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ABSTRACT

The European Union supports innovative transnational cooperation and practices between Member States on relevant issues in the field of sports, including a balanced combination of higher education and sporting careers of talented and elite athletes (dual career). Ten European academic and sport institutions aimed to construct an educational programme for parents supporting the dual career of their elite athletes. The innovative methodological approach to the co-construction of a parent education based on evidence and eminence of the actual needs of parents in relation to the age, sex, sport typology, competition and academic levels of student-athletes is described. Finally, the potentially far-reaching effects of digital technologies on adult learning and the innovative aspects of a multi-lingual and demand-driven dual career parenting education are envisaged.

Keywords: dual career, evidence, eminence, parenting education

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TOWARDS THE CONSTRUCTION OF AN EDUCATIONAL MODEL FOR DUAL CAREER PARENTING: THE EMPATIA PROJECT.

KORAK BLIŽE K OBLIKOVANJU IZOBRAŽEVALNEGA MODELA ZA STARŠE ŠPORTNIKOV Z DVOJNO KARIERO: PROJEKT 'EMPATIA'

IZVLEČEK

Evropska unija podpira inovativno transnacionalno sodelovanje in prakse med državami članicami na področju pomembnih vprašanj v športu, vključno z uravnoteženim usklajevanjem karier v visokošolskem izobraževanju in športu pri nadarjenih in vrhunskih športnikih (dvojna kariera). Deset evropskih akademskih in športnih ustanov si je zadalo cilj, da oblikujejo izobraževalni program za starše, ki podpirajo dvojno kariero svojih otrok – vrhunskih športnikov. Prispevek opisuje inovativen metodološki pristop k sooblikovanju izobraževanja za starše na podlagi pokazateljev in pomembnosti dejanskih potreb staršev glede na starost, spol, športno tipologijo ter tekmovalno in akademsko raven študentov športnikov. Nazadnje se posveti še potencialno daljnosežnim vplivom digitalne tehnologije na izobraževanje odraslih ter inovativnim vidikom večjezikovnosti in dejanskega povpraševanja v izobraževanju staršev športnikov z dvojno kariero.

Ključne besede: dvojna kariera, pokazatelji, pomembnost, izobraževanje staršev športnikov

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INTRODUCTION

The European Union (EU) recognizes sport as prominent in the life of EU citizens, having a significant social, educational, economic and cultural roles, and making an important contribution to the European Union's strategic objectives (European Parliament, 2015; 2017). Indeed, sport participation has a relevant impact on the maintenance of active lifestyles in the life course (Condello et al., 2016), and elite sports have a relevant impact on the construction of a national identity (De Bosscher, Shibli, Westerbeek & van Bottenburg, 2015) and on the European economy (Kleissner & Grohall, 2015), with elite athletes being fundamental to represent European countries (European Athletes, 2016). To address major challenges in the field of sports and to support innovative transnational cooperation and practices within and beyond Member States, the European Commission has established the Erasmus+ Sport Programme for Collaborative Partnerships (https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/erasmus-plus/actions/sport/collaborative-partnerships_en). Particularly recognizing that talented and elite athletes have the right to pursue a holistic development to advance their future role in society and in the labour market at the end of their sports commitment, the European Commission strongly recommends the balanced combination of a higher education with sporting career (i.e., dual career) and tackles the implementation of the European Guidelines on Dual Careers of Athletes (European Commission, 2007, 2012), including this issue among the priorities of the Erasmus+ Programme. In fact, talented and elite athletes are often challenged in balancing academics and sports, especially when Member States do not support dual career paths with established policies and services (De Brandt et al., 2018; Henry, 2013; Aquilina & Henry, 2010; Capranica & Guidotti, 2016; Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences et al., 2016).

Success in combining academics and sports is an individual responsibility and dual career paths can differ significantly from athlete to athlete. Whilst some athletes as students can have a continuous and positive dual career, others may suffer emotional instability and vulnerability when the demands of the academic and sports interfere, which might result in loss of human resources for national pride due to sport dropouts to attain an academic degree or in problems of social integration at the end of a sport career due to academic dropouts (Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences et al., 2016).

