

The Current Status of Career Support Services for Active and Former Professional Athletes in Europe

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Aim

There is a need to evaluate the status of the career support for active and former elite athletes within Europe. Therefore, current study's main objective is to gain insight in the domain of career support towards active and former elite athletes. More specifically, current study aims at (a) gaining insight in what kind of career support services are currently provided to active and former elite athletes; (b) mapping the current cooperation between the career support organisations; (c) getting an overview of the efficiency and effectiveness measures these organisations currently use to evaluate their practices.

Theoretical Background and Literature Review

As illustrated in the Holistic Athletic Career (HAC) model, elite athletes, face co-occurring challenges and transitions at multiple levels of development (i.e. athletic, psychological, psychosocial, academic/vocational and financial; Wylleman & Rosier, 2016). Especially the transition to the post-athletic career causes a lot of challenges. Career planning with professional career support providers before and career support (and follow-up) during and after the transition are important factors that contribute to a successful transition out of elite sport (Park, Lavallee, & Tod, 2013). As such, the importance of competent and tailor-made career support services has been emphasized (e.g., Hong & Coffee, 2017). The EU Expert Group (2012) and the European Union (2016) created an overview of future desired directions of (dual) career support structures and services. However, to improve the current quality of these services contextually and tailored to the actual needs, there is a need for scientific knowledge related to the current status of career support services of active and former elite athletes within Europe.

Research Design and Data Analysis

In light of the B-WISER project, a project that was co-funded by the Erasmus+ programme of the European Union, 123 career support providers from six European Member States (i.e. 30 from Belgium, 23 from Germany, 28 from Italy, 7 from Slovenia, 25 from Spain, 10 from Sweden) participated in this study. To be included, participants had to professionally provide support in view of optimizing active or former elite athletes' employability and/or employment. With institutional ethics approval, an online survey (that was translated to the language of the respective countries) was provided to the participants, who represented four types of organisations (i.e. representative bodies of elite athletes, elite sport organisations, employment agencies and educational institutions). Descriptive statistics (using SPSS 25.0) were used to analyse the data.

Results and Discussion

Career support providers' activities are mainly focused on individually coaching athletes (e.g., career planning and competency coaching), job placement support, and organizing networking events to bring (former) athletes into contact with (potential) employers.

However, a lot of active and former athletes still don't find their ways to these services, often because of a lack of awareness about the possibilities. Only 29% of all stakeholders measure any type of efficiency or effectiveness of their support systematically. Among those that do

measure their support provision, most commonly used measures are tracking the number of athletes supported (74%), tracking the number of events organised (68%), and satisfaction surveys with (former) athletes (53%). Cooperation between different career support organisations for athletes is apparent in all countries and this cooperation is perceived as adding value to the employability of (former) elite athletes. Results show that representative bodies of elite athletes, elite sport organisations, and educational institutions cooperate significantly less frequent with employment agencies than with the other organisations providing career support.

Conclusion and Implications

Several conclusions and implications of current study can be made for the six participating countries. First, although a variety of services exists, more work needs to be done on informing athletes on the possibilities and advantages of career planning and professional career support. The use of role models, best practices and success stories is suggested in this regard. Second, current research illustrates that cooperation between career support stakeholders and employment agencies could be optimized. To achieve better cooperation, future studies could investigate employers' and employment agencies' opinions on why employing (former) athletes can (or cannot) be of interest, to create a better understanding of how cooperation can be enhanced. Finally, a clear need exists to further develop the evidence-based measurement of efficiency and effectiveness within the career support providers' organisations. This will not only contribute to an evidence-based practice of career support services, but will also enhance the opportunity and resources for researchers to measure if and how the support practices for (former) elite athletes can be enhanced. A limitation of this study is that, although the current study provided a first insight in the status of career support for (former) elite athletes, it is purely descriptive in nature. Future studies could follow-up on these descriptive results and hypothesize the evolution of the status of career support based on the evidence-based practices that will be implemented in these countries.

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