

## Dual career in European-funded projects: a critical analysis and review

Dupla carreira em projetos europeus com financiamento atribuído: uma revisão e análise crítica

Carrera dual en proyectos financiados europeos: un análisis y revisión crítica

Flavia Guidotti<sup>a,b\*</sup> , Daniele Conte<sup>b</sup> , Lucia Bertocchi<sup>b</sup>, Mojca Doupona<sup>c,d</sup> , Laura Capranica<sup>b,d</sup> 

### Keywords:

Dual career  
collaborative  
partnerships;  
Erasmus+;  
Dual career  
dimensions;  
Elite sportspersons.

### ABSTRACT

This study aimed to review the projects financed between 2014 and 2022 under the ERASMUS+ programme of the European Commission to examine the past and present implementation of the dual career (DC) of elite sportspersons and to highlight potential gaps to guide future project proposals. Findings showed a relevant focus of the financed projects on the micro and multi-dimensional aspects of DC of athletes as the main target group, implementing training courses/programmes in different settings, and partnerships mostly composed by educational institutions and NGOs. In the future, sports bodies should engage more in partnerships, whereas DC of employee-sportspersons as athletes and sports staff should be implemented, with a strong focus on the project's long-term impact and sustainability.

### Palavras-chave:

Parcerias  
colaborativas de  
dupla carreira;  
Erasmus+;  
Dimensões de dupla  
carreira;  
Atletas de elite.

### RESUMO

Este estudo teve como objetivo rever os projetos financiados entre 2014 e 2022 no âmbito do programa ERASMUS+ da Comissão Europeia de forma a melhor perceber a implementação dos mesmos no âmbito da dupla carreira (DC) de atletas de elite e destacar eventuais lacunas para orientar futuras propostas de projetos. Os resultados encontrados apontam para uma maior predominância dos aspectos micro e multidimensionais da DC, sendo os atletas o principal grupo-alvo, propondo-se a implementação de cursos/programas de formação em diferentes contextos, assim como parcerias maioritariamente compostas por instituições de ensino e ONG's. Surge ainda recorrentemente a nota de, no futuro, os organismos desportivos se envolverem mais em parcerias, e a extensão da DC a outros agentes como os treinadores e árbitros, assim como o alargamento ao enquadramento dado pelo mocal de trabalho (mercado de trabalho), sempre com a tónica colocada no impacto e na sustentabilidade do projeto a longo prazo.

### Palabras-clave:

Asociaciones  
colaborativas de la  
carrera dual;  
Erasmus+;  
Dimensiones de la  
carrera dual;  
Deportistas de élite.

### RESUMEN

Este estudio tuvo como objetivo revisar los proyectos financiados entre los años 2014 y 2022 dentro el programa ERASMUS+ de la Comisión Europea, para analizar el presente y el pasado de la implementación de la carrera dual (DC) de deportistas de élite, resaltando posibles errores que permitan guiar futuras propuestas de proyectos. Los resultados mostraron un importante foco de los proyectos en aspectos micro y multidimensionales de la CD de los atletas como principal punto a destacar, implementando cursos/programas de entrenamiento en diferentes entornos y colaboraciones compuestas principalmente por instituciones educativas y ONGs. En el futuro, los organismos deportivos deberían participar más con asociaciones, así como que se debería implementar la DC de los empleados-deportistas como atletas y como personal deportivo, con un fuerte enfoque en el impacto y la sostenibilidad del proyecto a largo plazo.

<sup>a</sup>San Raffaele Roma Open University, Department of Human Sciences and Promotion of the Quality of Life. Rome, Italy.

<sup>b</sup>University of Rome "Foro Italico", Department of Movement, Human and Health Sciences. Rome, Italy.

<sup>c</sup>University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Sport, Department of Sport Sociology. Ljubljana, Slovenia.

<sup>d</sup>European Athlete as Student Network. Ghaxaq, Malta.

