Evaluation of the Effectiveness of the Dual Career Support System for Athletes: Evidence from Hungary

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Abstract **–Athletes do not receive adequate and equal support in building their careers. This study aims to examine the unequal and inconsistent support systems available for the simultaneous development of sporting and educational careers. A purposive sampling method was applied, and data were collected through a self-designed questionnaire survey distributed via Google Forms. The data collected were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows. The findings indicate that in Hungary, support systems are primarily material in nature, and mainly benefit a narrow segment of elite athletes enrolled in higher education. These systems have little or no significant impact on students of secondary school age. Most respondents reported support primarily from their families and their personal coaches. The vast majority of participants had not participated in professional programmes designed to facilitate dual career development. The results provide guidance for the development of competence-based training programmes that promote effective learning and life management skills. Such training should be incorporated into secondary school curricula as a matter of priority.**

Keywords **– Institutional support, career choice, learning methodology, vision, new programs.**

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1. Introduction

Culture encompasses the values accumulated by humanity, which a given society acquires, accepts and practices [1]. Sport has always been an integral part of universal culture. It plays an increasingly important role in modern societies, exerting a growing influence on culture, producing positive effects in an expanding range of social domains, and engaging an ever-wider segment of the population [2]. In the 20th century, sport evolved into an independent social subsystem. It now features formal organizations, established roles, the system of internal norms, a distinct logic of action, and social functions that render it significant for other social subsystems as well [3], [4], [5].

The importance of sport's impact on culture and society is further demonstrated by the increasing number of international scientific publications addressing the topic of athletes' dual careers. Since 2020, there has been a notable rise in such studies, including comprehensive reviews based on previous research, the findings of which substantially contribute to improving the efficiency of dual career development, balancing education and sport among athletes.

A dual career for an athlete refers to the simultaneous pursuit of competitive sport and formal education, enabling former athletes to secure employment in the labour market that corresponds to their qualifications once their sporting careers have ended [6]. Several studies have already examined the opportunities and challenges associated with dual careers in Europe [7], [8], [9]. Within the European Union, the first steps towards the developing support systems for athletes' dual careers can be traced back to the strategic document "EU White Paper on Sport" published in 2007 [10]. This document compiled the principal knowledge and data related to sport within the European Union and articulated both the importance of national sports associations and the significance of European-level research.

The next major European policy document focusing specifically on athletes' dual careers was completed in 2012: *EU Guidelines on Dual Careers of Athletes Recommended Policy Actions in Support of Dual Careers in High-Performance Sport* [11]. The range of directives was subsequently expanded from 36 to 72 in 2015 [12]. It is worth noting that the issue of supporting dual careers features in every cycle of the EU Work Plans for Sport (2011-2014; 2014-2017) [13], [14], [15]. The 2021 report of the European Parliament's Committee on Education and Culture concerning EU sports policy includes an assessment of the most recent work cycle (2017-2021) and proposes possible future measures [16].

In 2012, [17] was the first in Hungary to analyse the principal documents of the European Union's sports policy. Subsequently, a working group translated the document containing 36 EU directives. In 2017, the views of 320 athletes representing 38 sports, with an average age of 23, were published in a study entitled "Investigation of the Development Possibilities of Athletes' Dual Careers in Hungary" [18]. The research findings highlighted that, according to the athletes' evaluations, all 19 listed types of support tools were considered necessary.

In Hungary, however, there are still only a few good practices regarding this kind of support system for athletes. The reason for this may be due to the fact that the European Commission does not oblige either state or non-state sport authorities in individual member states, including Hungary, to implement the guidelines and recommendations set out in EU documents. In Hungary, dual career support for athletes currently comprises two programmes aimed at assisting those pursuing higher education: The Olympic Career Program (since 2002) and the Hungarian Sport Stars Scholarship Programme (since 2013) [18]. These programmes provide financial support, various discounts, and greater flexibility in preparation, learning, and assessment systems. However, the range of beneficiaries of these two support programmes remains narrow, and their content lacks the complexity required to ensure the genuine realisation of a dual career.

