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THE EUROPEAN ATHLETE AS STUDENT NETWORK (“EAS”): PRIORITISING DUAL CAREER OF EUROPEAN STUDENT-ATHLETES

EVROPSKA MREŽA ZA ŠTUDENTE ŠPORTNIKE (“EAS”): VZPODBUJANJE DVOJNE KARIERE EVROPSKIH ŠTUDENTOV - ŠPORTNIKOV

ABSTRACT

Elite athletes undergo tremendous volumes of training, which often collide with educational commitments. A dual career (i.e., the successful combination of elite sport and education) is a multifactorial complex, influenced by individual (i.e. talent and psychological characteristics), interpersonal (i.e., social support and cultural custom), environmental (i.e. access and availability to tools/services), and policy (i.e., national and international normative) aspects. Across Europe, discrepancies in dual career policies determine different career paths in student-athletes. To protect their right to combine sport and education, European policy-makers have encouraged EU Member States to support student-athletes at local level by providing EU Guidelines on Dual Careers of Athletes and key action strategies. Within such framework, the European Athlete as Student Network (“EAS”) has, since 2004, actively supported EU efforts in promoting dual career by providing a platform for a better dialogue between educational bodies (i.e., universities, high schools, sports schools) and sport organisations (i.e. clubs and federations). Through encouraging networking between institutions, EAS aims to unify partners involved in high performance sport and education, promote the exchange of dual career best practices, strengthen the link between educational institutions and

sports organisations and support and initiate projects and research on dual career.

Key words: dual career, EAS, athlete

IZVLEČEK

Vrhunski športniki opravijo ogromno količino treninga, kar je pogosto težko uskladiti z izobraževalnimi obveznostmi. Dvojna kariera (uspešna kombinacija vrhunskega športa in izobraževanja) je več dimenzionalni proces, ki je pod vplivom posameznika (talent in psihološke značilnosti), medosebnih odnosov (socialna podpora in kulturni običaji), okolja (dostop in razpoložljivost storitev) in politike (nacionalni in mednarodni normativi). Zaradi različnih pristopov do dvojne kariere športnikov v različnih evropskih državah prihaja do različnih kariernih poti športnikov. Da bi zaščitili pravice športnikov do sočasnega ukvarjanja s športom in izobraževanjem, so evropski oblikovalci politike začeli spodbujati države članice EU, naj podprejo študente športnike na lokalni ravni in sicer tako, da sledijo smernicam EU o dvojni karieri športnikov in ključnim ukrepom. Znotraj tega okvira, od leta 2004 Evropska mreža za študente športnike (“EAS”) dejavno podpira prizadevanja EU pri spodbujanju dvojne kariere z zagotavljanjem platforme za boljši dialog med izobraževalnimi ustanovami (univerze, visoke šole, športne šole) in športnimi organizacijami (klubi in športne zveze). S spodbujanjem mreženja med institucijami želi EAS poenotiti partnerje, ki sodelujejo v okviru vrhunskega športa in izobraževanja, spodbujati izmenjavo najboljših praks na področju dvojne kariere športnikov, krepiti vezi med izobraževalnimi ustanovami in športnimi organizacijami in podpirati ter sodelovati v projektih in raziskavah o dvojni karieri.

Ključne besede: dvojna kariera, EAS, športnik

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INTRODUCTION

To reach an elite level, young athletes undergo a long-term process during which their athletic development parallels their education progress (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007). In particular, elite athletes are challenged to combine heavy sport demands (around 20–30 hour week⁻¹) and academic requirements (around 30 hour week⁻¹). In Europe, often sport is not embedded in the educational system and European elite student-athletes competing at club level often decide to engage only in sport or in higher education instead of pursuing a dual career (Conzelmann & Nagel, 2003; Donnelly & Petherick, 2004; Wylleman & Reints, 2010). Conversely, the European (EU) Parliament and Commission strongly support the holistic development of the student-athlete to fully realise his/her potentials as student, athlete and EU citizen (European Commission, 2012b). However, difficulties in establishing a dialogue between sport and educational bodies to properly enable the engagement of athletes in academics exist. In fact, sport organisations tend to prioritise performance so that student-athletes could be misdirected towards academic drop out (Guidotti, Minganti, Cortis, Piacentini, Tessitore, & Capranica, 2013), whereas academic schedules might not provide suitable programs and services for athletes (i.e. flexibility for attendance and exams). Furthermore, teachers could have low expectations for student-athletes, perceiving them as low-level students (Horton, 2011). Actually, an imbalance between sport and academic commitments may arise already at high school level due to the recent introduction of the Youth Olympic Games for athletes aged 14-18 years (International Olympic Committee, 2009), which determined an implementation of youth sport programmes (Capranica & Millard-Stafford, 2011).