### \*Corresponding author:

Flavia Guidotti  
E-mail: [guidotti.flavia@gmail.com](mailto:guidotti.flavia@gmail.com)

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## INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, the establishment and development of dual career paths (i.e., the combination of elite sport and academic/vocational education and/or employment) for elite sportspersons at the European level characterized as a long journey. “Since the early interest in 2003/2004 of the European Parliament and the European Commission in defining and addressing athletes’ needs in combining elite sport and educational demands (PMP, 2004; European Parliament, 2003), the “dual career” term as been legitimately introduced in the European sports-policy framework (European Commission, 2007; European Union, 2011). In particular, the formal recognition of elite sportsperson’s need for dual career support substantiated prospective efforts in implementing policy actions and in creating funding priorities.” In parallel, dual career officially entered the mainstream research context from several academic perspectives and addressed different dual career dimensions at the micro (i.e., individual, including athletes and coaches), meso (i.e., interpersonal level, including parents, peers, coaches, teachers/professors, tutors/mentors, other relevant support figures), macro-environmental (i.e., schools, universities, sport clubs, sport); and global (i.e., organizational and Governmental levels) levels (Capranica and Guidotti, 2016; Guidotti et al., 2015).

In considering that dual career paths were recognized in a limited number of European contexts and presenting a variety of approaches (Aquilina and Henry, 2010), the continuous effort of the European Union to ensure the protection of elite sportspersons’ rights of sustainable sport and academic/vocational/employment careers was crucial to foster the growth of a European dual career culture at local, national, and international levels (EU Expert Group, 2012; European Union, 2014, 2017, 2020). In fact, the publication of the EU Guidelines on Dual Careers of Athletes (EU Expert Group, 2012) represents a milestone towards the implementation of dual career paths within the different European national contexts and a driver of scholar’s interest in this field for the full establishment of this research area. Furthermore, the study of Capranica and Guidotti (2016) provided a dual career meta-model, which displays the intertwined relationship between the different dual career stakeholders at the micro, meso, macro, and global levels, and the need for cooperation to promote and sustain the necessary support services for the elite sportspersons.

The seminal study of Guidotti et al. (2015) paved the way for comprehensive overviews on the state of the art of dual career as an independent research area, and the main characteristics of dual career projects co-financed by the European Commission in this field, respectively. According to the literature (Edmondson and Mcmanus, 2007), this first systematic review highlighted that in 2015 dual career was entering its intermediate stage as an academic discipline (Guidotti et al., 2015), presenting

a variety of methodological approaches and emerging themes coherent with its multidisciplinary nature. Furthermore, this study highlighted the prevalence of research studies focused on the micro dimension of a dual career in relation to the educational paths of athletes and the need for support to resolve the major dual career obstacles to their holistic development, and on the macro dimension concerning the evaluation of dual career programmes and policy/organizational frameworks, which highlighted the necessary of future research addressing further dual career aspects (Guidotti et al., 2015). Then, another early investigation pertained to the synthesis of the 19 international dual career projects co-financed by the European Commission through different funding programmes (i.e., Calls for proposals, Calls for Tenders, Lifelong Learning Programme) with an overall >6 million euros investment (Capranica and Guidotti, 2016), which highlighted the need of future cooperative efforts in several dual career dimensions.

From a research perspective, the scholar’s interest in deepening the understanding of the dual career phenomenon experienced exponential growth after 2015, with a relevant number of original studies and several literature reviews published in this area, which contributed to fostering the academic debate and a European dual career discourse. Of particular interest, two reviews have been performed to update the state of the art of European dual career, the first focused on the relevant role of the psychological research perspective in the dual career area (Stambulova and Wylleman, 2019), and the second related to bibliometric analysis of the main themes and the co-authorship networks (Vidal-Vilaplana et al., 2022). Whilst the safeguard of the mental health and psychological support of elite athletes have represented a priority theme since the early stages of dual career research (Kegelaers et al., 2022; Stambulova and Wylleman, 2019), over the past decade scholars focused on a variety of topics and target groups, encompassing barriers, resources, and success factors for the dual career of athletes (Costa et al., 2020), academic and athletic identities of student-athletes in dual careers (Steele et al., 2020), the quality of athletes’ dual career experiences (Li and Sum, 2017), and determinants for smooth career transition out of the sport (Knights et al., 2016). Also, the dual career of talented youth elite athletes has been extensively investigated, targeting support services/systems for the successful combination of sport and education (Hong et al., 2022; Maciel et al., 2022), the impact of sport schools on the holistic development of young athletes (Thompson et al., 2022), and the roles and views of the support staff of the student-athletes (López-Flores et al., 2021). In this framework, the role played by peers and important relatives such as parents was highlighted as crucial in supporting dual career paths (Tessitore et al., 2021). Finally, in a globalized society the role of migration (Palumbo et al., 2021) and of media (Poteko et al., 2021) have been considered potential tools to further promote the dual career of European athletes.

