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## THE ITALIAN APPROACH TO THE DUAL CAREERS OF UNIVERSITY STUDENT-ATHLETES

### ITALIJANSKI PRISTOP K DVOJNI KARIERI UNIVERZITETNIH ŠTUDENTOV ŠPORTNIKOV

#### ABSTRACT

In the last decade, the topic of the dual careers of student-athletes has received increasing attention across Europe, both from many scholars in several different fields and from the European Union. In the European Union lexicon, the term 'dual career' means that an athlete can combine, without unreasonable personal effort, their sporting career with education and/or work in a flexible way through high-quality training in order to protect their moral, health, educational and professional interests without compromising either objective, with a particular focus on the continued formal education of young athletes. The basic idea behind several dual career programs to aid the student-athlete is that practicing sport and studying are two time-consuming activities. As a consequence, without special agreements between the sport sector and the educational system pressures and challenges on student-athletes may become excessive and unsustainable, forcing them to choose sport or education. The main purpose of this paper is to show the results of a two-year research project concerning the role of dual career programs as a tool to promote the development of a social Europe. The research project focusses on dual career programs of university student-athletes from 71 universities throughout Italy and the results are based on data collected from each university. These data were then analysed in order to show the degree of involvement of Italian universities in dual career programs, the different kind of support services offered to student-athletes and the geographical spread of dual career programs among universities located in Northern, Central and Southern Italy. The data presented in this paper are updated until 30 October 2018

*Keywords:* student-athletes, dual career, Italian universities

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#### IZVLEČEK

V zadnjem desetletju je tema dvojne kariere študentov športnikov po vsej Evropi deležna vse večjega zanimanja tako akademikov z več različnih strokovnih področij kot Evropske unije. V besednjaku Evropske unije izraz 'dvojna kariera' pomeni, da lahko športnik, z razumno mero prizadevanja, svojo športno kariero usklajuje z izobraževanjem in/ali delom na fleksibilen način in s kakovostnim treningom ter tako zaščiti svoje moralne, zdravstvene, izobraževalne in poklicne interese, ne da bi pri tem ogrozil katerikoli cilj, poseben poudarek pa je namenjen nenehnemu formalnemu izobraževanju mladih športnikov. Temeljna ideja veliko programov za pomoč študentom športnikom z dvojno kariero je, da treniranje športa in študij zahtevata zelo veliko časa. Zaradi tega lahko, če ni posebnih dogovorov med športnim sektorjem in izobraževalnim sistemom, postanejo pritiski in izzivi za študente športnike preveliki in nevzdržni ter so tako primorani izbrati med športom in izobraževanjem. Glavni namen tega prispevka je prikazati rezultate dvoletnega raziskovalnega projekta o vlogi programov dvojne kariere kot orodja za spodbujanje razvoja socialne Evrope. Raziskovalni projekt se osredotoča na programe dvojne kariere univerzitetnih študentov športnikov iz 71 univerz po vsej Italiji, rezultati pa temeljijo na podatkih, ki jih je zbrala vsaka univerza posebej. Podatke smo analizirali, da prikažemo stopnjo vključenosti italijanskih univerz v programe dvojne kariere, različne oblike podpornih storitev, ki so na voljo študentom športnikom, ter geografsko porazdelitev programov dvojne kariere med univerzami v severni, osrednji in južni Italiji. Podatki v tem prispevku so bili zadnjič posodobljeni 30. oktobra 2018.

*Ključne besede:* študenti športniki, dvojna kariera, italijanske univerze

## INTRODUCTION

In the European Union (EU)'s lexicon the term 'dual career' (DC) means that an athlete can combine, without unreasonable personal effort, their sporting career with education and/or work in a flexible way through high-quality training in order to protect their moral, health, educational and professional interests, without compromising either objective, and particularly focusing on the continued formal education of young athletes (European Commission, 2012).

The terms Dual Career Programs (DCPs) and Student-Athletes are strictly linked. The term Student-Athletes itself indicates that they are not ordinary students; indeed, they are students and athletes at the same time. By virtue of their dual nature, student-athletes are required to balance academic results and athletic commitment (Danish, Petitpas, & Hale, 1993; Wylleman, & Lavallee, 2004; Wylleman, & Reints, 2010; Lupo et al., 2015; Guidotti, Lupo, Cortis, Di Baldassarre, & Capranica, 2014; Stambulova, & Ryba, 2014; Guidotti, Cortis, & Capranica, 2015; Guidotti, & Capranica, 2013; Lupo, Mosso, Guidotti, Cugliari, Pizzigalli, & Rainoldi, 2017).