To empower the athlete's commitment, self-discipline, perseverance, determination, concentration, dedication and efficient organization of daily study and training there is a need of a supportive entourage (Knight & Harwood, 2015). Actually, dual career is a multi-faceted domain with a multiplicity of stakeholders having different roles and responsibilities in supporting the educational and sports development of elite athletes at micro (e.g., the individual athlete), meso (e.g., parents, peers, teachers/employers, coaches, sport managers), macro (e.g., sport clubs/federations, educational institutions, and labour market), and policy (e.g., national and European governing bodies) levels (Capranica & Guidotti, 2016). Among the various stakeholders involved in nurturing talented and elite athletes, parents play a unique and important role in both the sport and academic contexts, mainly acting at the meso and most proximal dimension of an athlete's dual career support network (Knight & Harwood, 2015). Whilst a positive parental role includes emotional, instrumental, material, social, and informational support and encouragement deemed crucial to the athlete's initiation, perseverance and success in combining sport and education (Wendling, Kellison & Sagas, 2018), negative parental attitudes might put athletes at risk of psychosocial challenges, and sport or academic dropouts (Stefansen, Smette, & Strandbu,

2018; Tamminen, Holt, & Crocker, 2012; Wuerth, Lee, & Alfermann, 2004; Wylleman, DeKnop, Ewing, & Cumming, 2000).

In general, a dual career starts at young ages and spans across the developmental years of the individual, during which training, competition and school demands significantly vary in typology, volume, intensity and organization, according to the sport and education policy contexts of the Member States. Research has highlighted several career stages and transitions at different levels of the athletic, psychological, psychosocial, academic/vocational and financial development (Pummell & Lavalley, 2018; Wylleman & Reints, 2010), which might occur at different times and having a reciprocal influence on the holistic development of the individual. Therefore, parents will have to understand these multilevel transitional dual career demands to support their progeny in achieving sport and education outcomes. Conversely, a lack of parental support combined with accumulated deficit in academic resources can further affect the athlete's capability to meet academic demands (Simons, Bosworth, Fujita, & Jensen, 2007).

Researchers have revealed the complex demands of sport parenting through investigations on individual experiences and opinions regarding personal development (Dorsch, King, Dunn, Osai & Tulane, 2016; Bean, Fortier, Post, & Chima, 2014; Clarke & Harwood, 2014; Harwood, Drew, and Knight, 2010; Harwood & Knight, 2009). Findings indicate a need of specific knowledge and skills necessary to educate parents in facilitating positive relationships with athletes and other stakeholders of the sport and educational environments (Dorsch et al., 2018; Harwood & Knight, 2015). In particular, specific education has been envisaged to gain a thorough understanding, confidence and expertise in the parental role, and to proactively develop and utilize a range of intrapersonal, interpersonal and organizational skills and coping strategies to ensure an appropriate parental support in youth sport careers (Dorsch et al., 2016; Harwood & Knight, 2015; Holt & Knight, 2014). Furthermore, an evidence-based approach to parent education has been envisaged to understand the multidimensional construct consisting of specific thoughts, emotions skills and needs (Dorsch et al., 2016). Unfortunately, at present no research has been generated on the needs of parents of athletes as students, which could highlight relevant aspects of the parenting role in dual career. Finally, an international dimension is deemed crucial to empower parents in support of athletes as students who might relocate during their developmental years to meet the globalized nature of sports.

Recently, a consortium of ten university and sport institutions with a consolidated relationship at national and European levels in dual career from six Member States (e.g., Ireland, Italy, France, Malta, Portugal, and Slovenia) envisaged a three-year Collaborative Partnership to structure an Education Model for Parents of Athletes in Academics (EMPATIA), which was successfully submitted to the Erasmus+ Programme for the 2018-2020 period (590437-EPP-1-2017-1-SI-SPO-SCP).

METHODS

Experimental approach to the problem

The Ethical Committee of the University of Ljubljana approved the EMPATIA project (9:2018). To guarantee rigorous research design, methods, procedures, data analyses, and construction of the EMPATIA educational programme, the project encompasses two preliminary phases, an implementation phase, and a dissemination phase, respectively. This methodological approach

is based on a step-by-step modality with the outcomes of one phase providing sound basis for building upon the others. In particular, the preliminary phases are aimed to gather evidence- and eminence-based information on dual career parenting by means of a systematic literature review, the organization and conduction of workshops involving parents of talented and elite athletes as students, and a concept mapping procedure to construct a dual career parenting framework, respectively. Evidence-base and eminence-base knowledge are deemed relevant to present a solid theoretical basis for the implementation phase, which comprises the development of a sound dual career education programme allowing parents to co-create and exchange contents through a dual career parenting platform. The dissemination phase is intended to be carried out at national and international levels by involving a large number of parents through sport clubs, National Sport Federations and Olympic Committees, sports schools, and universities. Furthermore, information made available by means of scientific contributions and presentations during national and international conferences targeting dual career experts could contribute to increase the awareness of scholars, teachers at high school and academic levels, sport managers, coaches and policy-makers on the parenting role in dual career of athletes.