Since the 2004 European Year of Education through Sport (EYES) that aimed to publicise the role of sport and physical training in the development of the wellbeing of Europeans (European Commission, 2003), dual career has been considered a strategic issue for the advancement of the European dimension of sport. At first, three cross-national studies on this issue were financed (i.e., "Combining Sport and Education", European Parliament, 2003; "Education of Elite Young Sportspersons", Amara, Aquilina, Henry, & PMP Consultants, 2004; and "Study on training of young sportsmen and sportswomen in Europe", INEUM Consulting & TAJ, 2008). It has since become apparent that Member States adopt different policies in support of student-athletes, ranging from specific measures enabling a successful dual career path to a lack of policies (Aquilina & Henry, 2010; Henry, 2013).

To overcome these differences and to encourage the establishment of dual career policies in countries with no structured dual career path for student-athletes, the EU Commission, in 2012, published the "EU Guidelines on Dual Careers of Athletes" (European Commission, 2012b). More than a rulebook, this tool should inspire stakeholders to consider the proper implementation of the necessary support for athletes as students. The EU Work Plan for Sport, 2014-2017 (European Commission, 2014b) indicates that the implementation of the EU Guidelines will be reviewed as well as the funded preparatory actions in the field of dual career. Furthermore, a call for tender on the "Study on the minimum quality requirements for dual career services" was financed in 2014 (European Commission, 2014a) and the funds allotted to EU projects on sport have been increased (European Commission, 2013c). Therefore, a need for the development of a European culture to support and empower athletes through high education has emerged.

The role of the European Athlete as Student Network (EAS) in prioritising dual career of European student-athletes.

Since the EU 2004 EYES, EAS has been established as one of the few EU initiatives aimed to facilitate the recognition of student-athletes and to respond to the dual career needs of this specific population. EAS includes educational bodies (i.e., universities, high schools, sports schools) and sport organisations (i.e., clubs and federations) and its ambition is to unify the partners involved in high performance sport and education in order to exchange dual career best practices between countries and institutions, improve conditions for high performance sport and education and to develop projects and research on dual career (EAS, 2015).

Since 2004, EAS is the only EU network still providing a platform where sport and academic bodies could converge and collaborate. In considering that the combination of sport and education is a relevant resource for the development of a European dimension of sport, EAS strongly cooperates with the EU Commission. In particular, its first relevant initiative was to promote inclusion of the term “dual career” in the EU White Paper on Sport (European Commission, 2007).

Four main pillars characterise EAS: an annual conference, networking, research, and European projects. The annual conference is aimed to inform EAS members about on-going best practices; to promote cooperation between institutions, coaches, teachers and students; to discuss key issues on dual career at local, national and European levels; and to disseminate information collected by means of EU-funded projects. More recently, the 11th EAS conference has been included among the collateral activities in the field of sport of the Italian Presidency of the European Union.

Networking is deemed crucial to involve potential stakeholders, to raise their awareness of the potential benefits of educated elite athletes entering the labour market at the end of their sport career, and to follow the progress and implementation of dual career actions and policies. Networking is also relevant to share best practices with different interested parties and to establish permanent cooperation for further actions. Furthermore, EAS has been accepted as an observer in the EU Expert Groups on Human Resources Development in Sport and on Good Governance and has been a partner in the EU project “Pro Safe Sport for Young Athletes”, which aims to promote the physical and mental well-being of youth athletes. The Chair of the aforementioned Human Resources Development in Sport group is also the National Scheme Director of TASS, which is a member of EAS. Member organisations of EAS such as TASS and INSEP are also leading, or partners of other projects as part of the preparatory actions in sport.