As pointed out by Zimbalist, 'the term itself indicates that they are not normal students. If student-athletes were normal students, then either the term would not be necessary or it would be joined by other terms like student-musicians, student-artists or student-engineers' (Zimbalist, 2001). Similarly, Sánchez Pato, Isidori, Calderón and Brunton have underlined that 'the student-athlete really seems to be a centaur: half a student and half an athlete, whose success depends upon being entirely one of the two parts of the mythological creature' (Sanchez-Pato et al., 2017).

The term DCPs refers to pathways aimed at allowing student-athletes to combine education and high-performance sports. The basic idea these programs rely on is very simple and can be summarized as follows: studying and practicing sports are two time-consuming activities. Without special agreements between the sport sector and the educational system, pressures and challenges on student-athletes may become excessive and unsustainable, forcing them to choose sport or education.

Student-athletes' education is not just a practical problem, as it involves ethical and legal implications. It is of paramount importance to underline that forcing the student-athlete to choose education or sport presents numerous critical issues, as it questions the same fundamental right to education of high-level athletes. According to Aquilina and Henry, 'clearly an element in the quality of the system of education of elite athlete is the extent to which athletes' rights (particularly, but not exclusively, those of minors) are recognized and protected. If the State is fostering participation in elite sport development while making no attempt to modify the educational provision, then the athletes' rights to education will de facto be affected' (Aquilina, & Henry, 2010).

Moreover, it cannot be emphasised enough that the correct and holistic development of young sportspeople requires a close cooperation among the family, the school and the sports organizations.

## THE EUROPEAN UNION AND DUAL CAREER PROGRAMS

In the European Union (EU)'s lexicon the term 'dual career' (DC) means that an athlete can combine, without unreasonable personal effort, their sporting career with education and/or

work in a flexible way through high-quality training in order to protect their moral, health, educational and professional interests, without compromising either objective, and particularly focusing on the continued formal education of young athletes (European Commission, 2012).

Generally speaking, DCPs have always been considered a subject matter reserved to a greater extent to psychologists. However, since the late 1990s also the European Union (EU) started to deal with DCPs: at first in a very light way, limited to stressing the existence of the problem, and later on in a more incisive way, highlighting the ways to tackle the problem. Currently there is no doubt that the DC represents a priority in the context of the EU political agenda on sport, education, youth and professional training.

In the late 1990s the attitude of the EU towards DC was rather soft, most likely because of the lack of a specific European competence in the field of sport. In its 1998 Consultation document of Directorate General X called 'The European Model of Sport', the Commission underlined that the risk of lacking adequate education is a problem that particularly concern adolescent athletes. Most of them start at an early age in order to make it professionally and tend to neglect their education (Europejska, 1999). The following year in the Helsinki Report on sport, the Commission suggested that Community action, within the context of its educational and training programs, should focus on the objectives of improving the position of sport and physical education at school through the Community programs and promoting the subsequent switch to other employment and future integration onto the labour market of sportsmen and women (Commission of the European Communities, 1999).

The 2000 Nice Declaration as well as the 2007 White Paper on Sport share the same programmatic nature. In the Nice Declaration the European Council underlined 'the benefits of sport for young people and urges the need for special heed to be paid, in particular by sporting organizations, to the education and vocational training of top young sportsmen and women in order that their vocational integration is not jeopardized because of their sporting careers, to their psychological balance and family ties and to their health, in particular to prevent doping'.

Similarly, in the White Paper on Sport the Commission emphasized 'the importance of taking into account at an early stage the need to provide 'dual career' training for young sportsmen and sportswomen. In order to ensure the reintegration of professional sportspersons into the labour market at the end of their sporting careers and to provide high quality local training centres to safeguard their moral, educational and professional interests (Commission of the European Communities, 2008).