Participants

Participation will be voluntary and based on a process of informed consent designed to lead to a thorough understanding of the EMPATIA project, with an opportunity to withdraw at any time without providing any reason. The Sport and University Organizations involved in the EMPATIA project will recruit parents of dual career talented and elite athletes. Parents will be identified through a fine stratification of sport typologies (e.g., individual, team, summer, winter) and competitive levels (e.g., National, International), as well as the athletes' age (<14 years) and academic levels (e.g., high school and university). Furthermore, elite coaches and European dual career experts will be involved in the validation phases of the project through a direct external feedback and evaluation to allow a further fine-tune of the project content and organisation.

Procedures

Evidence-based information will be gathered through a systematic literature review of scientific contributions on parents of athletes as students upon a consensus on the search strategy, inclusion criteria (research topics, and typology and research methodologies of the scientific contributions), a defined string for the literature search at the main electronic databases, and definition of categories for data extraction. To overcome the rigidity of the mechanistic search and to allow the identification of relevant papers not emerging during the electronic search, the use of a snowballing technique will be deemed crucial. Then, relevant factors for dual career parenting will be collected and analysed.

In considering crucial the provision of the parents' opinions, needs, challenges and perceptions, national focus groups will ensure powerful and authentic evidence and new insights on the relationships between relevant factors of dual career parenting support. To maximise the exploration of different perspectives, each focus group will include a limited number (10-20) of parents of diverse typologies of athletes engaged in a non-threatening supportive environment. Group interaction will be encouraged through a series of open-ended questions as the most appropriate method for gaining access to parents' thoughts and experiences, and for encouraging questions, exchanges of anecdotes and comments on each other's points of view (Krueger & Casey, 2015; Wilkinson, 1998). At the end of the focus groups, participants will be asked to establish in an

open-ended and non-judgmental fashion an exhaustive list of all potential relevant factors for a dual career parenting education. The information collected during the national workshops will be collated with that emerging from the systematic literature review to represent the basis for the concept mapping focus prompt after eliminating repetitions, rewording similar statements and condensing highly specific statements into broader ones. Finally, European dual career experts will evaluate the clarity of the final list of statements.

For the concept mapping, a standard operating procedure will be adopted according to the literature aimed to advise the elaboration of effective policies and interventions (Anderson, Day, & Vandenberg, 2011; Condello et al., 2016; Trochim 1989a, 1989b; Trochim and Kane, 2005; Trochim, Marcus, Mâsse, Moser & Weld, 2008). In particular, a large sample of dual career parents will be recruited to sort and rate the validated statements, allowing the identification of distinct clusters in a two-dimensional concept map, which creates a logic model to integrate practical with scientific knowledge.

To enhance the engagement of parents in the online concept mapping procedure, a pre-notification email providing information on the development of the dual career parenting framework will be provided. Furthermore, follow-up contacts will be planned to increase response rates. Respondents will be informed about the aim of the research and the procedures to access the dedicated online analysis platform. Respondents will be asked to individually rate the statements on a Likert-type scale from 1 (lowest value) to 5 (highest value) in relation to expected priority for education on dual career parenting support. Through a stepwise analysis a cohesive dual career parenting framework will be agreed and will provide the theoretical basis for the educational units of the dual career parenting education model.

For the implementation phase, the pedagogical model of dual career parenting will be grounded on the valuable information gathered during the preliminary phases of the project, which will provide a solid scientific background for adult learning in online environments. In general, adults prefer a self-directed, problem-solving and real-life approach in learning, with the educational process based on the quality of the learning process rather than on the assessment of learning outcomes (Huang, 2002). To ensure potential improvements and timely corrections on a constant basis, reflections will emphasize the organization and conduction of the learning process based on adults' experiences and the relevance of individual units. Furthermore, to enhance an active learning participation, discussions and collaboration with peers will be also envisaged. In fact, experienced parents can help inexperienced ones through collaborative learning. Finally, particular attention will be placed in the provision of information relative to dual career in Europe and in other countries where athletic migration is relevant.

Online learning allows learners to engage in cost-effective learning through synchronous and/or asynchronous communication, Web-based instruction, Web search, online resources and technical support place- and time-independent. Most recently, smart phones provide access to mobile learning and knowledge resources anytime and anywhere, as well as facilitate human interactions. Research has shown that mobile learning enhances learners' satisfaction, autonomy, system functions, interaction and communication (Liaw, Hatala & Huang, 2009). To pursue its educational objective, the EMPATIA project will deliver a dual career parenting education programme with a wide range of opportunities through a website and a simultaneous multilingual (e.g., English, French, Italian, Portuguese and Slovenian) delivery of the educational materials with courses customized to the different learning goals. International academic institutions and

sports organizations could profit from this educational programme formulated at European level to fully support the development of dual career parenting competences worldwide. In particular, National Federations for across Europe could make use of the website educational resource or start pilot programmes for parents.

