

THE PROBLEM OF DROPOUT IN DUAL CAREER PATHS

IL PROBLEMA DELL'ABBANDONO NEI PERCORSI DI DUAL CAREER

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ABSTRACT

This study explores dropout phenomenon in student athletes' dual career paths, analysing the causes and consequences of this issue. Through a review of existing literature and analysis of empirical data, the article identifies the main factors contributing to dropout, including competition stress, difficulty in reconciling sporting and academic commitments, and lack of institutional support.

Questo studio esplora il fenomeno dell'abbandono nei percorsi di doppia carriera degli studenti atleti, analizzando le cause e le conseguenze di tale problematica. Attraverso una revisione della letteratura esistente e l'analisi di dati empirici, l'articolo identifica i principali fattori che contribuiscono all'abbandono, tra cui lo stress da competizione, la difficoltà nel conciliare impegni sportivi e accademici, e la mancanza di supporto istituzionale.

KEYWORDS

Dual career, dropout, student-athletes
Doppia carriera, abbandono, studenti-atleti

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Introduction

Youth athletes involved in sport academies start competing around 8 years of age and a 10-year experience is required to achieve elite performance, with additional 5–10 years to compete at the highest level (Wylleman & Reints, 2010). Thus, talent selection, detection and development overlap primary to higher education (Wylleman & Reints, 2010). Despite sport participation is strongly encouraged, youth elite athletes encounter several difficulties in combining their sport and educational commitments (Capranica & Millard-Stafford, 2011; Conzelmann & Nagel, 2003). In fact, to achieve athletic excellence 20–30 h.week⁻¹ for training and competitions are required, whereas students spend around 30 h.week to attain a satisfactory academic career (Aquilina, 2013). Furthermore, competition schedules spread over several months (i.e., team sports) or packed periods (i.e., individual sports) could affect the student- athlete's capability to successfully organise his/ her athletic and educational commitments. In Europe sport is usually organised at club level, with no or limited relationship with the educational system. Therefore, European talented athletes tend to drop out sport and prioritise education to prepare for future job opportunities (Amara, Aquilina, & Henry, 2004; Istituto Nazionale di Statistica-ISTAT, 2007) or postpone (i.e., >24 years of age) the achievement of a degree. In particular, the European parliament has embraced several actions to promote the dialogue between sport and educational bodies to establish "dual career" (i.e., the combination of elite sport and education) pathways for student-athletes (European Commission, 2007a, 2007b, 2011, 2012), and consequently to promote the transition from sport into the labour market.

The significance of dual career of (elite) athletes has been recognised and supported by the EU and its member states as well as sport associations and management structures in individual sport disciplines. The dual career of athletes is regulated by guidelines on a European level and by various national legislative frameworks. The following strategic documents regulate European policy on sport and directly affect the dual career of athletes:

- EU guidelines on dual careers of athletes (2012);
- Study on minimum quality requirements for dual career services (2016);
- Olympic agenda 2020.

The *EU guidelines on dual careers of athletes* were approved by the EU expert group "Education & Training in Sport" at its meeting in Poznań on 28 September 2012. The guidelines define policy areas and actions supporting the dual career of elite athletes.

The *Study on the minimum quality requirements for dual career services* was published in 2016. It is the result of collaboration between Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences, Birch Consultants, Directorate-General for Education, Youth,

Sport and Culture (European Commission), Talented Athlete Scholarship Scheme and Vrije Universiteit Brussel.

Olympic agenda 2020 is described as “the strategic roadmap for the future of the Olympic Movement. The 40 recommendations are like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle that, when put together, form a picture that shows the IOC safeguarding the uniqueness of the Olympic Games and strengthening sport in society”. The Olympic Agenda 2020 was unanimously agreed at the 127th IOC Session in Monaco on the 8 and 9 December 2014. It includes 20+20 recommendations for the Olympic movement for the period 2014–2020. The 40 recommendations included in the Agenda 2020 do not explicitly address the dual career of athletes. However, recommendation 18 is pertinent in this context (Strengthen support to athletes).