However, in the last decade the attitude of the EU towards DCPs has become more incisive. In 2014 the Commission published its Guidelines on Dual Careers of Athletes (Commission of the European Union, 2012). The aim of these Guidelines is to sensitise governments, sport governing bodies, educational institutes and employers in order to create the right environment for dual careers of athletes, including an appropriate legal and financial framework and a tailor-made approach respecting differences between sports. In accordance with the specific nature of the EU competence on sport recognized by Art. 6 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) and Art. 165 of the Treaty on the Functioning of European Union (TFEU), the Guidelines are not intended to become a binding instrument and they respect the diversity of competences and traditions in Member States in the various policy fields.

Two years later, in their Conclusions on DCs the Council and the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States invited the EU Member States, sport organizations and stakeholders to (a) develop a policy framework and/or national guidelines for dual careers; (b) promote cooperation and agreements in the development and implementation of dual careers between all relevant stakeholders; (c) encourage cross-sectoral cooperation and support innovative measures and research aimed at identifying and solving the problems facing athletes in both education and in the workplace; (d) promote the exchange of good practice and experience on dual careers among Member States at local, regional and national level; (e) ensure that measures in support of dual careers, where they exist, are applied equally for male and female athletes and taking into account the special needs of athletes with a disability; (f) encourage sports organizations and educational institutions to ensure that only suitably qualified or trained staff work or volunteer in support of athletes undertaking a dual career; (g) promote the use of quality standards in sport academies and high performance training centres for example with regard to dual careers staff, safety and security arrangements and transparency about the rights of athletes.

Lastly, in 2015 the Commission published a study on the minimum quality requirements for dual career services. The main objectives of the study were to develop a set of requirements to function as a reference point for national DC services and facilities across the EU and to provide a model of a quality framework, offering transparency and guarantees on quality, safety and security for athletes, with a quality label and/or accreditation system for facilities and dual-career services at national and European levels. In particular, the study has delivered a set of 25 country profiles in which existing DC policies and DCPs at national and regional level are specified per country. Additionally, the study has resulted in the development of an “athlete-centred” quality framework in which all levels of influence (from personal, to institutional, to policy level) are addressed.

From a general point of view the report shows that there is a need for a Europe-wide framework on support systems and facilities for DCs, which could be deployed uniformly in individual Member States. This means that the success of such a framework depends strongly upon how it is implemented. For this reason the study recommend to:

- develop this framework into an easily accessible online tool for all stakeholders;
- support the development of a network of national contact points to implement and monitor the quality framework in their own domestic contexts, to guarantee the quality of stakeholder assessments and self-assessments and to provide statistical monitoring of athletes;
- promote additional research, specifically targeted at the level of the services for athletes with DCs, could support effective policy making for DCs.

## THE ITALIAN UNIVERSITY SYSTEM

The Italian university system is organised in three cycles. A different academic degree is awarded at the end of each cycle:

- the *Laurea* (e.g., Bachelor; end of 1<sup>st</sup> cycle);
- the *Laurea Magistrale* (e.g., Master’s degree; end of 2<sup>nd</sup> cycle); and
- the *Dottorato di Ricerca* (e.g., Ph.D; end of 3<sup>rd</sup> cycle).

The first cycle of studies lasts three years and students who have gained 180 ECTS credits and satisfied all curricular requirements, including the production of a final written paper are awarded the *Laurea* degree. The *Laurea* gives access to the 2<sup>nd</sup> cycle study programs and corresponds to the Bachelor's level in the European Higher Education Area.

In the second cycle, students are provided with education at an advanced level for the exercise of highly qualified activities in specific areas. The studies last two years. The *Laurea Magistrale* is awarded to students who have gained 120 ECTS credits and satisfied all curricular requirements, including the production and public defence of an original dissertation. Some programs (namely, those in dentistry, medicine, veterinary medicine, pharmacy, architecture, construction engineering/architecture, and law) are defined as 'single cycle programs' (*Corsi a ciclo unico*). For these programs, admission is based on entrance exams. The studies last five years (six years and 360 ECTS credits in the cases of medicine and dentistry). The *Laurea Magistrale* corresponds to the Masters level in the European Higher Education Area. It gives access to *Corsi di Dottorato di Ricerca*.

