major foci on sport and studies or work’ (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019). This holistic outlook from Chapter 2 underscores that athletic and nonathletic spheres are interconnected, and it emphasizes the value of integrating these spheres in an athlete’s life rather than keeping them separate. Theoretical models highlight how balancing sport with education or employment can yield benefits like identity development, resilience through transitions, and smoother retirement from sport. These concepts have increasingly permeated policy discussions. Chapter 3 showed that this discourse translated into concrete policies from broad frameworks like the *EU Guidelines on Dual Careers of Athletes* (European Commission, 2012) to national strategies that formally recognize and support student-athletes. Comparative research has identified a range of dual career policy models; for instance, some countries enforce athlete-friendly education laws, others fund partnerships between schools and sports bodies, while some historically left athletes to manage largely on their own (Aquilina & Henry, 2010; Morris et al., 2021). These policies, in turn, set the stage for practical support systems. Chapter 4 illustrated how, in practice, numerous tools and programs have been developed to assist dual career athletes. Studies indicate that in many countries, structured support services now exist to help athletes balance sport and academics or work, providing academic flexibility, career counseling, life skills training, and more (Hong & Coffee, 2018; Hong et al., 2022; Lopez Flores et al., 2021). This proliferation of on-the-ground programs demonstrates practice catching up with and operationalizing the ideas proposed by research and encouraged by policy.

### ***Intersection and Mutual Support***

Equally important is how these three domains intersect and bolster one another. Theory provides evidence and concepts that inform better policies; for example, research showing the risks of a one-dimensional athletic identity and the benefits of dual identity like reduced burnout and smoother transitions, has justified policies prioritizing education for athletes (Sorkkila et al., 2017; Stambulova et al., 2009). Policy, when well crafted, establishes environments and incentives that make it easier to put theory into practice, such as laws mandating flexible schooling or funding for dual career programs. Practice, in turn, supplies real-world insights and feedback loops. The success or struggles of dual career initiatives on the ground guide researchers toward new questions and help policymakers refine their approaches. In Europe’s case, a virtuous cycle has been noted. Increased communication among stakeholders has led to a shared body of knowledge and a more unified approach. The cultural praxis paradigm in sport psychology explicitly calls for close links between theory, research, practice, and context, highlighting that advances in dual career should be cocreated across these realms (Stambulova et al.,

2021). An example of this intersection is how the identification of ‘dual career competencies’ needed by athletes has influenced the training of support staff in practice, and even the creation of qualification frameworks for dual career services. Conversely, innovative practices like new online learning platforms for athletes or mentorship schemes are prompting researchers to study their efficacy and encouraging policymakers to include such innovations in future plans. Thus, theory, policy, and practice exist in a dynamic interplay. When aligned, they create a supportive ecosystem around the athlete; when disconnected, gaps emerge that can hinder athlete development.

## **Implications for Stakeholders**

The push forward in dual career development carries important implications for the key stakeholders in the system – the athletes themselves; the organizations that support them including sport bodies, educational institutions, or clubs; and the policymakers or authorities who shape the environment. Each group has a distinct but interrelated role to play in advancing dual career opportunities. We highlight these implications below.

### ***For Athletes***

For athletes, the way forward emphasizes embracing a dual identity, proactively seeking support, and fully utilizing the resources available. One recurring lesson of this handbook is that pursuing education or vocational development alongside sport is not a sign of reduced athletic commitment, but rather a strategy for long-term success and well-being. Athletes should be encouraged to view themselves as more than just athletes. They should see themselves as well as students, professionals, or entrepreneurs in the making, and to take pride in this multidimensional identity. Research has shown that having this dual identity can buffer athletes against the volatile nature of sports. It contributes to more balanced personal development and eases transitions, such as retirement, by ensuring that self-worth and purpose are not solely tied to sports performance (Stambulova et al., 2009). In practice, this means athletes might consciously allocate time and energy to their studies or job training even during their sports career peaks, recognizing that this investment will pay off both in future career opportunities and in immediate mental refreshment and perspective. Indeed, a well-rounded identity is linked to better emotional regulation and lower burnout; for example, student-athletes with a strong school-sport balance report fewer stress symptoms than those who identify only with sport (Sorkkila et al., 2017).