The dissemination phase of the project will profit from the high experience and well-established networks established by the EMPATIA Partners at the local, regional, national and international academic and sports levels. In particular, the outcomes of the EMPATIA project will be generalized at different sport contexts, with the final aim to establish positive circular policies and services on dual career parenting to be embraced by sport-specific organizations and public/private sports clubs. This aspect is deemed particularly important and in line with the recommendations of the recent European “Study on the minimum quality requirements for dual career services” (Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences et al., 2016).

Furthermore, the European Athlete as Student (EAS) Network will provide a think-tank in dual career and establish positive collaboration and exchange knowledge with sport and academic institutions interested in dual career, offering an added valuable link between the sport and academic communities, and policy makers (Capranica et al., 2015). Thus, the outcomes of the EMPATIA project will be presented during national workshops, dual career conferences and university sports events (e.g., EUSA Games, Universiade), with the aims to raise the awareness of other dual career stakeholders (e.g., scholars, coaches and sport managers) and European policy makers on the needs and difficulties families face in supporting athletes as students to be translated into effective interventions and policies for the implementation of the EU Guidelines on Dual Career of Athletes (European Commission, 2012).

Discussion

The EMPATIA project is a serious attempt to structure an educational programme based on the actual needs of parents in support of athlete as students. In considering that athletes of different ages (e.g., youth, adult), sex and competition level (e.g., youth elite, elite, and sub-elite) involved in different sports (e.g., individual, team, summer, winter) and academic levels (e.g., high school, university) might need different parental support, EMPATIA will involve a composite target group of parents who have the potential to highlight the different needs of parental support at different stages of dual career paths (Wylleman & Reints, 2010) and in relation to the different educational and sport systems in place in their Countries (Aquilina & Henry, 2010; Capranica & Guidotti, 2016). Thus, this project has the opportunity to contribute to the wide exploitation of the dual career parenting education within and beyond Europe. Furthermore, the sport-related mission of the EMPATIA Partners and a well-established cooperation ensures the vital stability to this project in terms of communication and shared responsibility.

With its multi-disciplinary and transnational character, the EMPATIA project is overall innovative in creating a collective forum for the European sports organizations and agencies to generate possibilities for a better implementation of dual career by strengthening the family supportive network of the athletes through a European dual career parenting education programme. A relevant innovative aspect of the project is related to its search for a thorough understanding of dual career parenting. In having a transnational character and in focusing on skills development of parents of athletes, this project is unique and innovative because it targets a large and heterogeneous population of European citizens involved as front-line stakeholders in dual career

willing to increase their skills in support of athletes as students. By promoting their education in and through sport, this project could provide excellent opportunities for the implementation of the EU Dual Careers of Athletes (European Commission, 2012) and contributes to the European mandate for lifelong learning in a knowledge society. Actually, the EMPATIA project will present also innovative aspects in relation to its methodological approach, which moves from an empathic awareness of real problems families face in sustaining athletes progressing their dual career paths. First, the collaborative efforts of European experts from the academic and sport will realize an elective meta-network that will engage the target population of parents to generate an integrated vision of major dual career parenting challenges, needs and possibilities to anticipate, cope and resolve possible conflicts athletes might encounter in sport, education and society. Thus, the combined experience of European scholars, sportsmen and sportswomen and parents of athletes will be capitalized to identify potential factors of dual career and to rate these factors in terms of their importance to parents and athletes, and their priority for education. These analyses of parents' opinions, needs and challenges in support of dual career will be central to identify an evidence-based framework of dual career parenting. This innovative demand-driven approach will be indicative of the current understanding of dual career parenting education and also provide significant guidance and linkage to the creation, development and implementation of an effective dual career parenting education programme. This represents an important condition for subsequent translation of research findings into educational outcomes to increase the collaboration between stakeholders for a future European dual career agenda. Second, the project is innovative because it considers the demands of distance learning to educate European parents. Furthermore, in line with the mandate of the European 2020 "think global, act local", the multi-lingual EMPATIA Platform will guarantee not only a common core educational content, but also specific information made available to guarantee country-related heterogeneous approaches of dual career. Third, the dual career educational resource will be based on a dynamic animation of the EMPATIA Platform and other web 2.0 tools and social media channels such as Facebook and Twitter. These medium- and long-term tools for dual career parenting education are vital in considering the participating Countries as a pilot community of European parents. Thus, this dual career parenting education will have the potential to be fully exploited at local, national and international academic and sports levels within and beyond Europe.