In the third cycle the main degree programs are *Corsi di Dottorato di Ricerca* (Research Doctorate Programs). The students enrolled in these programs will acquire methodologies for advanced scientific research, will be trained in new technologies and will work in research laboratories, wherever appropriate. Access is by a *Laurea Magistrale* degree and admission is based on a competitive exam. The studies last at least three years and include the public defence of an original research project. The *Dottorato di Ricerca* corresponds to the Doctorate/PhD level in the European Higher Education Area.

According to the MIUR (Minister of Education, University and Research) the Italian University system is composed of 100 Universities of which

- 67 are State Universities;
- 22 are legally recognized non-State Universities;
- 11 are legally recognized non-State telematic Universities.

## THE ITALIAN APPROACH TO DCPs FOR STUDENT-ATHLETES

For decades Italy has not paid attention to the topic of the DC of student-athletes. To date, the only legislative reference to DC is represented by Art. 1(7)(g) of Law No. 107 of 13 July 2015 (the so-called Good School Law) according to which the protection of student-athletes' right to education must be a priority. Moreover, as far as University high-level students are concerned, on the 12 December 2016 the Italian Olympic Committee (CONI), the Ministry for Education, University and Research (MIUR), the Rectors' Conference of Italian Universities (CRUI), the Italian University Sports Centre (CUSI), the Italian Paralympic Committee (CIP) and the National Association of Bodies for the Right to Education (ANDISU) signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), in which it is stated that the parties undertake to promote the university career of student-athletes in compliance with the fundamental right to education (MIUR, 2016). The main objectives of this MoU are stated as follows: to provide student-athletes with a tool for the growth the people and the enhancement of the sports culture; to encourage high-level athletes to enrol in Italian universities to their increase prestige and international exposure; to support and facilitate the combination of the sporting career with the university education; to

valorise the sports commitments of these athletes through ECTS. As regard the commitments of the parties of the MoU, Art. 2 states that the parties undertake, by mutual agreement, to support and coordinate concrete initiatives in favour of high-level student-athletes. In particular, the parties undertake to guarantee:

- (a) the establishment of tutoring programs for student-athletes in all study courses;
- (b) for courses for which attendance is required, the possibility to take into account the hours of tutoring and distance learning in order to fulfil the requirement of frontal lessons necessary to sit the exams;
- (c) the possibility of setting up extraordinary exam sessions for justified reasons such as the overlapping of exams and sports commitments;
- (d) the possibility to reserve a certain number of places for student athletes in university residences; and
- (e) the possibility of setting up full or partial scholarships or other flexibility instruments as far as tuition fees are concerned.

Unfortunately, the vagueness of the above-mentioned legislative reference together with its purely programmatic nature and the principle of autonomy (financial, organizational and academic) of Italian universities has led every single University to follow its own way. The main and direct consequences of this situation are: (i) the lack of a common framework; (ii) the lack of official and reliable data; and (iii) the lack of relevant studies and research projects on the topic at issue.

## **THE UNIVERSITY OF BERGAMO RESEARCH PROJECT ON DUAL CAREER PROGRAMS FOR STUDENT-ATHLETES AS A TOOL TO BUILD A SOCIAL EUROPE AND THE PROGRAM DUAL CAREER UP 4 SPORT**

Last year the Department of Law of the University of Bergamo decided to finance a two years research project called ‘Dual Career Programs for student-athletes as a tool to build a social Europe’. The main purpose of the project is to analyse the status of student-athletes from a social, cultural and legal point of view as well as develop educational programs in order to allow student-athletes to combine their sports career and high-level education. The research project is mainly aimed at collecting data on DCPs among the Italian University system; organizing such data according to well-defined parameters and criteria; analysing and describing the main results obtained from the analysis of the collected data; and elaborating a model of DCP in compliance with the EU Guidelines for the benefit of different stakeholders. Because of the lack of official data, the collection of data was the starting point. On the basis of the data collected the research project has been directed to:

- (a) identify which Universities have adopted (or are about to adopt) a DCP;
- (b) evaluate the geographical spread of DCPs on the Italian territory (North, South and Centre);
- (c) define the main characteristics of DCPs especially in terms of the kinds of support services offered;

- (d) rank the Universities on the basis of the number of support services offered; and
- (e) provide an initial overview of the results achieved in the first year of activation of the dual career program at the University of Bergamo.