However, the UN has repeatedly emphasised the importance of sustainability and sustainable development [19], [20], [21]. Although sustainable support for athletes' dual careers is a widely recognised issue throughout Europe, there is still a lack of targeted, systemic, sustainable support for such careers of athletes in Hungary. The Budapest Olympic Movement (BOM), for the Hungarian Sport Foundation, established in 2005, has been offering its scholarship program for athletes since 2013. In addition to the financial support, scholarship recipients may participate in the Mentor Programme for Hungarian Sport, launched jointly by the BOM Foundation and the National Association of Managers.

This initiative provides assistance for athletes in successfully transitioning to civilian life and integrating into the labour market after their sports career. The so-called dual career developed using "new, innovative methods" presented by the Hungarian Olympic Committee on 2nd October 2023, may be regarded as a promising sign for renewal. This complex programme provides support in several areas, including mental health, sports performance enhancement, academic assistance and preparation for a second career.

Across Europe, numerous surveys have been conducted examining the importance of supporting athletes in managing both their sporting and educational careers [22], [23], [24]. However, most of these studies focus primarily on athletes in higher education [25], [26], [27]. According to research findings, it would be necessary to integrate courses aimed at developing life skills into university curricula [28].

Nevertheless, several EU member states already operate support systems for secondary school students. In England, the "Active Knowledge" section of the Sector Vocational Training Council runs the Advanced Apprenticeship in Sporting Excellence programme within vocational education. In Sweden, under the auspices of the Swedish Sports Association, 51 secondary sports schools cater for athletes aged 16 to 19. In France, within the field of football, the UEFA Club Licensing System provides support for sports clubs to ensure compulsory school education for young athletes participating in the talent development programme. In Flanders (Belgium), young athletes who are active in tennis, swimming or gymnastics can receive the title "Promising Young Athlete" which grants them reductions in training hours. In Denmark, educational expenses are covered for athletes competing on behalf of national sports associations [7].

The good practices already operating in the EU member states confirm the need to develop a sustainable support system for the secondary school age group. The primary justification for this is the high rate at which successful young athletes terminate or abandon their sporting careers [11].

This situation highlights the necessity of addressing the issue, which also provides the research with its element of novelty.

Despite the fact that domestic sports associations lose a significant percentage of athletes who had already achieved sporting success during their secondary school years and had been active in competitive/elite sports for several years, a comprehensive programme enabling secondary school students to successfully pursue a dual career has not yet been developed. In other words, athletes with outstanding sporting performance would need to receive various forms of support and subsidy during their secondary school studies.

Moreover, other research findings show a significant relationship between strong sporting performance and academic achievement [29].

Several international examples illustrate effective measures in this area, such as: specialised training and assistance in coordinating academic workload and sporting commitment; the provision of courses and learning programmes that facilitate personalised preparation before and after school absences (competitions, training camps); and the development of competencies essential for sustaining a dual career, along with improved communication and cooperation among stakeholders involved in career development.

The results of the analysis of documents and sources discussed in the Introduction revealed that dual career support systems are primarily available to athletes enrolled in higher education and who achieve excellent results in sports. These forms of support are predominantly financial in nature and tend to favour the continuation of sporting careers. Academic support, by contrast, is more likely to be realised through tuition discounts and flexible scheduling arrangements.

The study also seeks to explore the difficulties faced by secondary school athletes in pursuing dual careers, the reasons for the stagnation of their sporting and/or academic progress, and to gain insight into the types of support that most effectively contribute to achieving success in both domains. In addition, it aims to examine their vision for the future and their plans for life after sport. The purpose of this research is to collect information on the operation of the domestic dual career support system and to assess the degree of complexity of the existing support programmes. The study also seeks to explore the difficulties faced by secondary school athletes in pursuing dual careers, the reasons for the stagnation of their athletic and/or academic progress, and to gain insight into the types of support that most effectively contribute to the achieving success in both domains. In addition, it aims to examine their vision for the future and their plans for their life after sport. A further long-term goal is to compile a proposal for a support programme specifically designed for the secondary school age group. The findings of this research may serve as a framework for coordinating the activities of actors involved in the support system. They could also assist networks of sports organisations and educational institutions, strengthen the advisory roles of coaches and teachers, and support post-sport career planning, as well as the development of teaching materials, courses, and further training programmes aimed at the enhancing key competencies.

