COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: SUPPORT FOR STUDENT - ATHLETES AND THE GUIDELINES FOR THE UNIVERSITIES IN SOUTHEAST EUROPE

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Abstract
Multitude of different studies confirmed that it is rarely possible to combine higher education and sport successfully without some level of flexibility in educational programmes. Some of the European countries and its universities have adjusted entry requirements that offer flexible arrangements and support systems for student athletes. The main purpose of this paper is to consider the role of universities in balancing athletic performance and education of student-athletes. The support services to the student-athletes at university generally include some of the following measures: flexible timetabling and permission for absence at training/competition, unlimited student status, distance learning and e-learning programmes, individual tutor support and monitoring, etc. According to the best practices in Europe, we have proposed the list of the Guidelines for promoting dual career in educational institution that have been adjusted towards universities’ abilities and student-athletes needs in this region.

Key words: higher education, support for athletes, guidelines, best practices

Introduction
The White paper on Sports regulates sporting careers and education: „In order to ensure the reintegration of professional sportspersons into the labour market at the end of their sporting careers, the Commission emphasises the importance of taking into account an early stage the need to provide „dual career“ training for young sportsmen and sportswomen and to provide high quality training centres to safeguard their moral educational and professional interests.“¹ Once the compulsory school is terminated, athletes are confronted to several different choices: to abandon their studies and keep on training and competing or to keep on training and continue their professional education through the available ways in their country (the Study on training of young sportsmen/women in Europe, 2008). Following the European Council’s Declaration 2008 to address the question of “dual careers”, the European Commission has emphasised the importance of ensuring that young high-level athletes are offered a quality education in parallel to their sport training. Many efforts have been made in the most European countries with the aim to allow high level young athletes to combine higher education studies and high level sport. According to the several studies, the practice often shows that this is not sufficient and that many high level athletes cannot go on studying efficiently if they want to reach the high level on the sports side. Athletes are surrounded by an entourage of supporters and stakeholders, all whom want to influence young sportspersons in ways they feel are best for their development: 1. Sports stakeholders – often include a team drawn from sports club, coaches, physiotherapist, psychologist, nutritionists, medical advisers and others, 2. Personal development of the entourage include family, friends and peers and 3. Education brings teachers, tutors, mentors and others into the entourage (Education of young sportspersons, pp. 158). Support from all the members of the entourage is the key to enable the athletes to achieve a balance between their education, sport and social development. Most of the studies that we have analyzed emphasize that athletes go through several stages of their career transition when these pressures and conflicts may become acute. In the periods of transferring up to the next level, they may need additional help and support in respect of managing failure and in dealing with the end of sporting career. Managing these career transition issues is a significant factor of the athlete’s overall welfare and success. The challenge of balancing academic and sport development, together with managing personal development, continues into higher education. Some of the European universities have adjusted the entry requirements and they offer flexible arrangements and support systems of studying to student athletes (Athletes To Bussines results – educational institutions, Education of young sportspersons: pp. 142-153). The main purpose of this paper is to consider the role of universities in balancing athletic performance and education of student-athletes. In order to have a clear picture, we have analyzed different European models and best practices from different studies. According to all these data as well as the sports tradition and culture, the final result of this paper is the list of the guidelines for the universities in Southeast Europe which was adjusted with its abilities and student – athletes needs identified in a few studies in this region.