## METHODS

The first step of the research project consisted in collecting data from the Italian university system in order to know the number of Universities involved in a DCP and their geographical location. Second, we identified the different types of support services offered to student-athletes and grouped them in 12 categories. Third, we identified 4 levels of performance of the universities on the basis of the number of support services offered and ranked the universities accordingly. Fourth, we identified the most recurrent support services and ranked them accordingly. Lastly, we briefly described the data concerning the DCP of the University of Bergamo.

## RESULTS

### Data Collection.

To collect data from the Italian university system we proceeded asking via e-mail to each university if a DCP has been activated or is about to be activated. 71 universities responded to the e-mail while 29 universities (traditional:  $n=18$ ; and telematic:  $n=11$ ) ignored it (non-responding universities). However, due to the specific peculiarities of the telematic universities, the latter have been considered separately from the traditional universities.

Among the 71 responding universities, 22 declared they had adopted a formal DCP, 17 universities had adopted some special rules (hereinafter referred to as Dual Career Facilities – DCFs) aimed at facilitating the dual career of student-athletes although outside the context of a formal DCP, 7 universities declared that they were about to adopt a DCP and 29 universities had adopted no DCP.

As far as the 18 non responding traditional universities are concerned, 11 are State universities whereas 7 are non State universities. As for the geographical spread of the non responding universities the data show that 5 are located in Northern Italy, 5 in Central Italy and 8 in Southern Italy.

### Geographical Spread of DCPs and DCFs

In order to get a picture of the geographical spread of DCPs and DCFs, we divided Italy into three macro-regions: north, centre and south. As far as DCPs are concerned, the data show that the majority of DCPs are activated in Universities located in Northern Italy (12), whereas in Southern Italy there are 7 universities with a DCP and only 3 universities are located in Central Italy.

As regards DCFs, the results are slightly different: 9 Universities with DCFs are located in Central Italy, 7 in Northern Italy and only 1 in Southern Italy.

Adding this data together it is possible to affirm that the majority of Universities with DCPs/DCFs are located in Northern Italy ( $n=19$ ), whereas in Central Italy there are 12 universities and in Southern Italy only 8 universities.

Table 1. Geographical Distribution of the Italian Universities Providing Dual Career Programs and Dual Career Facilities \* indicates Private Universities

North	Centre	South
Dual Career Programs		
Università di Genova	Università di Camerino	Università del Salento
Università di Bergamo	LUISS – Roma*	Università di Foggia
Università Commerciale Bocconi - Milano*	Università di Roma Foro Italico	Università di Bari Aldo Moro
Politecnico di Milano		Politecnico di Bari
Università di Pavia		Università di Napoli “Parthenope”
Università di Verona		Università di Messina
Università Padova		Università di Cagliari
Università Ca’ Foscari - Venezia		
Università di Trento		
Università di Modena e Reggio Emilia		
Università di Bologna		
Università di Parma		
Dual Career Facilities		
Università di Torino	Università di Pisa	Università di Catania
Politecnico di Torino	Università di Firenze	
Università del Piemonte orientale	Università di Siena	
Università dell’Insubria	Università di Urbino Calo Bo	
Università di Milano	Università di Roma Tor Vergata	
Università Iuav di Venezia	Università Link Campus - Roma*	
Università di Ferrara	Università Europea di Roma*	
	Università Roma Tre	
	Università di Cassino e del Lazio Meridionale	

### The Support Services Offered to Student-Athletes

We have analysed the different support services (SSs) offered to student-athletes in the context of both DCPs and DCFs. We have identified 12 different SSs, grouped into 9 categories: 1) financial support (scholarship, fee exemption); 2) learning support (tutoring, E-learning); 3) flexibility (exams schedule, lessons schedule); 4) gap year; 5) ECTS; 6) part-time; 7) accommodation facilities; 8) sports facilities; and 9) job placement. Among the SSs offered by the universities adopting a DCP tutoring is the most common one (19 out of 22 universities), whereas E-learning is offered only by three universities. Figure 1 shows the frequency of occurrence of SSs.