Hand in hand with dual identity comes the importance of seeking and using support. The evolving dual career landscape offers more support than ever before, but it is still up to athletes to take initiative and tap into these services.

Athletes should not hesitate to reach out to dual career support providers, to inform coaches and teachers of their dual commitments, and to ask for accommodations or advice when needed. As highlighted by the International Society of Sport Psychology, athletes who engage in dual careers benefit greatly from developing personal resources and from the conditions and support provided by their environment. In fact, a recent position stand explicitly recommends that athletes utilize available support to build their dual career competencies and find an optimal balance between sport, studies or work, and personal life (Stambulova et al., 2021). This means taking advantage of programs such as study flexibility policies, tutoring services, life skills workshops, or job placement assistance that might be offered through universities, sports institutes, or athlete career programs. It also means being honest about one's needs, by communicating with coaches about exam periods or workload, rather than suffering in silence or attempting the balancing act alone. Athletes should recognize that seeking support is a strength, not a weakness. By making use of the resources at their disposal, they can significantly reduce unnecessary stress and prevent problems like academic underperformance or mental health struggles that arise from overload and can also hinder performance on the sport field.

Another implication for athletes is the value of planning and adaptability. Dual career athletes should proactively plan their schedules and career steps, for example, mapping out how they will fulfill academic requirements around training camps, or vice versa. They should set both sport and non-sport goals. However, they should also cultivate adaptability, since plans might change as an unexpected sports opportunity or setback might require adjustments to studies, and vice versa. Those who succeed in dual careers often cite flexibility and good communication as key personal strategies (Aquilina, 2013). In practical terms, this might involve choosing educational programs that offer online coursework or part-time options or keeping an open mind about taking a gap semester or extending a degree if a sporting opportunity arises. It may also involve learning when to prioritize one domain over the other for a period of time and knowing that this is okay, as long as one returns to maintain the balance.

Finally, athletes should realize that by pursuing a dual career, they are also contributing to a cultural shift in sports. Every athlete who successfully graduates or builds a parallel career debunks the old myth that serious athletes must be singularly focused. Athletes become role models for younger peers, showing that it is possible to excel in sport and education or work simultaneously. Embracing this pioneering role can be empowering. The implication is that athletes' voices and stories matter; by sharing their dual career experiences with coaches, media, and policymakers, they can help drive further improvements in the system. In the 'way forward', athletes are not just recipients of support but active partners and advocates in shaping a more humane and sustainable sporting culture.

***For Sport Organizations and Educational Institutions***

For the organizations closest to the athletes like clubs, sports federations, Olympic committees, universities, schools, and dedicated dual career support centers, the way forward calls for institutionalizing support, creating inclusive and collaborative systems, and actively listening to athlete voices. These organizations are the ones who implement policies on the ground and interact with athletes daily, so their commitment and approach can make or break a dual career effort.

To institutionalize support means making dual career assistance a built-in, standard part of athlete development programs, rather than an add-on or afterthought. The message of recent research and policy trends is that dual career support should be part of the fabric of sport and education systems. Practically, this could mean appointing full-time staff who specialize in athlete welfare or dual careers, establishing formal agreements between sports bodies and local colleges or companies, and ensuring that coaches and administrators are educated about the importance of dual careers. We have seen positive examples like parts of the athlete's environment work in an integrated fashion, sharing information and coordinating efforts to support the athlete's whole development. Research on successful dual career development environments (DCDEs) shows they are characterized by integrated efforts among stakeholders and a strong, coherent organizational culture that values both sports and education (Morris et al., 2021). Sport organizations and schools should strive to build such cultures. This could involve routine check-ins on athletes' academic or vocational progress just as one would track physical training, celebrating academic achievements in sports teams, or including dual career goals in the athlete's development plan. By institutionalizing support, organizations send a powerful signal that excelling in sport and growing off-field are complementary, not conflicting, objectives.

