

# PROMOTING STUDENT-ATHLETE INTERESTS IN EUROPEAN ELITE SPORTS SYSTEMS

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## Abstract

### Introduction / Research Issues

The analysis of sports policy often focuses on a limited set of stakeholders, and relatively rarely engages in the discourse of rights (as opposed to, for example, discourses of effectiveness, efficiency and economy). This presentation will seek to demonstrate through the case of education / sporting policies for student-athletes that a review of stakeholder interests can be informed by a consideration of a discourse of rights and specifically by the consideration of the roles, rights and responsibilities of different actors (the state, the European Union, the athlete, the education institution, and the national federation) in this policy domain.

The background to this discussion is the demonstration by the European Union of a significant and growing concern for the protection of athletes in relation to education and training and their integration into the workforce in a post athletic career. This is explicit for example in a number of statements in documents such as the sporting Annex to the Nice Treaty, and to the conclusions of the French Presidency delivered in Nice in 2000, the White Paper on Sport (European Commission, 2007) and the recent Communication adopted by the European Commission entitled: 'Developing the European Dimension in Sport' (European Commission, 2011). Promotion of equity or at least good practice thus remains a key concern. It actively continues to find alternative means of engaging in dialogue with other global stakeholders to discuss this matter. Presidency Conclusions (11-12 December, 2008) in Brussels stated that the European Council Declaration on sport has acknowledged the "need to strengthen the dialogue with the International Olympic Committee and representatives of the world of sport, in particular on the question of combined sports training and education for young people". (17271/08 Annex 5). By including this issue on the agenda, the European Council has demonstrated the increasing importance attributed to the effective management of a dual career of elite sport and education by young sportspersons.

## Methodology

A life story approach (Miller, 2000) was adopted to elicit these student-athletes' own personal life experiences and look at the decision-making processes they made use of, in order to combine an academic and sporting career successfully. The helped identify struggles and constraints such as the hindering of a student-athlete's academic development and sought to propose ways of how some of these difficulties may be overcome with the help of coaches, educators, managers and policy makers.

## Findings and Discussion

While it will be noted that the European Union has to date had a seemingly limited scope in influencing policy at the nation state level within this context, it will be argued that it is the Nation State therefore that has to assume responsibility to ensure that student-athletes have access to opportunities and support to combine a dual career successfully. Bergsgard et al., (2007:153) observed that the level of 'priority given to elite sport varies considerably between countries, due in part to different national cultural values and traditions, political and administrative structures, and relationships between governmental and civil society sport organisations'. Therefore it is a matter for each nation state to decide how important sporting achievement is, usually by taking a local democratic decision whether to invest in promoting elite athletes. However, the main argument presented here is that if they do decide to do so, as demonstrated by the three countries (Finland, France and the UK) investigated in this research study; nation states have a moral responsibility towards their elite athletes. The critical message here is that nation states should not leverage sporting success by mortgaging the future of student-athletes, and in particular by diminishing their access to educational rights. The athlete may serve the interests of the state, the national federation, or the educational institution by attaining high level performance, and these bodies may serve the athlete's purposes in developing their athletic potential, but such a system implies a set of mutual obligations in which the interests of all parties (particularly of young athletes who may be most vulnerable) should be protected.

References:

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