Overall, a consistent body of literature has focused on the micro, meso, and macro levels of European dual careers, highlighting the need to further investigate the central role of different support providers (i.e., relational, athletic, educational, logistical, psychological, managerial, vocational) in facilitating dual career paths of elite sportspersons.

The establishment of the ERASMUS+ programme in 2014 and the relevant increase in its overall budget (€11,235,479.19) allocated between 2014 and 2020 to 66 collaborative partnerships surely represents a fundamental driver to nurture transnational initiatives and cooperation between a variety of stakeholders in the field of European dual career, to stimulate the academic dialogue, and to foster the transfer of the theoretical knowledge into concrete actions (Vidal-Vilaplana et al., 2022). It envisages a wide cooperation between organizations seated in countries from different geographical areas (e.g., northern, southern, eastern, and western areas), aims (e.g., educational institutions, sports bodies, non-governmental organizations), size (e.g., small, medium, big), and experience (partners in many, few or no previous European projects). In this framework, the role of the European Athlete as a Student network has been acknowledged as an active promoter of several projects and initiatives toward the creation of solid links between sports, educational, and employment institutions for the benefit of the dual career elite sportspersons (Stambulova and Wylleman, 2019; Capranica et al., 2021). Conversely, the study of López-Flores et al. (2021) highlighted that most of the projects were focused on adult and/or former elite athletes, with only a limited number of projects targeting the talented youth population. Despite the major interests of scholars and stakeholders focused on the student-athletes, dual career represents a challenge that concerns also the labour market sectors when athletes are employed during their athletic career (European Commission, 2021; EU Expert Group, 2012). Furthermore, in 2020, the European Commission called for additional measures to support dual career paths and to strengthen the employability of sportspersons (e.g., athletes/coaches/sports managers) (European Commission, 2020). Thus, the definition of dual career paths as solely applicable to student-athletes is limited in its scope and potential impact. In recognizing sportspersons' difficulties in managing concomitant athletic efforts and education or working commitments, quality education, training, and life-long learning should be guaranteed to nurture the appropriate development of the necessary skills and competences to meet the future and/or current challenges of the labour market. Furthermore, European sports statistics (Eurostat, 2021) reported that only 40% of people employed in sport presents a higher education level, which calls for the promotion of lifelong learning education and sustainable dual career paths for sportspersons, and the implementation of policies and practices to facilitate the transition and/or combination of sport and employment. In this framework, the implementation of educational pathways to increase the

number of qualified sportspersons has become one of the priorities to foster sustainable development of sport in Europe (European Commission, 2021; EU Expert Group, 2012; European Commission, 2020).

In considering the multifaced, multidimensional, multisectoral, and dynamic nature of dual career environments and the role of European funds in implementing concrete initiatives and actions, a lack of comprehensive, systematic, and updated information on the state of art of European co-financed projects in this field has to be disclosed. In the context of European dual careers striving to meet the challenges of providing adequate academic, vocational, and employability opportunities to elite sportspersons, there is a need to fill in this knowledge gap to guide future project ideas and proposals. Therefore, the present study aimed to systematically explore the main characteristics, project trajectories, major themes and trends, and long-term sustainability of international projects co-financed by the European Commission since the establishment of the Erasmus+ programme. In particular, relevant, updated, and comprehensive information could provide a clear picture of main thematic areas, target groups, and outcomes related to the implementation of the projects, highlight potential gaps and/or critical areas needing to be addressed in future project proposals, and offer suggestions to policymakers for future implementation of both the dual career of elite sportspersons and funding key priorities.