The EMPATIA project will provide also innovative scientific outcomes, from the identification and systematized analyses of the existing scientific literature to the establishment of a conceptual framework on dual career parenting, and to the generation of an innovative pedagogical approach. These intellectual outputs will implement the existing knowledge on crucial aspects of dual career, contribute to the general awareness of the crucial role of parents as relevant stakeholders, and present a potential generalizability of the dual career education model in and beyond Europe. Finally, the EMPATIA Platform will be available beyond the project time and could be a precursor for future dual career education programmes for other stakeholders having strict and constant relationships with the athletes as students, such as coaches, teachers and sports managers. It is possible to envisage that parents educated on dual career could become proactive mediators between sport and academic bodies. Thus, these specialized human resources could also promote future needs of novel professional figures in dual career counselling, in line with the European mandate "New Skills, New Jobs" (European Commission, 2008).

The EMPATIA project aims to promote and implement dual career, especially in principles of integrity, good governance and voluntary activities in sport, in agreement with the EU White

Paper on Sport (European Commission, 2007), the EU Guidelines of Dual Career of Athletes (European Commission, 2012), the EU Parliament Resolution on an Integrated Approach to Sport Policy: Good Governance, Accessibility and Integrity (European Parliament, 2017), the recommendations of the European Study on the Minimum Quality Requirements for Dual Career Services (Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences et al., 2016), the recommendations of the Expert Group on Education and Training in Sport (2013) and the Social Investment Package adopted by the European Commission in 2013 (European Commission, 2013).

Despite the engagement of the European Commission in research and dialogue with a range of stakeholders in dual career, the EMPATIA project represents the first approach to involve parents as crucial actors of the European sport sector, being the legal representatives of their young talented athletes and having primary responsibilities in supporting the holistic development of talented and elite athletes as future European citizens and employees. In supporting educated parents in making confident and informed choices based on the best interests of their daughters and sons, the European Commission will fill the existing gap in guiding European stakeholders in dual career, and will take a pro-active approach to promote awareness of parenting issues, to empower their participation and foster their involvement in decision-making about changes to policies, practices and provisions, essential for a successful implementation of dual careers in sports.

The EMPATIA project also meets the demands for evidence-base information, training and support programmes for European families, for a participatory and strengths-based orientation, and for global accessibility (Eurochild, 2012). Furthermore, the outcomes of this project have the potential to contribute to acquire a global dimension of European sports, in line with the quest of the European Parliament on education, skills development and training of volunteers in sport, and recognition of their work in promoting the growth of sports practice and culture (European Parliament, 2017).

Due to the high variety of national policies in dual career (Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences et al., 2016; Aquilina & Henry, 2010; Capranica & Guidotti, 2016) and to a lack of systematic approaches to parental support, the European vision of the EMPATIA project resulting from different national angles anticipates, subsumes and complements potential outcomes of national approaches in support of athletes as students. Furthermore, European investments in innovative online educational programmes for parents are vital nowadays, especially in considering the substantial backdrop of public spending cuts in education in several Member States since 2010 that could impair the future of long-term sustainable cultural growth of European citizens (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2013). In particular, this project will contribute to the lifelong learning of a high number of European parents supporting the dual paths of athletes as students, thus preventing the potential loss of talents (Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences et al., 2016).

The online education platform of the EMPATIA project could be considered a specific and structural measure for the ongoing implementation of dual career parenting in and beyond Europe. Furthermore, it reinforces the European mandate to employ innovative technologies and open resources for teaching and learning (European Council & European Commission, 2015). This platform on dual career parenting will present parents a valuable opportunity to learn from educational units and to co-create contents in different languages of the Members States, making

the tool relevant and concrete. In envisaging a progressive universalism, the EMPATIA platform will be tested during workshops organized at local and international level.

The emphasis on European dual career educational objectives of the project will greatly contribute in making parents aware of dual career challenges, services and regulations in Europe, thus empowering their skills and reinforcing their active European citizenship in sports. This issue is particularly relevant due to the increasing international mobility of athletes (Capranica & Guidotti 2016), which requires parents to be acquainted with different dual career systems in European Member States to deliver their daughters and sons the best advices. In this framework, the EMPATIA project could guide and help parents in advising the sport and academic career decisions of European athletes to safeguard their development and future transition in the globalized labour market, thus positioning itself at the forefront of the educational role of sport in the globalized world.

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