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.

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). 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.

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. 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”.

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, interpersonal, environmental, and policy dimensions affecting constructive dual career paths.

1. Drop out

Several social and individual factors are found to fuel the drop-out phenomenon: from an overall educational orientation *deficit* to the resulting cultural, instrumental and motivational weaknesses with which some students struggle. There are socio-economic variables as well as individual variables such as

the ability to self-regulate knowledge, which positively influences the school and academic performance of students (Diseth & Kobbeltvedt, 2010) and is a protective factor in preventing university *drop-out*. The investigations by Biasi, De Vincenzo and Patrizi (2018) have precisely highlighted, by means of regression models, the weight of specific predictors of drop-out risk for university students, such as: a condition of a-motivation for the study undertaken, an inadequate cognitive processing mode and low perceived self-efficacy. In this regard, the issue of orientation, at entry, *in itinere* and at exit, can represent a crucial junction in the promotion of strategies to counter drop-out phenomena. To these factors we must add the burden of sports commitments borne by student athletes. The phenomenon of dropout, i.e. the abandonment of sport and/or school activities by student-athletes, is a major issue in the context of *dual careers*. The difficulty of balancing academic and sporting commitments can lead to high psychological pressure and inadequate time management, with significant consequences for athletes' professional and personal futures (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019). Furthermore, the literature highlights that athletes who receive structured and personalised support in *dual career* management are more likely to succeed academically and athletically (Guidotti et al., 2015; Aquilina, 2013). Among the main dropout factors are sporting and academic pressures with the constant demands to meet challenges, achieve real rewards and try to exceed one's limits. Time management issues having to reconcile training sessions, study sections, classes to attend and trying not to lose family and friendships. We cannot fail to mention another possible cause of the dropout, namely that of a sporting career, which hardly fits in with being a woman, a mother, a professional. Cultural models represent an external structural barrier in women's sport. It can be argued that we still live in a patriarchal society in which clear cultural differences between the sexes are evident. Unlike sex, which represents the biological characteristics of men and women, gender is deeply culturally and socially determined. It is shaped by the division of roles in society, where women are positioned in the private sphere and men in the public sphere. The private sphere concerns domestic responsibilities (roles of mother and housewife), while the public sphere refers to life outside the family, where men are perceived as the breadwinners and protectors of the family. This view of the division of gender roles is deeply rooted and influences all spheres of social life (Babović, 2010). Gender stereotypes are widespread and very resistant, prescribing how men and women should behave. Although individuals should not conform to stereotypes, they are often encouraged to avoid behaviour that deviates from them (Heilman, 2001). In contemporary society, with the increasing participation of women in the labour market, gender roles are gradually changing, reducing gender inequality. The representation of women has increased in almost all social spheres, including sport. However, the increase in the number of women participating in sport has had a limited impact on reducing gender inequality

because sport remains culturally perceived as a 'male domain' (Giulianotti, 2008). Culturally, sport is often represented as an expression of masculinity, and participation in high-level sport for men is seen not only as a lifestyle choice but also as a status symbol. Women, therefore, face discrimination in sport for multiple reasons. The first is related to the traditional role of women, which focuses on the care of the home and the private sphere of work. The second type of cultural discrimination relates to women's sexuality, as women involved in professional team sports are often perceived as less feminine or even "masculine". The third is the way the media talks about successful female athletes, often using terms such as "beauty" or "companion", describing them more as sexual objects than as professional athletes. It would be good to receive the right support from not only coaches, professors, parents, but also from friends and specialists such as sports psychologists. Motivation and perceived lack of competence in athletic and academic abilities can also reduce self-confidence and increase the likelihood of dropout (Küttel, 2017). The consequences therefore have repercussions on an individual level when thinking about a sports career or schooling, reducing career opportunities and increasing the difficulty of getting into a job after sport. On a societal level, there is less sporting talent, less participation in sporting life and a consequent negative impact on the general well-being of the population. In sport, the dropout phenomenon also affects students who abandon one sport to devote themselves to another sport or to other activities, leave competitive activity for a less demanding one, and finally some who abandon sport altogether to devote themselves to nothing else. Sport is not just an activity for its own sake, but a powerful tool for personal and collective growth. It does not automatically improve human and social relations, but offers opportunities for learning, developing skills and building shared values. In this perspective, it represents a "mixed" experience, in which technique and virtue - the *téchne* and *areté* mentioned by Aristotle - are intertwined. It contains great educational potential, offering people the opportunity to confront fundamental moral concepts such as honesty, fairness, justice and impartiality. For this reason, some scholars of the subject define it as a real "ethical laboratory", as it allows rules and certain qualities to be applied to real situations, thus helping to internalise them in a concrete way. (Rubino et al., 2016). This is why it is in everyone's interest to promote and support sporting activities and even more so sporting careers during study. To reduce the risk of dropping out, targeted strategies are crucial.