Comparative analysis of the European models

The comparative analysis of students-athletes support in higher education was based on the following studies: 1. Combining sports and education: Support for athletes in the EU Member State (2003) – study which had the aim to explore how the different EU Member States deal with educational opportunities and long term athletes career prospects, 2. Education in Elite Sport in Europe (2004) – the study with the aim to add contributions towards the enhancement of potentialities for impelling innovation and progress among actors on varying organisational levels and to promote structural cooperation models between high performance sport and education, 3. Education of young sportspersons (2005) that have been focused on the situation in Europe related to the education of young sportmen and women and their return to education and/or employment once their sporting careers have ended all across the European Union Members States, 4. Study of training young sportmen/women in Europe (2008) - analysis related to the national and European legal and political frameworks preserving and promoting the training of young athletes in the 27 Member States and 5. EU Project: AthletesToBusiness (2010-2011) that has analyzed the obstacles, barriers and opportunities that athlete face during their years when they must combine education, sports life and the beginning process of their career which is called “dual career” as well as the published articles related to this topic. Central question of this paper is what can be done to support student-athletes and promote dual career issue by higher educational institution? The general studies findings underline the need to encourage young sportspersons to achieve a proper balance between education and sport development and the high level of flexibility is required to support elite athletes during higher education to enable them to combine training and education successfully. According to Espwall at al., (2004) sport and the educational involvement are characterised by increasing time-consume during childhood and particularly adolescence: at late youth age, in most sports, 15 to 25 training hours per week are suggested in federations’ concepts. During the same age, time expenditure in school ranges from 25 to 35 hours per week. In universities, these values are widely exceeded. Additional demands result from homework, studying, changeover, passages, and competition trips. In order to facilitate the compatible and successful coupling of individual sporting and educational development, manifold structural models of cooperation between high-performance sport organisations and educational institutions were built up in diverse systems in Europe. Particular attention has been focussed on flexible solutions for time-management. Henry (2010) made analysis based on findings of four studies: Amara at al., 2004; Aqualinia, 2009; Aqualinia at al., 2005; Review of Performance Lifestyle initiatives in UK, 2010. These studies identified the kinds of specialist provisions evident in higher education institutions seeking to meet athletes’ needs: 1. Facilitation by Universities of the academic experience of elite athletes by providing services such as: flexibility and time tabling (Cyprus, Germany), distance learning (Denmark, Sweden) and transfer between campuses and unlimited tenure of student status (Greece, Latvia), 2. Enhancement by Universities of the sporting experience of elite athletes by providing services such as: sport scholarships (Austria, Ireland, Slovenia, Poland, Portugal), elite sport development programmes (Finland, Spain, Germany, Sweden, UK) and professional supporting services (Belgium, France, Spain, UK) and 3. Universities providing assistance with post-athletic career opportunities through: study grants (Germany, France, Finland, UK) and new programmes (Sweden, The Netherlands). It is well known that the Government regulation and approval is important in the whole process. The author has identified four principal categorises the kinds of state’s role in this field: a/ State-centric System of defined legal obligation which provides adapted opportunities for student-athletes, b/ State sponsored formal system established on Permissive Legislation is the system which authorising but not requiring universities to make special provision for athletes, c/ Representation of Athletes Educational Interests by Sporting bodies provides representation of athletes’ educational interest by sporting bodies which is based on the negotiation with the university and which is very similar to the the last category d/ „Laisser faire” - no formal structures where any arrangements fall back on individually negotiated agreements (Henry, 2010). Some of the best practices of the European countries for each category are presented in the Table 1. In general, the studies have highlighted that a high level of flexibility is required to support elite athletes during higher education to enable them to combine training and education successfully. The majority of European countries offer positive measures to support student-athlete at this level, although the nature of such support varies between countries. The support services for the student athletes at university generally include some of the following measures: individual tutor support and monitoring, personalized study programmes, distance learning and e-learning programmes, transfer between departments or campuses, unlimited student status, flexible timetabling and permission for absence at training/competition.

Promoting sporting careers and education in the South-East Europe universities

The term Southeast Europe is often replaced with the term Balkan region which very often has a negative connotation. The countries located fully in the peninsula are the following: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Bulgaria, Greece, Macedonia, and Montenegro. The geographic definition may also include countries that are significantly located in the peninsula: Croatia and Serbia and some countries which are located mostly outside of the peninsula: Romania and Turkey.
Confirmed the necessity to provide support in athletes (n= 352) on education and equality have attitudes and interests of Croatian female top level and student-athletes needs. The analysis of the towards Southeast European universities’ abilities for promoting dual career (Table 2) in the EU the universities in the Region consider the athletes support in higher education we wish that body for sport and the Ministry responsible for sport system are organized on the same way: the World and European sports competitions in different hosted big sports events (Winter Olympic Games, international level. Some of these countries have promote themselves in the best way of the sports history and tradition and great wishes to countries? In general they are smaller with long experiences in the sport, they are also good at organizing major events and their resources are used efficiently. Table 1: Best examples in some of the European countries