The hypotheses of the research are as follows:

H1: The national dual career support system affects only a very narrow group of athletes.

H2: The national dual career support system for dual careers is one-dimensional and primarily oriented towards supporting sporting careers.

H3: The dual careers of the secondary school students are primarily supported by their families and personal relationships.

H4: The majority of high school students envisage their future mainly in relation to sport.

H5: A significant proportion of high school students lack systematic and sustainable support for developing the skills and competences necessary to realise their vision of the future.

2. Methodology

The sample consisted of secondary school students from schools specialised in sports in the city of Győr (N=261). The respondents were students of sports technical schools, most of whom had a medium to good academic results. The sample showed a balanced distribution in terms of gender and age. All participants engaged in competitive sport as registered members of sports clubs.

Data were collected through a questionnaire survey designed by the researchers using "Google Forms". Students completed the questionnaire on their smartphones, under the supervision of school heads and teachers, who coordinated the process in an organised manner. The questionnaire comprised 5 logical units (I-V). Unit I: Covered sociodemographic data. Unit II and IV collected information relevant to exploring the practical aspects of dual career experiences and programmes (how it works in practice). Unit III focused on the system of sports-related subsidies within the Hungarian school system. Unit V is based on the content of the Hungarian Olympic Committee's (MOB) dual career programme, aimed to assess the effectiveness of the programme's practical implementation in relation to the target group.

The data collected were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows. Descriptive statistical methods were applied, which are appropriate for presenting the cross-sectional data, describing the current situation, and grouping and classifying variables. Simple arithmetic operations were performed to display the results, and distribution ratios were used for their presentation.

3. Results

One of the most significant factors influencing athletes' dual careers concerns the future perspectives of secondary school students. particularly their short-term plans following graduation and their long-term employment aspirations.

Half of the respondents indicated that they intended to continue their studies in higher education.

The vast majority of these students (38%) also stated that they did not plan to give up sport either, meaning they were aiming to pursue a dual career. A considerable proportion (21%) expressed the intention to remain engaged in sports sport-related employment, which likewise represent a form of dual career. Meanwhile, 12% of respondents stated that they wished to continue solely as a professional athlete, without indicating plans for further education or employment (Figure 1).