2. Possible strategies

In the introductory paragraph, we analysed the programmes supporting dual careers, but looking among the stakeholders that revolve around the figure of the student athlete, we find one in particular, the teacher. An important role is played

by teachers, who are key players in the construction of study and life paths. Teaching nowadays is a complex undertaking that requires a high level of professionalism. Educators have the task of responding to profound needs and requirements that serve as a basis for future generations and for the personal growth of each individual. (Maietta & Martiniello, 2024) and in order to do this, the skills that need to be developed in the job are as follows:

- *Self-awareness*: the teacher, free of prejudice, assesses the present reality and is aware of the problem and intervenes with empathy. It implies knowledge of one's lower states, knowledge of one's strengths and limitations and confidence in one's abilities.
- *Self-possession*: the self-possessed teacher is not afraid to speak either in private or in public. He gets to the heart of the problem, gets the necessary information first and avoids abstractions. It includes self-control, conscientiousness, adaptability and innovation.
- *Motivation*: indicates the direction we feel most strongly about, where we like to go. The strongest motivations fuelled by pleasant emotions lead one to do what one would like to do. A distinction must be made between interest and motivation: the former represents the bond that unites an individual to a fact, to a person; motivation, on the other hand, responds to a need and is driven by commitment, initiative, optimism and the drive to succeed.
- *Empathy*: implies awareness of the feelings, needs and interests of others.
- *Social skills*: involves the ability to influence, negotiate to reduce conflict, work with others towards common goals, create synergies and induce desirable responses in others (Maietta et al. 2024).

To these skills are added digital skills, which in the case of dual-career pathways for student athletes are crucial for the continuation of the study programme. Offering teaching programmes using e-learning allows flexible training and examination schedules, enabling athletes to reconcile the two careers. Providing alternatives to traditional didactics such as e-learning allows for distance learning by using tutors whose task is to support both during the actual learning phase but also to guide to examination sessions and timetabling. It should also be considered that in digital didactics, the teaching-learning process is facilitated through the use of ICT, which has the advantage of optimising study time, making learning more engaging and certainly more inclusive than traditional methods. In addition, the main advantages of using technology are greater motivation through interactive games, healthy competition and real-time feedback to encourage students to actively participate. Learning is more easily customised as technology allows lessons to be adapted to the individual needs of students, monitoring progress and providing tailor-made exercises. Accessibility through the integration

of technology allows anyone, even in less favourable contexts (e.g. schools with few resources), to access advanced learning tools. One of the negative factors is the cost of resources, but by distributing more resources to institutes and academies we can certainly contribute to the decrease of drop-out. During the study of the drop-out phenomenon, we tried to respond to the behaviour of student-athletes and a sample of 200 secondary school students resident in Emilia Romagna and Campania was chosen.

3. Methods

A sample of 200 secondary school students aged between 14 and 22 (out-of-school students) was analysed, including 100 students resident in Emilia Romagna and enrolled in a Professional Institute for Agriculture and the Environment and 100 students resident in Campania attending a Technical Institute for Surveyors. The students answered a questionnaire consisting of 10 questions in total anonymity via Google Forms, their e-mails were not collected. The resulting tables were drawn up by the authors based on their answers.