Building inclusive systems is another critical implication. An inclusive dual career system means support is available to all athletes who need it, not just the most elite or those in certain sports, and that it is tailored to diverse needs. Diversity in this context spans gender, socioeconomic background, ethnicity, disability, and the type of sport or level of competition. For example, female athletes and athletes with disabilities historically have faced additional challenges in their career pathways and may have specific support needs. Moreover, as sports become more global, many athletes pursue education in a country different from their home or compete for clubs abroad, and these transnational athletes need support that accounts for cultural and language adjustments. Sport organizations and educational institutions should thus evaluate whether their current programs reach all groups. For instance, are there dual career opportunities for athletes in vocational tracks, or only university students? Does support extend to junior athletes in secondary school, not just those in university or national teams? Is there mentorship available for athletes who take nontraditional pathways? A forward-looking program might establish special outreach or scholarships for underrepresented athlete groups

or ensure materials and counseling are culturally sensitive. Inclusivity also means international collaboration by recognizing qualifications across borders and sharing best practices so that an athlete moving from one country to another does not fall through the cracks. Ultimately, an inclusive dual career system honors the principle that every athlete, not just the superstars, deserves the chance to develop as a whole person.

Crucially, sport and educational organizations should also listen to athlete voices and empower them in the support process. Athletes are the ‘end users’ of dual career programs; their feedback is invaluable in designing effective support. In practice, this could mean involving athletes in program planning committees or national dual career networks, conducting regular surveys or focus groups to gather athlete input on what services they need, and being responsive to their suggestions. It also means training support staff to practice empathy, personalized communication, and confidentiality, so that athletes feel safe discussing their challenges. When athletes feel heard and respected, they are more likely to seek help early and participate actively in dual career programs. Another emerging idea is to include dual career milestones as part of talent development criteria. By giving athletes a voice and stake in their dual career journey, organizations align with the broader shift toward more democratic and holistic sport systems.

### ***For Policymakers and Sport Governing Bodies***

Policymakers whether at the governmental level or within sport governing bodies have a macro-level influence on the dual career landscape. The implications for them center on creating harmonized frameworks, ensuring sustainable funding, and fostering cross-sector collaboration, all while keeping an eye on emergent trends and research.

First, harmonized frameworks refer to the alignment of policies and guidelines across different regions and sectors so that dual career support is coherent and comprehensive. Key challenge is the unevenness of dual career provisions as some countries have advanced legal frameworks while others are just starting, and within countries different institutions vary in their approach. Policymakers should work toward greater harmonization by learning from successful models and adopting common standards. At the European level, the EU Guidelines (2012) have been a good example of providing a blueprint that member states can adapt. However, the framework is currently quite dated and would benefit from revision. Harmonization does not mean one-size-fits-all legislation, but rather a coordinated framework that ensures minimum standards of dual career support. This could manifest as accreditation systems, for example, a certification for ‘Dual Career Friendly Universities’ or ‘Athlete-Friendly Employers’ that nations collectively recognize, or the integration of dual career indicators into broader sport development benchmarks. By speaking a common policy language, stakeholders from different countries or sectors can more easily collaborate and share resources. It

also facilitates athlete mobility if an athlete knows that moving to a certain country or club would not derail their education because of standardized support measures, they have greater freedom in career choices. In the way forward, policymakers should also incorporate the latest research into these frameworks. The literature points to emerging needs such as supporting athletes in vocational education, not just university, or addressing the dual career needs of athletes in later career stages and into retirement to encourage lifelong learning. A harmonized framework should be forward-looking enough to encompass these aspects, thereby future-proofing dual career systems.

