

Future employability in young athletes, the importance of dual career skills development: A European perspective

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Abstract

Objective: The purpose of this study was (1) to examine how and during which processes transferable competencies in dual career (DC), like Dual Career Management, Career Planning, Emotional Awareness and Social intelligence and Adaptability skills be trained within the sport sector and (2) develop content for online education in and through sport with special focus on soft skill development in dual careers of athletes to help them entering the labour market.

Design and method: A longitudinal mixed-method research design was used with quantitative and qualitative parts. 475 (former) athletes (individual- 284 (59.8%) team sports; 191 (40.2%) representing 62 different sports completed a quantitative questionnaire. Additionally, 58 representative of the labour market completed a quantitative questionnaire, 33 representatives had experience in hiring (former) athletes. Semi- structured in-depth interviews were conducted with 68 (former) athletes, 41 coaches/ staff and 26 representatives of the labour market from four EU countries: Spain, Italy, Finland and Bulgaria. These interviews were used to discuss the need perceptions of DC skills and competencies, in which environment the development of competencies for a successful DC should take place and which environment has the biggest influence on developing DC skills and competencies.

Results: It appeared that DC skills development takes place in the sport, school and social environment of the athletes. Not surprisingly, the sport environment was the most influential for skills development according to the athletes followed by the social and school environment. The need of possession of skills of the athletes as well as the skills that were lacking or conflicting was shown in the results. Additionally, within the focus groups networking skills and courage to get out of the comfort zone were named as being important skills to have a successful Dual Career. Coaches mentioned specific exercises, as an example, during warm- up and practise that were related to soft skills development. Besides training in sport activities, coaches state that they are not only consulted by their athletes with sport related issues. With this multidimensional role of the coach it might seem extensive to add the responsibility of the Dual Career soft skill development as an additional responsibility. However, the coach is seen as the most important player in the life of the athlete and the person that has an influence on where the athlete is going after the Dual Career. This means that through explicit and implicit actions, the coaches influence the skill and competence development which is why the awareness of such influence is extremely important. Coaches and staff stated that coaches are unable to be entirely responsible for the development of Dual Career soft skills in (elite) athletes in preparation for the labour market. The possession of the soft skills by athletes was not exclusively positive. Similar to the athletes, the labour market lacked athlete – employees who have a vision of where they want to go in life after their Dual Career and have the knowledge about career options. The value of the elite athlete was recognized by the labour market in both the focus groups as the questionnaires.

Conclusion: The results of the questionnaires and focus groups shows us that early establishment of connections between companies and athletes can help close the gap between the sporting career and an athletes' future career. Such network also helps the labour market to understand the benefits of hiring an athlete while reducing uncertainties that pose obstacles in hiring a(n) (former) athlete. Coaches and staff are not primarily specialised in this topic and need information regarding the opportunities within the labour market.

Keywords: dual careers, sports, athletes, employability, skills, competencies, EU guidelines, DCCQ-A, DCCQ-SP

1. Introduction

The **SCORES** project (Developing **SKILLS & COMPETENCIES RESULTING in EMPLOYABILITY THROUGH SPORT**) connected academic experts, sport organisations' volunteers and representatives, and the business sector from six EU countries: Spain, Italy, Finland, Bulgaria, Belgium and the Netherlands. The partners Club Natació Banyoles (CNB) (Spain), Sant Cugat Creix (SCC) (Spain), Municipality of Modena (Italy), Tampere Sports Academy (Finland), LEVSKI-SPORT for ALL (LSC) (Bulgaria), European Platform for Sport Innovation (EPSI) (Belgium) and Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences (AUAS) (The Netherlands) have expertise and a continued interest in raising awareness and improving young athletes support in their life and career during and after sport. The project focused on promoting education in and through sport with special focus on skills development, as well as supporting the implementation of the EU Guidelines on Dual Careers of Athletes^{1,2}.

Sport is a value-based sector directly linked to the development of professional skills. An athlete may acquire through his/her sport career basic skills and competencies (such as fair play, self-esteem, resilience, honesty, trust, etc.) but also skills an athlete can use in specific environments such as school and the (future) labour market (such as sensitivity to diversity, client/environment awareness, generating synergies, teambuilding, taking care of people etc.). The above sets of skills are often taught in the best MBAs. Athletes can acquire them while practicing sport at the highest level.

Detecting how and when- in which situations – these skills and competencies are and can be developed in the practice of sport is crucial as well as building the necessary instruments to monitor and reinforce them. As described by earlier European research, there is insufficient knowledge on transferable competencies acquired by athletes that can help them maximize their Dual Career progress^{1,2,3,4,5}. It is important to better understand what type of expertise is needed for coaches and staff in sport who work with athletes towards increased employability. Furthermore, insights from the labour market in what are the job requirements and needs so that these can already be trained in an early phase.

The study focuses on the main research question: 'How and during which processes can these transferable competencies in Dual Career, like Dual Career Management, Career Planning, Emotional Awareness and Social intelligence and Adaptability skills be trained within the sport environment?'