## METHODS

### SEARCHING STRATEGY AND INCLUSION CRITERIA

The search for the dual career projects was performed on the official web platform of the Erasmus+ EU programme for education, training, youth, and sport (European Commission, 2023b), in which the information about the projects financed until the year 2020 and already concluded were retrieved. The keyword "Dual Career" was adopted for the search and only Collaborative Partnership projects from the Key Action "Sport" were selected. For projects more recently financed (i.e., until 2022) and still ongoing, the projects' details were provided by the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA) Sport Office. Overall, only projects specifically focusing on the dual career of sportspersons and about the educational, vocational, and employability dimensions were considered. The project's screening phase was separately performed by two investigators, reading each project's title and summary to assess its eligibility based on the set inclusion criteria, and in case of disagreement, a third investigator's opinion was sought.

### DATA EXTRACTION

The following general information was retrieved from each included project: the allocated budget, funding year, project status (ongoing or completed), the target groups

of the project (i.e., athletes, sport staff, educational or sport institutions, etc.), and the addressed dual career dimension (i.e., micro, individual; meso, interpersonal; macro, environmental; and global, organizational and Governmental). Additionally, projects' information about the main outcomes (i.e., educational platforms and/or tools and/or programmes, guidelines, handbook, etc.) and contents (i.e., a project focusing on support services for a dual career; projects focusing on curriculum/programme/training design/implementation and guidelines implementation) were also collected. Furthermore, each completed project's official webpage on the Erasmus+ platform was also screened concerning the availability of main results, and the status of each project's official website was also evaluated (i.e., still in use; dismissed). Finally, for each project, details were collected about the participating partners, the countries of the legal seat of the coordinator and that of the participating partners, and the type of the partner's organization classified as: 1) education, 2) non-governmental organization (NGO), 3) sport, and 4) other.

## STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

Mean and standard deviation (SD) were calculated for the dependent variable project budget expressed in euro, whereas for all the remaining dependent variables the frequency of occurrences expressed as count (n) and in percentage (%) were computed.

Chi-square goodness of fit tests were applied to verify any differences in the distribution of: 1) the number of projects per year; 2) addressed dual career dimensions (i.e., micro, meso, macro, global, multi-dimension); 3) target groups (single and multiple); 4) project contents (support service for DC, curriculum/program/training design/implementation, and guidelines); 5) type of organization participating (education, NGO, sport, other).  $\phi$  effect size was also calculated and interpreted according to Cohen's benchmarks considering 0.1, 0.3, and 0.5 as small, medium, and large effect sizes, respectively (Cohen, 1988). Statistical analyses were performed using Microsoft Excel (Microsoft Excel version 2305; Microsoft Corporation, Redmond, WA) and the level of significance was set at  $p \leq 0.05$ . A co-occurrence

analysis was also performed to graphically represent the connections between countries participating in the investigated projects using the Gephi data visualization software (version 0.10.1 for Windows).

## RESULTS

Seventy-three financed projects were identified from 2014 to 2022, for a total investment of 24,025,906 euros, with an average of  $329,122 \pm 107,599$  euros per project. From the total amount of screened projects, 14 are ongoing, while 59 have been completed. The highest frequency of occurrence of financed dual career projects was registered in 2020 ( $n=15$ ; 20.5%), while the lowest frequency of occurrence was found in 2014 ( $n=2$ ; 2.7%) (Table 1).

The analysis of addressed dual career dimensions (i.e., micro, meso, macro, global, multilevel) showed the highest frequency of occurrence for micro and multi-dimensional projects ( $n=26$ ; 35.6% each), followed by the meso (16%) and macro (12%) dimensions. Inferential statistics indicated a difference ( $p=0.003$ ) in the distribution of the projects' dual career dimensions ( $p=0.004$ ) with a medium effect size ( $\phi = 0.303$ ). In considering the 26 multi-dimensional projects, 25 focused on the micro, 18 on the meso, 10 on the macro, and two on the global dimensions.

For the target groups, no information was available for one project, whereas for the other 72 projects, 39 (54.2%) entailed a single target group and 33 (45.8%) multiple target groups, showing no statistical difference in the target group distribution ( $p=0.480$ ). Among projects targeting different stakeholders, 47 (65.3%) involved athletes and 24 (33.3%) sport staff (coaches/trainers), respectively. Further details are shown in Table 2. The analysis of the project's main outcomes showed that only 72 projects showed the relevant information for the analysis while one project had missing information. The most represented outcome resulted in training courses/programme ( $n=44$ ; 61.1%) and guidelines/recommendations ( $n=19$ ; 26.4%) (Table 2). Additionally, a statistically significant difference ( $p < 0.001$ ;  $\phi = 0.358$  - medium) was found in the distributions of project contents with 18 (24.7%) projects focusing on support services for dual careers and 55 (75.3%) projects focusing on curriculum/programme/training design/implementation and guidelines.