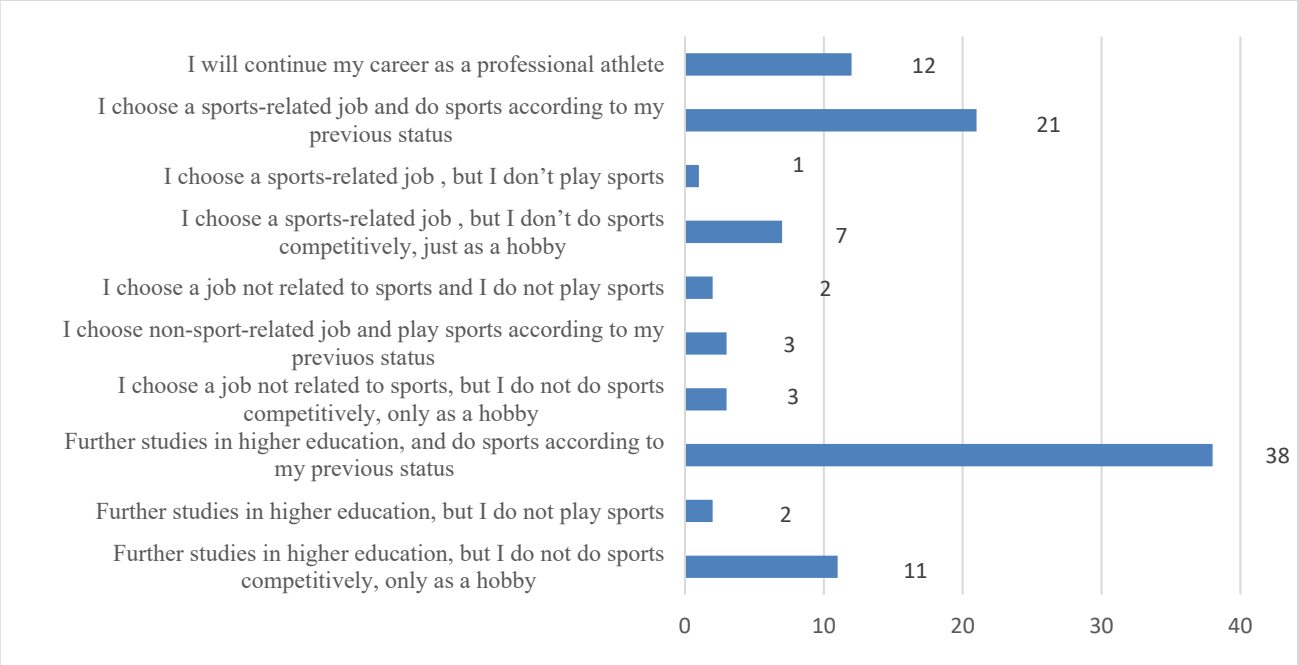

Figure 1. Post-secondary goals and career aspirations of the sample (%), N=261
Source: Authors' own results

The answers to the following questions reflect the students' high level of commitment to maintaining a dual career and reveal their attitudes towards the relative importance of studying and sporting activity. The questions also explored from whom they receive the greatest support in achieving sporing success and what kind of institutional support systems they have already benefited from in pursuing a dual career? A total of 60% of the respondents considered both studying and pursuing a sports career to be equally important. To achieve this balance, students identified their families as their primary source of support, followed by their personal ("own") coaches.

From the point of view of athletes' dual careers and the broader policy framework, a relevant issue concerns whether schools and sports clubs offer different types of personality development training for secondary school athlete. Such training may include topics such as career choice, further education, career planning, mindset and competitiveness, and learning methodology.

Furthermore, the study examined whether training opportunities are available to help students prepare for entry into higher education or adult education.

Students' opinions and experiences were divided regarding the roles of schools and sport clubs, as well as the frequency of such preparatory activities. Concerning schools (Table 1), the majority of respondents reported that they did not receive this kind of preparation. Some students, however, indicated that they had participated in at least one such activity related to goals mentioned above. Only a small proportion stated that these sessions were organized occasionally (approximately three times), while the fewest respondents reported that their schools regularly provided personality development preparations in their schools, training linked to career choice, learning methodology, and further education.

Table 1. Frequency of personality development activities for students in schools (number of persons), N=261

Frequency of trainings	Trainings supporting career choice and career building	Training for mindset development and competition preparation	Training for the development of learning methodology	Trainings related to admission to higher education or adult education
Once or Absent	119	82	83	79
Occasionally (at least 3 times)	47	28	56	21
None	77	119	92	141
Regularly	18	32	30	20

Source: Authors' own results

In relation to the role of sports associations (Table 2), a significant majority of respondents reported that they had not received any training regarding career choice, preparation for competitive situations, learning methodology, or entry into higher education.

Almost one-third of them stated that they had participated in at least one training session addressing the aforementioned goals, while between 20 and 60 students indicated participation in training sessions held periodically, including at least three sessions.

Finally, similar to the school environment, the least frequently selected option was that students regularly received some form of training within their sports associations for the purposes outlined in the Table 2.

Table 2. Frequency of personality development training sessions for students in sport clubs (number of persons), N=261

Frequency of trainings	Trainings supporting career choice and career building	Training for mindset development and competition preparation	Training for the development of learning methodology	Trainings related to admission to higher education or adult education
Once or Absent	81	72	74	64
Occasionally (at least 3 times)	29	61	21	20
None	136	78	156	163
Regularly	15	50	10	14

Source: Authors' own results

4. Discussion

At the beginning of the research, five hypotheses were formulated. In light of the results, the following conclusions can be drawn

The first hypothesis stated that the national dual career support system affects only a very narrow group of athletes. This assumption was confirmed by the findings: In Hungary, available grants are primarily intended for students in higher education and only for those who demonstrate exceptionally high sporting performance.