Questionnaire

- 1. Age**
 - 14-16
 - 17-19
 - 20-22
- 2. Region of residence**
 - Emilia-Romagna
 - Campania
- 3. Type of sport practised**
 - Individual
 - Team
- 4. Frequency of weekly training**
 - 1-3 times
 - 4-6 times
 - 7 or more times
- 5. Level of competition**
 - Amateur
 - Competitive
 - Professional
- 6. Difficulties in reconciling sport and study**
 - None
 - Slight
 - Moderate

- High
- 7. **Support received from the school**
 - No support
 - Occasional support
 - Constant support
- 8. **Support received from the family**
 - No support
 - Occasional support
 - Constant support
- 9. **Main motivation for playing sports**
 - Entertainment
 - Health
 - Career
- 10. **Intention to continue with both sport and study**
 - Yes, definitely
 - Probably yes
 - Probably not
 - No, definitely no

4. Results

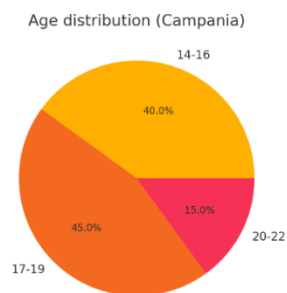
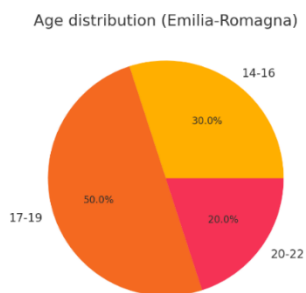
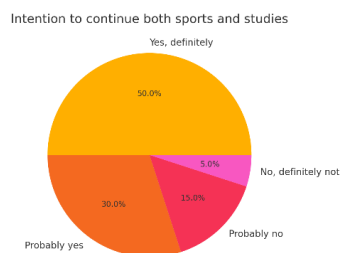
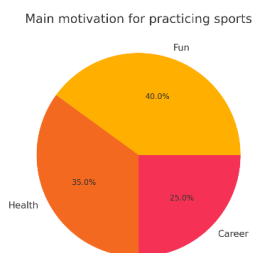
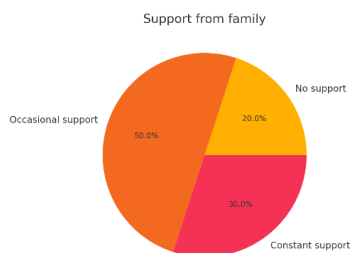
Age	Emilia-Romagna	Campania	Total
14-16	30	40	70
17-19	50	45	95
20-22	20	15	35
Total	100	100	200

Table 1. Distribution by age and region

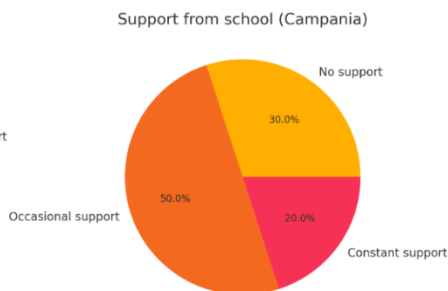
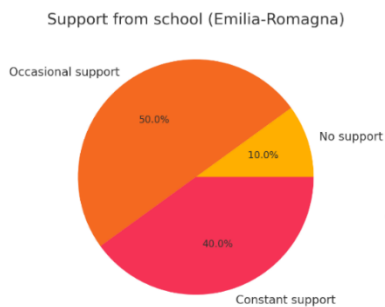
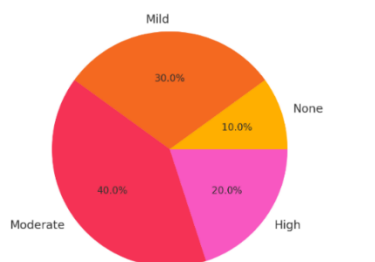
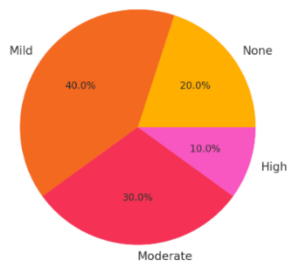
Support	Emilia-Romagna	Campania
No support	10%	30%
Occasional support	50%	50%
Constant support	40%	20%

Table 2 - Support received by the school

Tables 1 and 2, show the most significant data for our study.