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<th>CATEGORY</th>
<th>EXAMPLES</th>
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<td>State – centric System of Defined Legal Obligation</td>
<td>Hungary - Olympic medallist have the right to be admitted to any colleague/university without entrance examination. For the athletes who are beneficiaries of the agreement between the Olympic Committee and colleges/universities – the Universities offers elite athletes flexibility in relation to student athlete absence and their study examination timetable. Study activities are scheduled to accommodate the needs of training and competition, handbooks and other auxiliary educational materials during periods of absence for training or competition.</td>
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<td>State Sponsored Formal System Established on Permissive Legislation</td>
<td>Spain - legislation requires universities to reserve 3% of the total places provided for accredited high performance athletes who have at least the minimum academic requirements. Services: individual tutor, monitoring, placing of place sin university residences, flexible timetables and flexible schedules for the sitting of exams....</td>
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<td>Representation of Athletes Educational Interests by Sporting bodies (EU countries: Greece, United Kingdom)</td>
<td>Belgium - for the student-athletes who were ranked on the Olympic lists – a contract which allows them to combine elite sport and studies in higher education (scholarship for specific cost: 20,000 Euro. Special support programme STEP (workshops, communication skills, financial management, injury prevention and rehabilitation... Athletes could request to spread the work of one academic year over and extended time period (2 and more years).</td>
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<td>„Laiser – faire“ – no formal structure (individual negotiation agreement where these prove possible)</td>
<td>Greece – provides some limited rights: entrance examination to any university department of their choice, unlimited length of time, two types of scholarships: annual scholarship for any educational level up to undergraduate studies, second for graduate studies and Greek universities or abroad.</td>
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<td>United Kingdom - a number of universities has traditionally informally offered special concessions in terms of exam dates, location for holding examinations, flexible duration of programmes of study. The Talented Athlete Scholarship Scheme (TASS) – government funding which is designed to promote a partnership between NOC and Higher education with the aim to reduce the drop out of talented athletes from sport due to academic and financial pressures.</td>
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<td>Italy – flexibility for student athletes is possible in some private universities, in public universities requirements can be rigid and any request for flexibility is seen as a matter between the athletes and teaching staff. Some of the universities do have links with sport federations but not particularly strong. Student-athletes may negotiate individually with university staff.</td>
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<td>Malta is the country with small education system where it is difficult to adapt provision to accommodate the needs of athletes.</td>
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What are the common characteristics of these countries? In general they are smaller with long sports history and tradition and great wishes to promote themselves in the best way of the international level. Some of these countries have hosted big sports events (Winter Olympic Games, World and European sports competitions in different sport, World University games and European University championship in some sports) where they shown them as the perfect organizer. Due to the same cultural tradition, common languages especially in the former Yugoslav countries, the sport system are organized on the same way; the National Olympic Committee as the umbrella NGO body for sport and the Ministry responsible for sport as the GO. A significant financial support for sport and elite sport is coming from the Governments and lottery. With this context in mind as well as the European best practices of student-athletes support in higher education we wish that the universities in the Region consider the implementation some of these support measure. For this purpose we have adjusted the Guidelines for promoting dual career (Table 2) in the EU towards Southeast European universities’ abilities and student-athletes needs. The analysis of the attitudes and interests of Croatian female top level athletes (n= 352) on education and equality have confirmed the necessity to provide support in educational system: individual tutor support and monitoring distance learning and e-learning programmes and flexible timetabling. (Caput-Jogunica, 2007, Matković, 2007, Caput-Jogunica and Razbornik, 2009). According to these results, the Croatian Olympic Committee, in the cooperation with the Ministry responsible for education and sport has provided the Project: “Top level athletes in educational system”. In general, the project’s feedback from the seven Croatian universities and Council of the Polytechnics reflects that the higher educational systems do not seem readily adapted to the needs of athletes: sportspeople overall express a need for more flexibility, lighter study conditions and better study advice. To address these demands and support a stronger structure to provide a fair access to athletes to be able to participate in sport and fulfil their long term dreams so that then they can bring this unique experience to the labour market after their sports career, it must start with a stronger relationship with the educational organisations. Furthermore, it is important to emphasize the role of lifestyle management advice in helping athletes to achieve an appropriate balance in their lifestyle: coaches and parents are usually the key factors, for young athletes they have a significant influence (Burden at al., 2004; Cecić-Erpić, 2001; Sotiriadou & Shilbury; 2009, Trninč at al., 2009).
According to the Guidelines of promoting dual career in the EU (2011) the first step must include the active promotion on increasing the cooperation with education and sport to be created or strengthened and maintained on different levels: local, national and regional. One strategy would be to have one body or team in the national sport organisation, institute for sport, department in the ministry, etc., which takes the lead in developing dialogue between sports and educational institutions. According to the AthletesToBussines conclusions, it is recommended to involve former top level athletes at the beginning of the “dual career” campaign with the aim to motivate and support young athletes’ efforts and in its decisions.

