Title: An Action Research Approach to Supporting Elite Student-Athletes in Higher Education

Author(s): McKenna, J., & Dunstan-Lewis, N.

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Keywords: Action research, elite higher education, student-athlete, support, social support, role of the institution, student-athlete identity, male and female, time management

Sport(s): Rugby union, ski racing, dinghy sailing, athletics, rowing, hockey, soccer, weight lifting

Journal: European Physical Education Review

Main Theme: Role of the Institution

Secondary Theme(s): Identity, Social Support

Aims: The study has three main aims: (1) to add to the literature describing the UK student-athlete experience, (2) to provide a critical account of our attempts to develop a support programme that supports student-athletes through intensive academic studies, and (3) the account is written to show how the resulting programme has been accepted within this academic community.

Method: Action research was used to develop a support programme, which was established through a one-year programme, letting the researchers follow a cyclical approach of 'Look, Think, Act'. Data was collected through action research methodology as well as through interviews and focus group discussions with the student-athletes of both genders. Tutors, heads of department, administrators, and managers of sport support services contributed with supplementary interviews. All data underwent a systematic thematic analysis.

Results and Practical Implications: Findings showed that the student-athletes persisted in their academic and sporting careers while wanting change. These results were underpinned by three main areas of concern were identified: (1) establishing priorities of the 'student' and 'athlete' roles, (2) relationships with academia and (3) lack of support and

understanding. Establishing priorities of the 'student' and 'athletes' roles is a process fraught with dilemmas and challenges. Especially since most days include effortful decision-making on a repeated basis. These decisions include academic, social, and sporting priorities and the resolution of these decisions is often contingent on time constraints. These priorities are further conflicted by tutors and other students who believe that student-athletes are merely gifted, but overindulged individuals who seek undeserved favours not offered to others. Also, extra sporting attention might block student-athletes from normal development of identity outside sport. Relationship with academia often comes with envy, being used or despised for being high-achieving in multiple settings. However, some student-athletes also find it hard to sustain academic achievements. A lack of support and understanding adds to the feeling of an unusual life, and more support and understanding of their needs might lessen the need for the arduous task of prioritising. This easing of demands might help student-athletes maintain a high level of performance in both academia and sports. The action research approach to this study aimed at improving the relationship with academia by establishing information links between coordinator, student, and tutor. In practice, all heads of departments, coordinators, and tutors received a description of the student at the beginning of the year, as well as two reports on academic and sporting progress. Student-athletes were also encouraged to open with their tutors about sporting commitments. Further, priorities of the 'student' and 'athlete' roles were improved by aiming an educational programme at time management and goal setting skills. This programme was aiming at balancing the sometimes contradictory roles.

Lastly, the educational sessions on time management and goal setting also served as a place to discuss the concerns with contradictory demands, but also celebrate achievements from the previous fortnight.

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