

Title: Pathway decisions during the student-athlete transition out of university in the United Kingdom

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Aims: The aim of the present study is to explore the pathways that UK student-athletes take when they transition out of university. In addition, a secondary aim is to explore the decision-making process and understand what factors influence athletes' decisions regarding the path that they take.

Method: Participants included 11 student-athletes from a variety of sports (e.g., rowing, judo, para basketball, aerial skiing; see Table 1) and 9 different UK universities. Student-athletes were either about to make the transition out of university within the next 2 months or had left university within the last 18 months. The study also included 8 stakeholders who all worked at the same UK university. The roles of these stakeholders varied within the institution, and included head coaches, a strength and conditioning coach, an athlete lifestyle advisor, performance sport manager and the director of sport.

Results and Practical Implications: Results found that when athletes approach the end of their undergraduate university dual career, they must make decisions regarding what their next steps will be. Within the current study, different pathways were identified that student-athletes might take. These pathways included (1) advancing onto a postgraduate education and elite sport pathway, (2) full-time sport pathway, (3) sport and work (and education) pathway, and (4) dropping out of sport and moving onto an alternative pathway. Athletes identified several different motives to continue at university by starting a postgraduate degree, including having a safety net, further career opportunities, and to maintain access to

the support services they had through university (suggesting some athletes are using education as a means to stay in their sport). Athletes who went full-time in their sport when they left university either entered a funded programme (e.g., World Class Performance) or decided to undertake a ‘make or break’ year, where they gave their sport one last chance. Motives identified to take a ‘make or break’ year included the goal of advancing onto a professional programme, lack of funding from the athlete’s NGB, financial support offered by parents, qualifying for major events, and a lack of preparation to take any other route. Following the transition out of university, some student-athletes experience an alteration in their dual career pathway and combine their sporting commitments with work. Athletes suggested that they took this route so that they were able to fund their sports careers (with many taking flexible roles that were not in line with their career aspirations). For those athletes that dropped out of sport when they left university, this was an involuntary decision. Reasons cited included a loss of support services received in the university environment, career ending injuries, and the structure of NGB training programmes and location meaning athletes could not combine their training with work or education (with many not financially able to be a full-time athlete). Practitioners can use the findings to help athletes make well-informed decisions about what path to take after university. More specifically, using the underpinning factors, practitioners can support athletes to critically reflect on their motivations and future goals and come to a decision around what their most suitable pathway should be. Transitioning into full-time sport in the absence of support programmes was a pathway that some athletes took. One of the reasons they did so was a lack of career exploration and perception that they would not need to consider another option. If athletes at university are considering taking this path, practitioners (e.g., lifestyle advisors) should help them to become aware of the potential challenges they may face. Additionally, limited dual career opportunities in centralized or professional sport programmes (e.g., due to required training times) may imply that some sports do not consider or compensate for the possibility of their athletes continuing with a dual career post-university. This may subsequently lead to athletes feeling that they have no option but to retire from elite competitive sport. An implication of this research is that NGBs may need to consider more carefully how they can incorporate dual career opportunities into their centralized programmes (e.g., flexing training times) to allow athletes the opportunity to continue on a dual career path after their undergraduate university degree. Finally, the results suggest that different stakeholders may have an impact on the pathway decision of athletes. These include parents (who may be in a

position to offer financial support), NGBs (who often dictate athlete funding decisions), and university support staff (who can offer sport scholarship programmes). Therefore, it is important that when athletes are making the decision around which path to take when they leave university, there is a collaboration between different support sources to help the athlete critically examine their opportunities post-university.