2. Method

To collect relevant information, a desk study was done investigating the athletes' skills and competencies. The questionnaire was constructed based on the Dual Career Competency Questionnaire (DCCQ-A) and earlier (European) research^{3,4,5}.

Instruments. After the desk study questionnaire was sent out to explore the current state regarding dual career skills and competencies possession, the development and influencing

environments among the (former) athletes in the partners' countries and a needs assessment in labour market were executed. For (former) athletes, coaches/staff, and representatives from the labour market in Spain, Bulgaria, Italy and Finland, focus groups were organized as semi-structured in-depth interviews. The four domains of the DCCQ-A^{3,4} (Dual Career Management, Career Planning, Emotional Awareness and Social Intelligence and Adaptability) were topics of the focus groups and questionnaire for the (former) athletes and labour market. The Dual Career Competency Questionnaire for Support Providers (DCCQ-SP)⁵ was used for the coaches and staff during the focus groups.

Within the DCCQ-A^{3,4} Dual Career Management covers the competencies to organize, balance and to stay committed to their highly demanding combination of elite sport and education. Career Planning is about how to plan a Dual Career and the flexibility to cope with deviations in their Dual Career and post- Dual Career pathway. Emotional Awareness focuses on the ability to cope and control effectively with adversity, developmental pressures and emotions of their Dual Career. The last domain, Social Intelligence and Adaptability, addresses the athletes' interpersonal and support seeking competencies required to establish and preserve a facilitative Dual Career environment and the ability to adapt to new social environments while maintaining an elite athletes' lifestyle. The DCCQ-SP⁵ consists of competencies divided into six competency factors: (1) Advocacy and cooperation competencies, (2) reflection and self-management competencies, (3) Organisational competencies, (4) Awareness of student- athletes' environment, (5) Empowerment competencies, and (6) Relationship competencies.

The questionnaire. The objective of the current paper was to use the DCCQ-A to explore (former) athletes' perceptions of need of DC competencies and in which environment the development of competencies for a successful DC should take place. Athletes received a questionnaire focusing on the environment in which they learned/developed specific skills. The answer options consisted of the social-, school-, sports- or work/internship environment. Afterwards athletes were asked to rank the environment from most influential for that specific skill to least influential. The representatives of the labour market received a questionnaire focusing on which dual career soft skills (DCCQ-A) were important/required to be a successful employee within their business. Furthermore, the representatives of the labour market that did have experience with hiring athletes were questioned about their experience with the athletes' skills level. Average scores and standard deviations for athletes' perceptions of need to develop DC competencies and the role of the coaches and staff were computed using descriptive statistics.

Focus groups. In line with the recommendation to use a holistic lifespan approach⁶, the first part of the interview was aimed at allowing participants to describe the development of their athletic and post-sport career from both a developmental as well as holistic perspective. (Former) athletes, coaches and staff were, in depth, asked to describe their experience with

the dual career competencies (DCCQ-A and DCCQ-SP) and their experiences in different cases who were presented. Which competencies are (more) developed than that in non-athletes and what do (elite) athletes learn more? The (former) athletes and coaches/staff's vision about implementing training materials to develop dual career competencies was discussed, the role of the different participants in that development and the collaboration with the labour market was discussed. The focus groups with representatives from the labour market focused on the needs, the certification of the competencies, the role of the labour market in developing the skills and competencies and hire (former) athletes. The focus groups were recorded and afterwards these recordings were converted into a transcript in order to simplify the analysis. Phrases were labelled and linked to specific skills from the model: marked as positive and present, negative and not present, conflicting if different statements were made or as missing if the specific skill was not mentioned or addressed within the focus group.

Participants. According to the questionnaires and focus group (n=8), inclusion criteria for (elite) athletes (young athletes and former (elite) athletes): i) to compete/ or competed in organized sport, differ in sports category for at least 5 years; ii) to participate in competitions at national or international levels; iii) to be involved in sport practice \geq 10 hours a week; iv) male/ female 50/50; v) different ages and vi) enrolled in different educational/ working stages. Inclusion criteria for coaches and staff: i) differ in sports category; ii) male/ female 50/50; iii) different ages; iv) different coach levels and other staff members who are involved in dual career programs, such as trainers, managers and psychologists. The inclusion criteria of the labour market were broad, as long as it were different companies, sectors, ages and male/ female 50/50. Not mandatory but recommended was to include former (elite) athletes in the focus group for labour market. Potential participants were identified through information provided by the project partners.

3. Results

Participants of the questionnaire included 475 14-to-43-year-old – (former) athletes ($M_{age} = 18.6$, $SD = 4.5$; 207 (43.6%) female and 268 (56.4%) male; competing at least at national level (284 (59.4%); individual- 284 (59.8%) team sports; 191 (40.2%); 9 (1.9% Olympic – 466 (98.1%) non-Olympic disciplines), recognised as (elite) and enrolled in an institute of education (5.9% high school, 38.9% college,– 53.9% university college/PhD). Only 58 of the representatives completed the online questionnaire, 33 of them had experience hiring (former) athletes. Focus groups participants included 68 (former) athletes, 41 coaches/ staff and 26 representatives of the labour market from four EU countries: Spain, Italy, Finland and Bulgaria.

