

Title: The Policy and Practice of Implementing a Student-Athlete Support Network – A Case Study

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Aims: In an effort to address difficulties experienced by elite athletes wanting to pursue tertiary education, High Performance Sport New Zealand initiated the 'Athlete Friendly Tertiary Network' (AFTN) in 2010. Whilst a number of tertiary institutions across New Zealand have since agreed to implement this policy, it is not yet known whether this implementation has actually resulted in these institutions fulfilling its promise to New Zealand's high-performance athletes. The following case study examined the experiences of high-performance athletes undertaking tertiary education within the New Zealand context, with the aim of gaining a deeper understanding of how implementation of the AFTN policy has impacted these athletes' abilities to engage in a student-athlete dual career.

Method: Semi-structured interviews were used to explore the lived experiences of 'university A's' high performance student athletes and questioned whether the AFTN is in fact, assisting these individuals to engage in a student athlete dual career. Nine (five female and four male) high performance student athletes were interviewed. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 28 years and had on average competed 3.3 years of study at University A. Each participant was nationally recognised for their sport, with eight of the nine athletes having represented, or continuing to represent, New Zealand in their chosen sporting code.

Results and Practical Implications: Results still suggest that despite the implementation of the AFTN policy, the student athletes still faced difficulties in combining both their academic and athletic pursuits. Specifically, whilst all participants acknowledged receiving some support to complete their studies alongside their sporting requirements, difficulties resulting from long absences away from their place of study, inflexible sporting demands and a lack of flexible course delivery options compounded athletes' struggles. Additionally, despite the university embracing the guidelines set out by the AFTN policy, an apparent lack of awareness and understanding amongst front-line teaching staff has meant that it is yet to fully meet its obligations under this agreement, thus suggesting the importance of clear policy communication throughout sporting and university infrastructures. Although student athletes acknowledged receiving some form of support from University A staff to facilitate their dual careers, most participants still felt that more could be done to enhance this process. These issues highlight the importance of addressing policy implementation across each level within an organisational organisation and suggest that universities need to focus on ensuring that all staff are both aware of, and meeting, their responsibilities under such agreements. These changes would ensure that universities fulfil their obligations and enable high performance athletes to successfully complete higher education whilst pursuing their sporting goals.

TASS have produced this lay summary. The full article is available (permissions may apply):

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/19406940.2017.1320301>