In 2013, EAS launched a scholarship dedicated to Bengt Nybelius, a former EAS President who profusely dedicated his life to the support of elite athletes as students. This scholarship represents the recognition of the role that knowledge acquisition and transfer plays and it aims to facilitate the integration of outstanding graduate students and young researchers and establish a tradition of excellence in the area of dual career in Europe. Although this research field is at its developing stage (Guidotti, Cortis, & Capranica, 2014), a growing body of literature is emerging, underpinning the efforts of the European Commission and Parliament on this issue (European Commission, 2012).

Since 2009, the European Commission addressed sport-related issues through its Calls for Proposals/Tenders (European Commission 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012a, 2013a, 2013b). In particular, under the 2009 Education and training and the 2011 calls for transnational collaborative projects,

EAS participated in the "Athletes2Business" project, which was coordinated by the EU Office of the European Olympic Committee; and the "Better Boards Stronger Sport Project", coordinated by the Sport and Recreation Alliance (UK). More recently, EAS has been a partner in two calls for tenders in the field of sport in 2014 - specifically: 1) the "Study on the Minimum Requirement for Dual Career Services" (coordinated by the School of Sports and Nutrition of the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences, The Netherlands), which aims to develop a set of minimum quality requirements at European level to act as a reference point for national dual career services and facilities (European Commission, 2014a); and 2) the "Study on Sport Qualifications Acquired through Sport Organisations and (Sport) Educational Institutes" (coordinated by PricewaterhouseCoopers) that aims to provide a model of a Quality Framework to ensure transparency and to guarantee quality, safety and security for athletes, taking into account a quality label and/or accreditation system for facilities and dual career services at national and European levels (European Commission, 2014b). Furthermore, the Network and the University of Rome Foro Italico are partners of the project "Facilitating Higher Education for Athletes – Winner education model (coordinated by the Lapland University of Applied Sciences, Finland) under the EU Lifelong Learning Programme.

Finally, members of EAS are involved in two financed projects on dual career starting in 2015: 1) University of Rome Foro Italico - "Collaborative partnerships covering topics on EU Guidelines" and 2) INSEP and University of Ljubljana, Slovenia and Italian National Olympic Committee - "Gold in education and Elite Sport EU guidelines on dual careers of athletes".

The Development of a European Culture Supporting the Student-Athletes.

Joint efforts are needed to develop and support a culture on dual career for student-athletes (Horton, 2011). The accomplishment of a dual career strongly relies on the athlete's motivation (Lupo et al., 2015) but also needs to take into consideration principles, requirements, organisational structure and process. Although athletes themselves are responsible for their engagement in a dual career, proper support from consultants, mentors, coaches, teachers and parents is important to create opportunities for knowledge, skills, insights and experience-building to learn how to plan and manage a dual career process. Therefore, society is responsible to offer structured opportunities in relation to the student-athlete's needs for life (Greenhaus, Callanan, & Godshalk, 2010).

With the aid of EAS, members are able to permanently operate in the dual career field, share good practices and envisage novel solutions for the development of opportunities in education and sport life for young athletes at national and European levels. Working in close cooperation with the EU Commission, the Network has good opportunities to participate in the long-term process of policy implementation aimed to develop, educate, train, and employ elite athletes in Europe. In particular, there is a need of dedicated programmes for coaches and sport managers to make them aware of the long-term benefits of supporting the higher education of athletes during their developmental years. Therefore, talented young athletes striving to be included in their national teams or professional clubs will not have to necessarily prioritise sport over education, whereas others will not have to face inevitable drop out from sport to better prepare for a future in the labour market. Furthermore, cooperation between coaches and teachers has to be structured and reinforced to make both parties conscious of the specific needs of a student-athlete and to envisage appropriate paths that favour his/her striving for academic progress and athletic excellence, and foresee their future integration into the labour market. Therefore, dual

career support programmes have to fully integrate sport, education, and employment in helping the athletes to manage their lifestyles and career transitions (European Commission, 2012b). Through the progressive process towards the establishment of a European culture counteracting the marginalisation/exclusion of athletes in education, a substantial contribution could derive from scientific work focused on the individual, inter-personal, environmental, and policy dimensions affecting constructive dual career paths.

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