Table 2: Guidelines and proposal for actions for the Universities and Polytechnics

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<th>Guidelines for educational institutions to promote dual career</th>
<th>Actions</th>
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| **European Southeast countries should provide and enabling legal framework** | 1. National authorities should promote and strengthen dialogue between sport and educational leaders (NOCs president and Minister responsible for education in cooperation with the university rectors) to develop concepts that could be adopted and based on a more flexible system for combining high level sports and academic education (Sports law, Law and other acts for higher educational institutions...).  
2. Ministries for Education should implement guiding principles determining a structure for educational institutions to develop several criteria levels: first – minimum support, second – support for top level athletes, third: support for the members of the national teams...).  
3. Relevant ministries should consider a budget for dual career allowing educational institutions to develop athlete friendly systems such as distance education (e-learning). |
| **Collaboration should be promoted and maintained** | 1. To identify the Universities that are interested to support the student-athletes  
2. Universities should sign agreements with the National Olympic Committee to support the integration of student-athletes’ sporting and academic ambitions.  
3. In the effort to handle and maintain effective partnership, there could be a neutral body as bridge between sports and education to minimise conflicts. |
| **Universities should envisage structural advancements** | 1. University leadership and staff should allow for of adjustment the athlete-friendly environment by adopting new or altered elements in the institutions’ regulatory documents.  
2. Educational institutions should provide athletes with flexibility in time, options and process to successfully pursue higher education. |
| **Provision of individual support assisted by networks** | 1. In the frame of combined education and training, there should be a central guidance counsellor who could navigate athletes to the appropriate service provider in both, sports and education.  
2. The advisor should be supported by a network comprising the stakeholders that appear locally relevant. |
| **Higher authorities should create and strengthen dialogue** | 1. Promote dual career on national basis: campaign with former top level athletes: round tables, workshops with the athletes, dialogue in media.  
2. To identify the national conceptual model of the organisation and structure of sport policies and financial support related to athlete in whole educational system and well as the post-career support. |

**Conclusion**

The field of athletes and education has been the subject of significant studies and projects. How do universities perceive students-athletes and what can they do to support them? This paper is just an addition to a small number of the papers in the Southeast Europe with the aim to promote this topic in academic society and to provoke the GOs responsible for education to implement some of the guidelines which could be helpful to achieve diploma in the end of study. Some of the European countries (UK, France, Germany, Belgium (Flanders), Sweden and Finland) offer a wide spectrum of advice and support on lifestyle, careers and education, as well as job opportunities, whereas other European and non European countries offer limited or no elements of support. The European countries and its universities in general have different positions as to policies towards, and legal/moral responsibility for supporting athletes-students. This paper is based on the analysis and results from different European projects.

The examples of mentioned European studies include advice and support, careers counselling, employment opportunities, financial support and incentives to return to education. Throughout the European studies which we have been presented in the paper, the need of flexibility was a key factor and especially highlighted by athletes as the most important for successfully combining sport, education and personal development. The flexibility in education is related to the timetabling, entry requirements, time off/extended deadlines and adaptation of the curriculum. Various examples of flexibility have presented within our comparative analysis of study results, categories and best practices. According to the European countries experience in order to provoke and encourage the Southeast universities to offer flexibility to students-athletes, the final result of this paper is the proposal of guidelines. It is important to emphasize that the universities are autonomous and therefore entitled to regulate themselves in that status and advantages allocated to student-athletes: flexibility in timetables, distance learning, tutors, etc.
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USPOREDNA ANALIZA: PODRŠKA STUDENTIMA – SPORTAŠIMA I UPUTE UNIVERZITETIMA JUGOISTOČNE EUROPE

Sažetak
Veći broj različitih stručnih analiza potvrđuje problem usklađivanja obveza u studiju i sport bez nekog oblika potpore nastavnika i prilagodljivosti obveza tijekom studija. Neke europske države i njihova sveučilišta propisuju su uvjete koji pridonose lakšem ispunjavanju obveza aktivnim sportašima u visokom obrazovanju. Osnovni cilj ovog rada je razmotriti ulogu sveučilišta koja može pridonijeti uravnoteženom procesu sportske karijere i obrazovanja studenata-sportaša. Uvjeti koji mogu osigurati usklađivanje sportske karijere i obveza u studiju možemo odrediti kao mjere fleksibilnosti – prilagodljivosti obveza koje se odnose na sudjelovanje na nastavi, ispitni rokovi, neograničen status studenta, učenje na daljinu i ispunjavanje obveza online, mentor ili tutor na studiju i dr. Na osnovu dobrih europskih primjera u praksi, predložena je lista smjernica za obrazovne ustanove prilagođena mogućnostima sveučilišta u ovoj regiji te potrebama sportaša.

Ključne riječi: visoko obrazovanje, potpora sportašima, smjernice, dobri primjeri prakse

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