Second, sustainable funding is the lifeblood of any support system. Good policies and plans require resources to implement. Policymakers must recognize dual career programs as long-term investments in human capital, and thus secure stable funding streams for them. This might involve government budgets allocating funds specifically for dual career support centers, scholarship programs, or training of dual career personnel. It could also involve incentivizing private sector and educational institutions to contribute, for example, tax breaks for companies that hire and mentor athletes or grants for universities that excel in supporting student-athletes. One success story in recent years has been the use of EU Erasmus+ Sport funding to catalyze dual career projects across Europe. Between 2013 and 2024, dozens of projects received funding to develop dual career curricula, guidelines, research, and best practices, indicating how external funding can jump-start progress. Policymakers should consider how to continue such funding on a regular basis not only project-based and ensure that effective initiatives become permanent offerings rather than time-limited pilots. This is a connecting point to institutionalization that was mentioned in earlier paragraphs. Additionally, policymakers should fund ongoing evaluation of dual career programs to identify what works best, ensuring money is well spent on evidence-based strategies.

Lastly, collaboration across sectors is an indispensable element highlighted throughout this book. Dual careers inherently sit at the intersection of sport, education, and labor. Therefore, policymakers need to facilitate collaboration between these sectors by breaking down silos. This can be done by establishing formal interministerial working groups. It also involves creating platforms for stakeholders to meet and exchange ideas such as national dual career conferences or networks that bring together sports federations, universities, athlete commissions, and industry partners. The comparative models we reviewed show that where collaboration is strong as in some Nordic countries' partnership models, dual career support tends to be more comprehensive. In practice, cross-sector collaboration might produce initiatives like specialized curriculum in schools that matches training schedules or apprenticeship programs where companies offer flexible work arrangements for athletes. On an international scale, collaboration means aligning the efforts of organizations like the IOC or International Sport Federations, with regional bodies like the EU or Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), to

ensure consistency and share successful tools. It also means engaging the research community. Policymakers should invite scholars to present findings and recommendations, so that policies remain evidence-informed. A culture of collaboration ensures that athletes do not fall into the gaps between systems. By formalizing these communication channels, policymakers create an ecosystem where everyone ‘speaks the same language’ regarding dual careers. Ultimately, such collaboration leads to more robust and creative solutions, the kind needed to face new challenges in this space.

In sum, for policymakers and sport leaders, the way forward is about consolidation and innovation on a broad scale – consolidating gains by embedding dual career support in our educational and sport systems for the long run, and innovating by keeping policies updated with the changing world of sports. By creating strong frameworks, funding them adequately, and fostering a spirit of partnership across sectors, policymakers can ensure that the next generation of athletes enjoys a supportive environment in which both their sporting talent and their personal potential are developed to the fullest.

## **Recommendations**

Building on the synthesis and stakeholder implications above, this section outlines key recommendations for driving the dual career movement forward. These recommendations are interrelated and reinforce each other, collectively aiming to create an integrated, high-quality, and future-ready dual career system:

### ***Integrate Theory, Policy, and Practice***

Establish structured mechanisms to link research, policymaking, and on-the-ground practice in dual careers. This could include creating knowledge exchange and encouraging evidence-based policy development. By integrating these domains, we address the noted gap between research and practice. The cultural praxis paradigm already offers a philosophy for this integration, emphasizing close collaboration and context consideration (Stambulova & Ryba et al., 2015). Concretely, we recommend the development of integrated dual career action plans at national or regional levels that explicitly tie together theoretical frameworks, policy goals, and practical initiatives.

### ***Standardize Evaluation and Quality Measures***

As dual career programs expand, it is crucial to assure their quality and effectiveness. We recommend creating standardized evaluation frameworks and quality criteria for dual career support services. This might involve developing benchmarks or accreditation standards for dual career programs. By introducing standard metrics such as athlete academic success rates,

athlete satisfaction, or post-sport employment rates, organizations can better gauge what works. We further recommend implementing periodic audits or peer-reviews of dual career programs, perhaps led by an independent body or a network like the European Athlete as Student (EAS) network, to ensure accountability and continuous improvement. Quality labels or certifications could motivate institutions to meet high standards. Importantly, standardization should not imply rigidity as qualitative feedback from athletes should complement quantitative metrics to capture the full picture of program impact. Overall, by measuring outcomes and sharing results across institutions, the field can identify best practices and scale them up, while phasing out approaches that are less effective.