**Table 1.** Frequency of occurrence expressed in counts (n) and percentage (%) of the dual career project by funding year.

Funding year	Count (n)	Percentage (%)
2014	2	2.7
2015	6	8.2
2016	3	4.1
2017	11	15.1
2018	11	15.1
2019	11	15.1
2020	15	20.5
2021	8	11.0
2022	6	8.2



Regarding the availability of published results of the 59 completed projects on the official Erasmus+ project page, this information was not available for 30 projects (51%). Furthermore, regarding the functionality of the official websites of completed projects, an active and dismissed status was found for 30 (68%) and 18 (31%) projects, respectively, whereas this information was not available for one project.

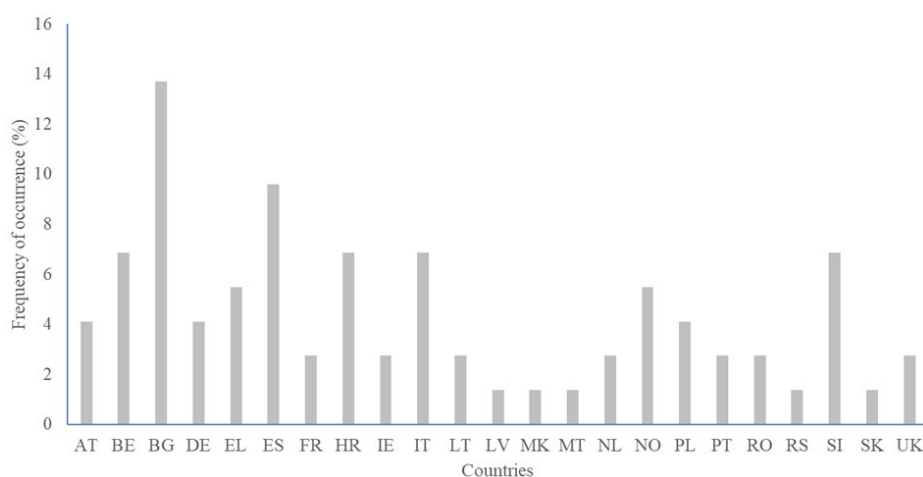
The frequency of occurrence of the project coordinating countries is displayed in Figure 1. Project coordinators were mainly located in Bulgaria (n=10, 13.7%) and Spain (n=7, 9.6%). Differently, when considering the frequency

of occurrence of the overall participating countries, Italy (n=58; 11.0%) and Spain (n=41; 7.8%) were the most represented countries in dual career projects (Figure 2). A graphical representation of the interaction between countries is shown in Figure 3.

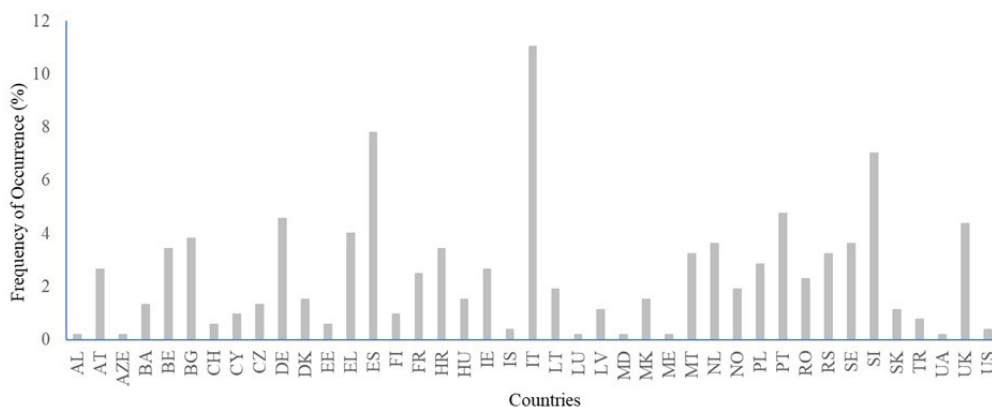
In considering the frequency of occurrence of the type of organizations involved in dual-career projects, a statistical difference was found ( $p < 0.001$ ) with a small effect size ( $\phi = 0.190$ ) (Figure 4). Descriptive statistics showed that educational organizations were the most represented in funded dual career projects (n= 173; 32.9%) followed by NGOs (n=145; 27.6%).