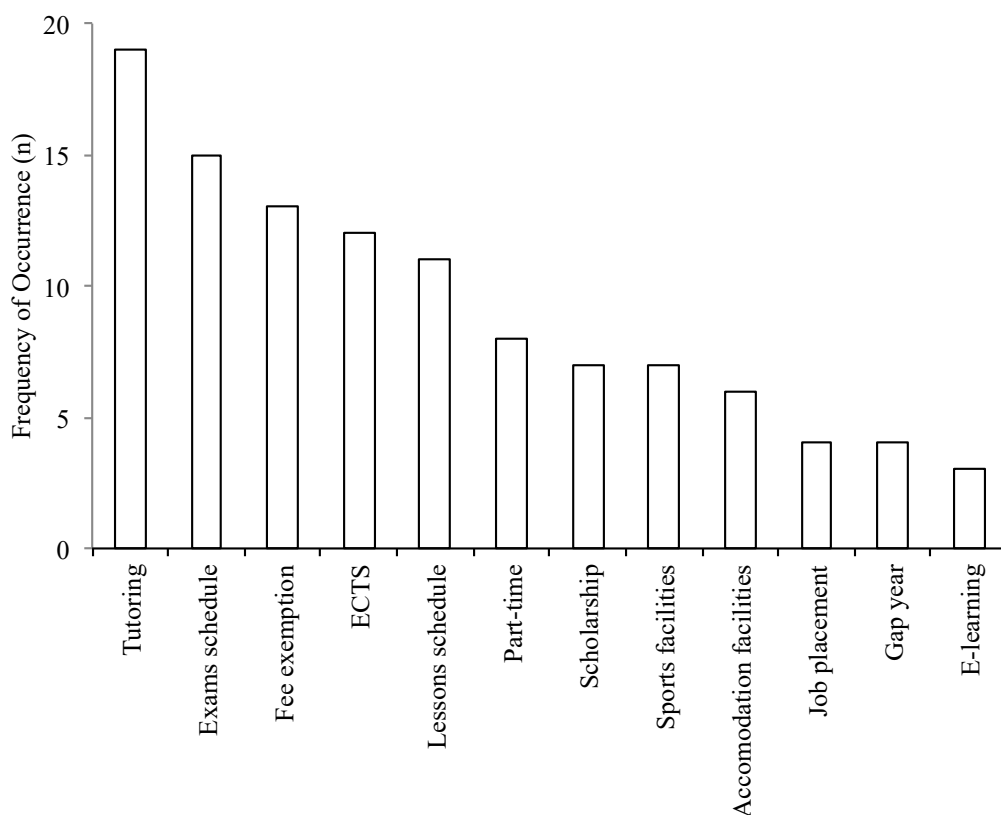


Figure 1. Frequency of Occurrence of the Support Services Offered by 22 Italian Universities to Student-Athletes.

Then universities have been accredited with one star for each SS offered. Universities with a DCP were grouped into 4 different levels based on the number of SSs offered to student-athletes: (i) basic ( $n=1$  to  $n=3$ ), (ii) intermediate ( $n=4$  to  $n=6$ ), (iii) high ( $n=7$  to  $n=9$ ) and (iv) top ( $n=10$  to  $n=12$ ). The data show that the intermediate level groups comprise the majority ( $n=14$ ) of Universities, while no University reaches the top level. The high level groups only include four 4 Universities and the basic level groups three 3 Universities. The same methodology applied to Universities with DCFs show that no University reaches the top and only one 1 the high level. The basic level groups the majority ( $n=12$ ) of Universities and whereas the intermediate level groups only 4 Universities.

As far as the geographical spread of DCPs and DCFs considered overall is concerned, the collected data show that half ( $n=10$ ) of the Universities grouped in the intermediate level are located in Northern Italy while the other half is equally divided between Southern Italy ( $n=5$ ) and the Central Italy ( $n=5$ ). Similarly, Universities grouped in the basic level: 7 out of 14 are located in Northern Italy, 6 in Central Italy and only 1 on Southern Italy. On the contrary, Universities grouped in the top level are distributed more equitably: 2 in Northern Italy, 1 in Central Italy and 2 in Southern Italy.

### **The telematic universities**

In Italy there are 11 non-State telematic universities legally recognized. Only 5 universities are involved in DCPs and/or DCFs. More precisely, 1 University has adopted a DCP, whereas 4 universities offer DCFs. All 5 universities offer their DCPs/DCFs to student-athletes of any faculty, but 3 universities limit the access to such programs/facilities only to athletes involved in specific sports disciplines.

The support services offered to student-athletes are as follows: (i) financial support; (ii) ECTS; (iii) tutoring; and (iv) job placement.

