

**Title:** A Multidimensional Approach to Evaluate the Policy Effectiveness of Elite Sport Schools in Flanders

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**Tags:** Belgium, school dual career, elite sports schools

**Sports:** Athletics, basketball, gymnastics, judo, tennis, volleyball, cycling, swimming, handball, badminton, ski/snowboard, triathlon, fencing, golf, taekwondo, table tennis

**Journal:** Sport in Society

**Main Theme:** Role of Institution

**Secondary Theme:** Dual Career Support

**Aims:** The aim of this article was to assess the effectiveness (from a multidimensional perspective) of elite sports schools at the secondary education level in Flanders, Belgium. In Flanders, elite sports schools were first introduced in 1998 with the aim of encouraging young talents to combine an academic career with a sports career to enhance their performance in international sports and still attain a secondary education diploma, with services available to address both goals. As elite sports performance in Flanders has not improved 14 years after its implementation, questions have arisen as to whether these schools are effective. To compare elite athletes who had (ever) attended an elite sports school in Flanders with those who had not, retrospective data were collected from senior elite athletes in 14 sports affiliated with an elite sports school in Flanders.

**Method:** Data were collected through an online survey (749 returned) sent to former elite sport school athletes, that included questions such as information around their current sports performance level, the provision they received to balance their sporting and academic careers and available training facilities. Interviews were also conducted with athletes and stakeholders of the elite sports schools.

**Results and Practical Implications:** Results found that there are no differences in success between athletes that went to an elite sports school and those that developed their sports career outside of one of these schools, with a similar number from each group reaching an international top three or top eight level. It was noted, however, that as athletes within the elite sports schools are slightly younger, they may not have yet reached their elite potential. Based on the limited success of athletes within these sports schools despite a large investment by the Flemish Government, the authors recommend that the development of alternative pathways to success (e.g. through supporting local talent clubs and local flexible school arrangements) for potential talent should be taken into account. The results suggest that the elite sport school system has been effective in particular sports, such as gymnastics. This finding may relate to the fact that gymnastics is an early specialisation sport and support services are needed at a much earlier age than in many other sports. The study, however, suggests that it should not be assumed that the sports schools alone have been the reason for a lack of success. There are many confounding factors influencing sporting success, such as genetic qualities of young talents and their close environment (e.g. parents and friends), organisational factors (e.g. sport clubs) and additional factors (e.g. media and geographic factors). Furthermore, there were no differences were found between academic success of athletes who went to elite sports schools and those who did not, however, more athletes outside of sports schools went to university. This finding suggests that athletes who attended sports schools may prioritise their sporting commitment but may have increased challenges when they come to retire from their sport. Such findings may have implications on how sport and education are structured across the world during younger age groups. Finally, athletes who did not attend a sports school received less support services to balance their dual career than those who did, yet the quality of services outside of sports schools was rated as being higher. This finding may indicate that having the services in place is an important factor, but not a sufficient condition for success.

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