**Table 2.** Frequency of occurrence expressed in counts (n) and percentage (%) of the dual career project based on the investigated target groups and main outcomes.

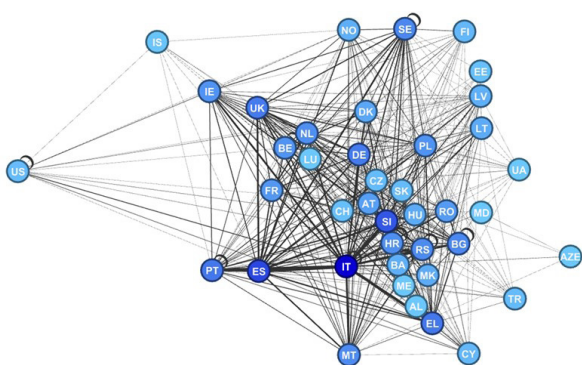
Project characteristics	Count (n)	Percentage (%)
<i>Target groups</i>		
Athletes	47	65.3
Companies/Employers	5	6.9
Education providers (schools/universities)	9	12.5
Service providers	8	11.1
Sport organizations (federation/clubs/associations)	9	12.5
Sport staff (Coaches/trainers)	24	33.3
Supporters (parents/agents/tutors/counsellors)	7	9.7
Teachers/professors/educators	6	8.3
Policies/best practices	1	1.4
<i>Main outcomes</i>		
Campaign	1	1.4
Career assistance programme/service	6	8.3
Database/monitoring tool/platform	6	8.3
Guidelines/recommendations	19	26.4
Handbook/manual	14	19.4
Toolkit	6	8.3
Training course/programme	44	61.1



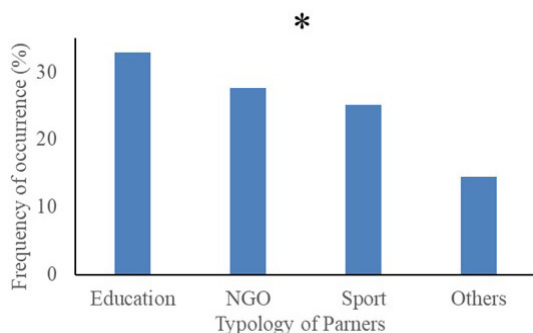
**Figure 1.** Percentage (%) of the frequency of occurrence of the coordinating countries of the analysed projects. Note: AT = Austria, BE = Belgium, BG = Bulgaria, DE = Germany, EL = Greece, ES = Spain, FR = France, HR = Croatia, IE = Ireland, IT = Italy, LT = Lithuania, LV = Latvia, MK = North Macedonia, MT = Malta, NL = Netherlands, NO = Norway, PL = Poland, PT = Portugal, RO = Romania, RS = Serbia, SI = Slovenia, SK = Slovakia, UK = United Kingdom.



**Figure 2.** Percentage (%) of the frequency of occurrence of the countries participating in the analysed projects. Note: AL = Albania, AT = Austria, AZE = Azerbaijan, BA = Bosnia and Herzegovina, BE = Belgium, BG = Bulgaria, CH = Switzerland, CY = Cyprus, CZ = Czech Republic, DE = Germany, DK = Denmark, EE = Estonia, EL = Greece, ES = Spain, FI = Finland, FR = France, HR = Croatia, HU = Hungary, IE = Ireland, IS = Iceland, IT = Italy, LT = Lithuania, LU = Luxembourg, LV = Latvia, MD = Moldavia, MK = North Macedonia, ME = Montenegro, MT = Malta, NL = Netherlands, NO = Norway, PL = Poland, PT = Portugal, RO = Romania, RS = Serbia, SE = Sweden, SI = Slovenia, SK = Slovakia, TR = Turkey, UA = Ukraine, UK = United Kingdom, US = United States of America.