Difficulty in balancing sports and studies (Emilia-Romagna)



Analysis

- In Campania, the percentage of students reporting “high” difficulty in reconciling sport and study is twice as high as in Emilia-Romagna.
- School support is significantly lower in Campania than in Emilia-Romagna. The motivation for sport in Emilia-Romagna, is oriented more towards health and fun, whereas in Campania, it is oriented more towards a possible sports career
- In Emilia Romagna, the majority of respondents (60%) report slight or no difficulties in reconciling sport and study. However, 30% report moderate difficulties and 10% high difficulties, indicating a significant problem for part of the sample. Most of the respondents (90%) receive support from the school, with 40% receiving it constantly. Only 10% receive no support at all.
- The situation is most critical in Campania, with 60% of respondents reporting moderate or high difficulties. Only 40% report slight or no difficulties. This suggests that students in Campania face greater obstacles in balancing sport and study. School support is less widespread in Campania, with 30% of respondents receiving no support at all. 50% receive occasional support and only 20% constant support.
- The 17-19 age group is the most represented (95 respondents), indicating a strong interest in sport among adolescents and young adults.
- The 14-16 age group follows with 70 respondents, while the 20-22 age group is the least represented (35 respondents). This could indicate a decrease in sporting activity with increasing age, perhaps due to university or work commitments.
- The sample is equally distributed between Emilia-Romagna and Campania (100 respondents each), allowing a direct comparison between the two regions.

Conclusions

This questionnaire and its results provide an overview of the drop-out phenomenon in Italy, highlighting the differences between a northern and a southern region. In particular, it emerges that:

- The difficulties in reconciling sport and study are more pronounced in Campania;
- School support is a crucial factor for the retention of student athletes in the education system;
- Sports and school motivation influence the study-sport pathway.

These data can be used to develop targeted interventions to support student athletes in order to prevent drop-out and promote both sporting and school

success. Dual careers represent a major challenge, but also a great opportunity for athletes. By implementing best practices at the international level and overcoming existing challenges, we can create an environment that is increasingly conducive to the development of young talents who excel in both sport and studies, thus reducing the drop-out phenomenon. It was emphasised that schools, teachers and sports facilities are crucial in motivating young people to continue playing sports, despite the difficulties they may face. In conclusion, the research revealed that tackling the problem of sports drop-out requires a comprehensive approach involving families, schools and sports institutions. Only with a shared commitment will it be possible to create an environment that stimulates young people's participation and wellbeing, allowing them to fully benefit from the positive aspects of sport without neglecting the personal and cultural growth that is preparatory to future working life. Digital technologies can facilitate the management of dual career programmes and offer new learning tools, as well as drastically reduce drop-outs. Furthermore, the exchange of good practices at the international level can accelerate the development of effective programmes. We mention for example the recent “FIND ME” project, during the 15th EAS VIRTUAL CAFE' on dual careers for talented athletes, within the online meeting of the “FIND ME: dual career opportunities at university”, held in March 2025, the possibility of structuring an evidence-based European platform specifically designed for dual careers at university level was discussed, providing information on dual career opportunities at university level and discussing its technical features and requirements to ensure its functionality and accessibility. A joint effort of five European universities (Faculty of Sport and Physical Education of the University of Nis, Coordinator; University of Chieti-Pescara “Gabriele D'Annunzio”, Italy; Faculty of Sport of the University of Ljubljana, Slovenia; University Alexandru Ioan Cuza Din Iasi, Romania; Universidad Internacional De La Rioja, Spain), an impact-driven organisation (Collective Innovation - COLIN, Norway) and the EAS (dualcareer.eu).

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