### ***Invest in Innovation***

Embracing innovation will allow dual career support to evolve with the changing lifestyles and needs of athletes. One key area is digital services. The recent pandemic accelerated the adoption of online learning and remote support, which can be a boon for busy athletes. Current growth of generative artificial intelligence (AI) can also facilitate dual career. We recommend investment in high-quality digital learning platforms tailored for athletes. For example, partnerships with universities to create online degree programs that consider athletes' schedules, or developing mobile apps that help athletes manage time, track academic assignments, or practice mental skills on the go. Digital mentorship programs can connect athletes with mentors around the world virtually. Policymakers and organizations should fund the development of such tools, possibly in collaboration with ed-tech companies or using open-source approaches. The other side of innovation is personalization of pathways. We know that athletes have highly individual circumstances; thus, support should not be one-size-fits-all. We recommend creating more personalized dual career plans for athletes, using an approach similar to individual performance plans in sport. This means sitting down with each athlete especially at the elite junior or senior level to map out a plan for their education or career alongside sport, tailored to their interests, strengths, and competition calendar. Perhaps such individualization can be facilitated by AI tools. Innovative use of data could help here; for instance, predictive analytics might identify when an athlete is at risk of academic underperformance allowing early intervention or which types of careers might fit well with their sport schedules. Innovation also extends to content, developing new programs such as short, intensive certification courses for athletes in off-season, or micro-internships with flexible hours. We encourage stakeholders to pilot creative solutions, document them, and, if successful, expand them. Ultimately, by leveraging technology and embracing the idea that there are multiple 'winning' dual career paths not just the traditional school-to-university route, we can serve a broader population of athletes more effectively.

### ***Promote Diversity and Inclusion***

Future dual career efforts must actively promote diversity and inclusion, ensuring equitable support for all athletes. This recommendation has several dimensions. One is gender equity, which means ensuring that all athletes, regardless of gender, have equal access to dual career programs and that these programs account for the different challenges athletes may encounter. For example, this may involve recognizing the specific needs of athletes who are also parents or addressing variations in career trajectories and peak performance periods across different sports and athlete groups. Another is support for athletes with disabilities, who may have Paralympic careers alongside schooling or work. Transnational athletes and those from minority backgrounds should see themselves reflected in support services. This might mean providing materials in multiple languages, training counselors in cultural competence, or pairing athletes with mentors who understand their cultural context. We also include international mobility under this umbrella. With many athletes training abroad or moving for competitions or clubs, dual career support should transcend national borders. We recommend establishing international cooperation protocols; for example, if an athlete goes to another country for a season, their home academic institution could partner with a local institution to ensure their studies continue smoothly. On a policy level, inclusion means involving diverse voices in designing dual career initiatives. Female athlete representatives, Paralympic committees, and athletes from various sports and regions should be part of consultation processes. By doing so, programs will be more attuned to the nuances that different groups face. Prioritizing diversity is not just about fairness; it also enriches the system. New perspectives often lead to innovations that benefit everyone. For instance, flexible learning solutions developed for athletes in remote areas can also help urban athletes with tight schedules. A study on cultural transitions noted that individual agency is shaped by structural conditions and power dynamics, implying that organizations must be mindful of how policies might inadvertently privilege some athletes over others. Correcting such imbalances is part of the way forward.