Only 1 university offers 3 SSs, whereas two universities offer 2 SSs and 2 universities offer only 1 SS.

### **The DCP of the University of Bergamo: Dual career up 4 sport**

The DCP of the University of Bergamo offers to student-athletes the following support services:

- i) fee exemption;
- ii) tutoring;
- iii) gap year;
- iv) part-time;
- v) accommodation facilities; and
- vi) sport facilities.

The collected data refer to academic years 2017/2018 and 2018/2019 and show that fifteen student-athletes are actually enrolled at the University of Bergamo; thirteen of them are part-time students, whereas two are full time students.

The sports disciplines practiced by these student-athletes are: Nordic skiing (n=1), basketball (n=1), athletics (n=4), swimming (n=3), chess (n=1), karate (n=2), rowing (n=1), triathlon (n=1) and paratriathlon (n=1).

The student-athletes represent five different Departments/faculties: Economics (n=6), Language, literature and foreign cultures (n=2), Engineering (n=3), Literature, philosophy and communication (n=2) and Human and Social Sciences (n=2).

## **THE UNISPORT-ITALIA NETWORK: A FIRST STEP IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION**

The National University Sports System Network (UNISPORT-ITALIA) represents a powerful example of how important it is to create synergies within the Italian university system capable of developing a single common voice in its relationship with different stakeholders. The idea to create a network is very recent and the establishment process is still being completed. Perhaps for this reason to date the UNOSPORT-ITALIA Network groups only 42 Universities out of a total of 100. The main purposes of the Network are to: i) promote and strengthen the role of sport in scientific research, not only in the so-called sports sciences, but also as a source of inspiration in all academic disciplines and in interdisciplinary projects; ii) promote new forms of education (formal and informal) that use sport as a tool for developing transversal skills; iii) promote sport as a tool for social inclusion, integration, overcoming the ideological and cultural

barriers linked to gender and nationality; and iv) making sport an integral part of the university experience, as a factor of sociality, aggregation, sense of belonging and as tool for healthy and sustainable lifestyles.

To fulfil these purposes, the Network intends to implement the following main initiatives and activities: a) to share and promote good practices related to university sports, with particular reference to the acquisition through sport of important skills in the professional sphere; b) to harmonize principles and criteria for the management of initiatives and projects of national interest, starting from the management of DC projects for student-athletes; c) to become an interlocutor for all regional, national and international stakeholders who can contribute to create added value through university sports (the MIUR, the Ministry of Sport, the Sport Office of the Council Presidency of the Ministers, the CONI and all the sports federations, the CUSI, the FISU, the EUSA, international university networks (such as the European Network of Academic Sports Services, ENAS; and European Network of Athlete as Student EAS) and the European Commission; d) to strengthen the recognition and value of the Italian university sport at international level; e) to create a community able to develop, disseminate and transfer best practices at national and international level; f) to develop the transdisciplinary dimension of university sport in order to contribute to increase the culture and values of sport, also through new pedagogical approaches; g) to increase collaborative partnerships with public financial institutions and private companies for the launching of projects and fundraising for the specific purposes of UNISPORT-ITALIA; h) to promote initiatives aimed at social inclusion of disabled people, equal opportunities, fight against religious, racial and gender discrimination; and i) to promote and encourage urban planning and construction of university campuses universities in order to take into account the needs of the university students in terms of academic buildings, student housing, sports facilities and other areas of common life.

It is important to stress that the fundamental idea behind the Network is to develop and share synergies among the Italian universities in fields and sectors directly connected to sport university. As a consequence, although the enhancement of DCPs cannot be considered the sole objective of the Network, dual career of student-athletes still represents a core value of the Network.

40 Universities of the UNISPORT-ITALIA network are State universities and only 2 are non-State. As for the geographical spread of the universities of the network, 18 universities are located in Northern Italy, 11 in Central Italy and 13 in Southern Italy. It is also interesting to underline the different level of involvement of the universities of the network on the theme of the dual career. Only 13 Universities have adopted a formal DCP, whereas 10 Universities have adopted some DCFs, 3 Universities are about to adopts a DCP/DCF, 11 did not adopt any program/facility and 5 Universities were non-responding.