(Former) athletes. It appeared that (former) athletes work on skills in all environments. Dual Career skills development takes place in the sport, school and social environment of the athletes. The work or internship environment was not always scored in the questionnaire which is possibly due to the fact

that most respondents were under 18 years old and did not work or have had an internship yet. Not surprisingly, the sport environment was the most influential for skills development according to the athletes followed by the social and school environment. It pinpoints the important role of the sport environment in preparing the athlete through holistic skill and competence development in sport. Main focus for these athletes is their sport as they are able to improve and achieve milestones directly while study comes later and work after their study and/or sport career.

The need for possession of skills of the athletes as well as the skills that were lacking or conflicting was shown in the results. Former athletes and athletes who still perform showed overall similar scores on the four domains with differences seen in the in-depth soft skills. All environments around the athlete take part in learning these dual career soft skills with the sport environment being the most influential environment.

Additionally, within the focus groups networking skills and courage to get out of the comfort zone were named as important skills to achieve a successful Dual Career.

Coaches and staff. Although the primary goal of a coach is the development of the athlete within sports, coaches are also confronted with the other environments of the athlete that all influence the sports performance and well-being. Besides training in sport activities, coaches state that they are not only consulted by their athletes with sport related issues. From the focus groups, it became clear that teen problems are often discussed as well which leads to coaches sometimes feeling as if they take on a parental role in the talents' development. With this multidimensional role of the coach it might seem extensive to add the responsibility of the Dual Career soft skill development as an additional responsibility. However, the coach is seen as the most important player in the life of the athlete and the person that has an influence on where the athlete is going after their sports career. This means that through explicit and implicit actions, the coaches influence the skill and competence development which is why the awareness of such influence is extremely important. Coaches mentioned specific exercises, as an example, during warm-up and practise that were related to soft skills development. Coaches and staff stated that coaches are unable to be entirely responsible for the development of Dual Career soft skills in (elite) athletes in preparation for the labour market. Involvement of the parents, school, business and psychologists are opportunities to create a network of support around the athlete. Role models, preferably alumni, were suggested by coaches as practical examples to strengthen the belief that sport, and study can positively complement each other.

Labour market. The importance of the Dual Career soft skills was underlined by the labour market through the responses of the questionnaire. However, the possession of these skills was not exclusively positive. Similar to the athletes, the labour market lacked athlete-employees who have a vision of where they want to go in life after their Dual Career and have the knowledge about career options. From experience, a lot of the companies stated that some athletes need a while to adapt to their new position within the group.

In the work environment they are new and starting and often not directly within a leading position. Something that is often in high contrast with the position those athletes had in the ending phase of their sport career. The value of the elite athlete was recognized by the labour market in both the focus groups as well as the questionnaires. The focus groups called out athletes as being focused and dedicated achieving goals and have skills to work in a team and show leadership. Companies that hired athletes stated that in almost all cases athletes had a good starting qualification for the job. Still almost half of the company respondents had no experience with hiring athletes. In relation to this, focus group outcomes stated that there is a lack of knowledge regarding hiring athletes and this topic is often associated with 'issue' or 'difficulties'.

4. Conclusion / Discussion

Conclusion. The results of the questionnaires and focus groups shows us that early establishment of connections between companies and athletes can help close the gap between the sporting career and an athletes' future career. Such network also helps the labour market to understand the benefits of hiring an athlete while reducing uncertainties that pose obstacles in hiring a(n) (former) athlete. Coaches and staff are not primarily specialised in this topic and need information regarding the opportunities within the labour market. Recognition and the development of Dual Career soft skills within daily practice was not embedded within their daily coaching tasks. Thus, the wish for coach education that provides a practical approach which could be earlier involvement of the labour market in Dual Careers of athletes could positively influence the connection and the understanding between the athlete and the labour market. The SCORES project offers a great opportunity to create effective informal learning certifications, through a massive online open course (MOOC) that is verified by the labour market and recognized by potential employers.

Discussion. In total 533 questionnaires, 475 by athletes and 58 by representatives from the labour market were completed online. Due to the fact that the aimed response rate was not met (1000 participants), it was decided not to split the results by country. Results were checked for differences between athletes that performed in team sports or individual sports and differences based on type of sport. Results of the questionnaire in the labour market were checked for differences in the type of company or size of the company. No differences were found. This study did only focus on companies' perception of hiring (former) elite athletes but there might be an opportunity for companies to improve their understanding of athlete employment and a better framework to support them in this matter. At least, DC development environments, DC athletes' well-being and mental health, DC support and training regarding employability and soft skills development still has major gaps in current DC research. It presents challenges for DC research to fill these gaps and adequately support practice and policy making within the European DC discourse.

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