According to the second hypothesis, the national dual career support system is one-dimensional and primarily geared towards supporting sporting careers. This assumption was also confirmed by the results. The available subsidies are predominantly financial in nature, while the academic dimension is addressed mainly through concessions and flexible time allocations.

The third hypothesis proposed that the dual careers of secondary school students are supported mainly by their families and personal relationships.

The findings clearly confirmed this: Respondents indicated that the principal source of support for both academic and sporting achievements was the family, particularly parental involvement, while the students' personal ("own") coaches also played a leading role.

According to the fourth hypothesis, the majority of secondary school students envisage their future in relation to sport. This hypothesis was also confirmed. Based on their stated goals, most students intended either to continue their studies in higher education while simultaneously striving for further sporting success, or to pursue sport-related employment after graduation or secondary studies. It would represent a significant social benefit if those students who excel in both academic and sporting domains were to become a highly qualified workforce in the future.

The fifth hypothesis assumed that a significant proportion of the secondary school students lack systematic and sustainable opportunities to develop the skills and competences necessary to realise their vision for the future.

This assumption was likewise confirmed, given the limited extent to which the schools and the sports clubs/sports associations support students in this area.

In both types of institutions, the organisation of formal programmes require improvement, as the proportion of respondents reporting that they had *not participated* in such development sessions is remarkably high.

Schools need to place greater emphasis on developing students' mindset, managing competitive situations, and providing programmes that support further education. In the case of associations, an even higher level of support is warranted in the areas mentioned above, particularly with regard to career development and further education.

In summary, the results confirm that, in alongside the competences required for sporting achievement, the development of other competences essential for learning and leading a successful life is also highly necessary for this age group. The findings may serve as a guideline for professionals involved in designing sports support systems. Addressing the existing gaps within the dual career support system would enhance the effectiveness and improve its long-term sustainability.

5. Conclusion

The analysis and evaluation of the available documents clearly indicate that the dual career support systems are primarily directed towards students in higher education who achieve outstanding sporting results. These forms of support are predominantly financial in nature.

A key finding of the research is that one third of successful athletes discontinue their sporting activities during secondary school. Nevertheless, the principal source of support for those who remain engaged in sport is their family, reflecting a predominantly personal rather than institutional form of assistance. Neither schools nor sports associations appear to play a leading role in developing the competencies necessary for double success. A significant proportion of respondents reported that they had not participated in any of the competence development training sessions identified in the study.

The responses of the participating students provide valuable insights into the topic of dual careers and suggest potential modifications and improvements that could be applied in educational and training practice.

These findings may serve as a foundation for designing and further developing a dual career support programme for secondary school students, which could contribute substantially to the establishment of a sustainable support system and to reducing dropout rates within this age group.

Until 2015, Hungarian working groups were engaged in interpreting and implementing the guidelines of the European Union's sports policy. In 2015, the United Nations emphasized the importance of ensuring the sustainability of athletes' dual careers across Europe. Until 2015, Hungarian working groups were engaged in interpreting and implementing the guidelines of the EU's sports policy. In 2015, the UN emphasised the importance of ensuring the sustainability of athletes' dual careers across Europe. Support programmes for the secondary-school age group have long been in operation in several EU member states. Despite this, Hungary still lacks a dedicated support scheme for school students aged 14-18. Existing subsidies remain limited to students in higher education and elite athletes and continue to be predominantly financial in nature.

For further development of the research, it is necessary to refine the questions included in the current study. Based on the hypotheses and findings, it appeared that respondents were not always clear about the specific focus of the questions, leading to possible variations in interpretation. It should be noted that the Community Education (class teacher) class, covering four main topics: individual and community development, learning to learn, health promotion, and adaptation and safety, is a part of the core curriculum of secondary schools. These core subjects already include components that contribute to the development of the competences required for a dual career. Moreover, the framework curricula of sports schools contain additional subjects aimed at developing skills essential for achieving success in both education and sport.

Future research could profitably be extended to other regions of Hungary. The country's diverse context justifies comparisons between the eastern and western regions, as well as the inclusion of sports schools in the capital. Further research could also explore gender differences.

In addition, international comparative studies are recommended – both with neighbouring countries, and in relation to broader European dual career policies.

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