

The roles of Universities in supporting elite athletes – A European perspective

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Introduction

This paper will present the findings of a review of current frameworks and initiatives developed by each of the 25 EU Nation States. The aim of the study, which is funded by the European Commission, is to establish the ways in which Higher Education institutions with particular reference to universities define their responsibility for the education of elite athletes, and the extent to which they employ flexible arrangements towards this group in relation to their educational provision.

Research Issues and Questions

‘It is only in the past decade that initiatives have been developed in Europe favouring the combination of academic and high level athletic activities’. (DeKnop et al. 1999) The main driving force behind these initiatives was the acknowledgement by various entities of the rising pressures that student-athletes have to cope with in order to balance their academic and sporting commitments. Being an elite athlete has become increasingly more demanding at a time when training volume and frequency of competition have clearly intensified. (Conzelmann & Nagel, 2003). Nevertheless, not all national systems have acknowledged these rising needs and the forms of provision towards student-athletes vary from the negligible to established structures backed by legislation.

The key questions addressed in this paper are as follows:

- **What are the roles of universities in balancing athletic performance and the education of the elite athlete?**
- In what ways are universities facilitating entry/duration for young elite athletes? What other services (academic monitoring, access to training facilities, career guidance) are being provided?
- How flexible are universities in their approach towards young elite athletes? Is there legislation in place to facilitate this?
- Is there a system of distance-learning, e-learning, distributed learning in place to facilitate athletes’ spreading of the demands of their course of study to meet the pressure of studying and competition
- What other alternatives can facilitate and enhance the student experience of elite athletes?

Methods

The overview of the various forms of educational provision for young elite sports persons will be based on analysis of data collected from the 25 member states. The research tool employed for obtaining this data is an open-ended questionnaire designed to capture qualitative data on the diverse nature of the systems operating in different states.

Findings/Discussions/Conclusions

The paper aims to offer a comprehensive view of the latest developments adopted by universities in different states in relation to student-athletes. However before outlining these, one must acknowledge that there are a series of issues to be dealt with both in terms of education and sport provision. Educational issues have to be resolved on the basis of the student’s ability to access the delivery of courses, sitting of exams, writing of assignments, availability for tutorials and so on while following an intensive training and competition programme. Sporting issues revolve round the opportunities available in terms of elite sport development programmes, infrastructure and other supporting services such as in physiology, physiotherapy and sport psychology. On the basis of responses from the EU member states, a typology of approaches adopted by universities was identified:

1) **Legal Obligation** - Legal requirement is placed on Universities to provide adapted opportunities for student-athletes in terms of entry-requirements, time-tabling flexibility, exam dates, type of course

delivery and so on. Such countries are Belgium (French-speaking community) and Spain. In the case of Hungary, the National Olympic Committee has entered into an agreement with 20 colleges/universities to support elite athletes through the Olympian Course of Life Programme which consolidates the established governmental decree on the General Regulations of Admissions Procedures at Colleges/Universities.

2) **Formal System** - There is a formal system for acknowledging student-athletes' needs, which stops short of a legal requirement. Finland and Denmark are illustrative examples of this approach where in Denmark both the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation have reinforced initiatives presented by *Team Danmark* (a semi-public organisation established by the Ministry of Culture).

3) **Representation of Athletes by Sporting bodies** - The third system is one in which the athletic development needs of the individual are catered for by the sporting institutions and where sporting advocates act on behalf of the student to negotiate flexible arrangements with the university. The UK (through the various national Institutes of Sports) and Sweden fit this category.

4) **No Formal Structures** - The fourth is one where there are no formal structures and any arrangements fall back on individually negotiated agreements where these prove possible. This category is very broad because there are institutions that have been very proactive in accommodating student-athlete needs such as some institutions in The Netherlands, Greece, Lithuania and Cyprus but there are also those countries whose system is still quite rigid in nature in relation to student-athletes' needs such as in Italy, Ireland and Malta.

Crucial to an evaluation of the systems summarised in the above typology is an understanding of what these policy systems are seeking to achieve. This may be expressed in terms of a balance between the obligations and the rights of the athlete and of the state. The State can "expect" of the athlete a sustained attempt to fulfil athletic potential on the basis of support from the public purse. The athlete can "expect" from the State equity/comparable treatment in terms of the educational experience delivered. Equity in this context is probably best conceptualised as equity of throughput (rather than resource input or output/performance). Equity of throughput implies access to equivalent amounts of tutor support, time for preparation of assignments and examinations and the freedom to undertake examinations without undue pressure of international sporting performance.

In the responses perhaps the most credible way of ensuring relatively uniform and equitable treatment was by the establishment of a legal obligation. However, further action such as the development of e-learning programmes tailored to the needs of elite performers may well provide additional educational benefits and safeguards in terms of flexibility.

References

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