### ***Prioritize the Athlete's Voice and Governance Participation***

As dual career support systems mature, athletes should be increasingly seen not just as beneficiaries but as stakeholders and decision-makers. We recommend formally including athletes' voices in the governance of dual career programs. This could take the form of athlete advisory boards attached to national dual career committees or university programs, where current or former dual career athletes provide input on program design, rules, and evaluation. Athletes' lived experience is invaluable for crafting policies that truly address their needs. An athlete advisory group might highlight that exam schedules often clash with major championships, leading a university board to adjust its

academic calendar for athletes where possible. At higher policy levels, athlete representatives should be part of any task force or working group drafting dual career strategies. In practice, prioritizing athlete voice also means fostering a culture where feedback is actively solicited and acted upon. Successful dual career athletes can be engaged as ambassadors to advocate for dual career programs to younger athletes, to sponsors, and to the public. Essentially, this recommendation is about cocreation. Athletes and officials should design the future of dual careers together. This partnership will likely lead to more robust and accepted solutions, and it empowers athletes to take ownership of both their sports and personal development journey.

Each of these recommendations reinforces the others. Taken together, they form a comprehensive roadmap for the next phase of dual career development. Adopting these recommendations will require effort and commitment, but the payoff is a sustainable system that truly enables athletes to ‘have it all’, excelling in sport, flourishing in education or work, and growing into well-rounded individuals who can contribute beyond their athletic achievements.

## **Conclusion**

As we conclude this book, it is worth reflecting on how far the dual career movement has come and the opportunities that lie ahead. What was once a niche concept, the idea that an athlete could successfully pursue education or vocational training while competing at a high level, has evolved into a central element of athlete development in many parts of the world. We have seen that supporting dual careers is not just a ‘nice to have’ but a fundamental responsibility of sports systems, educational institutions, and society at large. Athletes are whole human beings with talents, aspirations, and contributions that extend well beyond the competitive arena. By fostering their dual careers, we are safeguarding their well-being, enriching the sporting environment with more educated and balanced individuals, and ultimately giving back to society citizens who are prepared to thrive in multiple domains.

The ‘Way Forward’ is both a call to action and a hopeful vision. It calls on all stakeholders, whether you are an athlete thinking about life after the next championship, a coach or academic advisor guiding a young talent, an administrator designing a program, or a policymaker allocating resources, to recognize your role in this shared endeavor. Small actions, like a coach adjusting a training time for a critical class or a university professor offering an alternative exam date for a competition, can make a huge difference in an athlete’s journey. Larger actions, like a government enacting a new dual career policy or a consortium of universities launching an online degree for athletes, can change the landscape for generations. We need both the grassroots efforts and the top-down initiatives.

Our hope is that the insights synthesized in this chapter and throughout the book serve as a foundation for these actions. The theoretical models remind

us why dual careers matter, for identity, for transition, and for mental health. The policy analysis shows what structures can enable dual careers, laws, collaborations, and funding. The practical programs demonstrate how support can be delivered through counseling, flexibility, training, and technology. And this final chapter has tried to outline who must do what next: each stakeholder taking specific steps, and all stakeholders working together.

Ultimately, the dual career journey is about balance and empowerment. It is about balance in the sense of nurturing the athlete and the person in tandem, ensuring neither is neglected. It is about empowerment in that athletes gain control over their futures. They gain education, skills, and networks that empower them to navigate life during and after sport. In a way, a well-supported dual career is the antidote to the all-too-common narrative of athletes who struggle at career's end. Instead of 'What now?', the athlete with a dual career can say, 'I have choices'. That is a powerful outcome.

We reiterate the book's contribution to dual career development compiling a comprehensive understanding of the field and shining a light on best practices and areas for improvement. But a book alone changes little, it is the actions taken after reading that count. We encourage you, the reader, to carry forward the knowledge gained here. Whether it is implementing a new idea at your club, advocating for a policy change, mentoring a young athlete at school, or simply changing your mindset about what athletes can and should do off the field, you can be part of the way forward.

The future of dual careers is bright if we continue to collaborate and innovate. By keeping the athlete's holistic growth at the heart of our efforts, we will produce not only better athletes but better educated, adaptable, and fulfilled individuals. That, ultimately, is the win-win that dual careers promise, and it is a goal well worth pursuing. Let us move forward with commitment and creativity to make that vision a reality, ensuring that every athlete can confidently stride into life's next chapter, whenever it arrives, with a diploma in one hand and a trophy in the other.

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