## CONCLUSIONS

The present findings, although still partial, represent the first assessment of the attitude of the Italian university system towards the topic of dual career. Generally speaking, it is possible to affirm that the Italian universities show a growing awareness of the importance to allow student-athletes to combine education with their sports career and a proactive attitude to adopt internal rules and *ad hoc* programs to translate this awareness into concrete terms. To this regard it is important to underline that 10 Universities (north: n=4; centre: n=2, and south:

n=4) joined the EAS to share best practices in Europe and to support research and European collaborative partnerships in dual career. Unfortunately, the general legislative framework does not help universities in this effort and the fundamental principle of autonomy of the universities represents the main and hard obstacle to overcome in order to be able to elaborate a general, commonly shared approach.

To date, the present results show that only 22 universities (representing 31%) have adopted a formal DCP. However, the percentage increases to 65% if we combine together the universities that have adopted either a formal DCP or some specific DCFs as well as universities that are taking some initiative on DC. Unfortunately, 25 universities out of a total of 71 (representing 35%) are not involved in dual career yet.

The lack of a common definition of student-athlete for the purposes of the dual career represents another critical issue. The present findings show that some universities recall in their internal documents and regulations the definition of high-level student-athlete elaborated in the MoU between CONI, MIUR, CRUI, CUSI, CIP and ANDISU, whereas other universities tend to refer generally to the idea of high-level student-athletes but they do not define this notion. The definition of high-level student-athlete elaborated in the MoU is rather narrow as it refers only to: i) athletes representing national teams participating in international competitions; ii) for individual sports, athletes ranked in the first 12 places of the national category classification at the beginning of the academic year of reference; iii) football players of teams participating in the following professional championships: Serie A, Serie B and Serie C as well as youth players (under 19) of Serie C teams participating in the championship called Dante Berretti; iv) professional basketball players of teams participating in the Serie A championship; v) students involved in preparing for the 2018 Olympic and Paralympic winter Games in Pyeongchang, the 2020 Olympic and Paralympic summer Games in Tokyo, the 2018 Youth Olympic and Paralympic summer Games in Buenos Aires, and the 2020 Youth Olympic and Paralympic summer Games in Lausanne; vi) students qualified as athletes of national interest by the pertinent sports federation; and vii) athletes participating in the Universiade, in the World University Championship and in the National University Championship as well as students involved in preparing for the 2019 Summer Universiade in Naples.

It is rather evident that such a definition of student-athletes tends to refer only to top athletes and therefore to a very limited number of student-athletes, whereas DCPs and DCFs should be for the benefit of all students deeply involved in sports activities, that is, all students who practice sporting activities at a competitive level, regardless of the results obtained on the pitch. To this regard, to assess the involvement in sports activities it would be possible to refer, for example, to the amount of hours/week spent on training and competitions. Put simply: if the main obstacle for student-athletes is the lack of time (as they have to focus on two objectives), the main criteria to select student-athletes to benefit from DCPs should be the amount of time spent on sports activities, not the results obtained. The problem of combining sport and education is the same both for the athlete who qualifies for the Olympic games, and for the athlete who may not have qualified for a tenth of a second. In fact, both have dedicated the same amount of time to sport, sacrificing the education. On the other hand, the definition of students qualified as athletes of national interest by the pertinent sports federation is rather vague, as there is not a common definition and each sports federation applies its own criteria to qualify a student as an athlete of national interest.

As far as Universities are concerned, the results of this study show that some universities adopt a broader definition on student-athlete, whereas other universities adopt a more restrictive definition. Thus, in so doing, each university tends to create its own definition of student-athletes. Furthermore, the data collected on SSs show that no university is grouped in the Top level on the basis of the number of support services offered. This is clearly a critical issue to be dealt with and solved, but at the same time it reveals a great potential of growth of Italian universities. Similarly, the UNISPORT-ITALIA network represents a very powerful attempt to address the topic of university sport in general and a dual career in particular, in a concrete and institutionalized form. The network is able to overcome the current main weakness of the Italian sports university system, namely the absence of a sole subject able to dialogue with the different stakeholders such as the sports sector, the political sector, the economic sector, the business sector and the financial sector. To fulfil this mission, however, it is highly desirable that the network manages to aggregate as many universities as possible and that all universities belonging to the network adopt a formal DCP.

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