**Figure 3.** Co-occurrence analysis of the countries participating in dual career projects. The lighter blue coloured nodes represent countries less involved, while darker blue coloured nodes indicate the countries participating the most. Note: AL = Albania, AT = Austria, AZE = Azerbaijan, BA = Bosnia and Herzegovina, BE = Belgium, BG = Bulgaria, CH = Switzerland, CY = Cyprus, CZ = Czech Republic, DE = Germany, DK = Denmark, EE = Estonia, EL = Greece, ES = Spain, FI = Finland, FR = France, HR = Croatia, HU = Hungary, IE = Ireland, IS = Iceland, IT = Italy, LT = Lithuania, LU = Luxembourg, LV = Latvia, MD = Moldavia, MK = North Macedonia, ME = Montenegro, MT = Malta, NL = Netherlands, NO = Norway, PL = Poland, PT = Portugal, RO = Romania, RS = Serbia, SE = Sweden, SI = Slovenia, SK = Slovakia, TR = Turkey, UA = Ukraine, UK = United Kingdom, US = United States of America.



**Figure 4.** Percentage (%) of the frequency of occurrence of the typologies of organizations involved in dual-career projects. Note: NGO = non-governmental organization; \*  $p \leq 0.05$ .

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The present work attempted to provide a comprehensive, systematic, and updated picture of relevant information regarding international projects in the field of the dual career of elite sportspersons co-financed under the Erasmus+ programme. The main findings showed a substantial interest of the European community in addressing dual career issues, with a relevant budget invested in this priority area and an increasing trend since 2020. Actually, the peak reached after 2019 might be also seen in the light of the recent Covid-19 pandemic, affecting student-athletes sports careers. In particular, the protection and support of elite sportspersons represent a key priority of the European Union, calling for adequate actions and appropriate support adjustments to facilitate the coping process in this critical timeframe in relation to regular sports practice and competition. In fact, social distancing and restriction of regular sport activities might have also represented an opportunity for dual-career elite sportspersons to focus on the educational/vocational paths, which should be adequately supported by dual career service providers and financial resources (Cartigny et al., 2022; Drole et al., 2023; Izzicupo et al., 2021).

Regarding the main findings in relation to the addressed dual career dimensions, the micro and multi-dimensional dimensions were confirmed as the most relevant (Capranica and Guidotti, 2016; Guidotti et al., 2015). Conversely, the meso and macro dimensions showed a lower representation, partially confirmed by the literature (Guidotti et al., 2015). In particular, dual career represents a multifaced, multidimensional, multisectoral, and dynamic phenomenon (Capranica and Guidotti, 2016), involving a variety of stakeholders to meet the needs of elite sportspersons striving to combine their athletic career with academic/vocational education and/or employment (Costa et al., 2020; EU Expert Group, 2012;

Hong et al., 2022; Kegelaers et al., 2022; Knights et al., 2016; Li and Sum, 2017; López-Flores et al., 2021; Maciel et al., 2022; Palumbo et al., 2021; Stambulova and Wylleman, 2019; Tessitore et al., 2021; Thompson et al., 2022; Vidal-Vilaplana et al., 2022). Furthermore, the different institutional approaches towards dual career among Member States (Aquilina and Henry, 2010) makes the current international scenario even more complex. Thus, targeting a single dual career dimension in both project's activities and/or research might result limited in scope as an approach for the enhancement of European dual careers (European Commission, 2021; European Commission, 2022b; European Union, 2016). Conversely, a cross-national, multi-stakeholder approach should be envisioned to provide relevant evidence on the feasibility of dual career interventions within different settings and to facilitate the dissemination of best practices. Actually, the results of the present study confirmed the lack of projects adequately addressing the meso dimension of dual career, calling for potential future research and investment in this area (Guidotti et al., 2015).

Regarding the main target groups of financed projects, athletes continue representing the most relevant population whose dual career support should be ensured. However, the relevant representation of sports staff highlights dual career adjustments for a wider population of elite sportspersons is in progress (ERASMUS+ Sport Cluster Meeting on "The role of sport in education, 2021). In this respect, the need to provide coaches and sports managers adequate opportunities to ameliorate their knowledge level and better professional skills has been pointed out within the European policy actions in the field of sport towards higher rates of qualified sports professionals (Eurostat, 2021). Several projects implemented competencies and skills in relation to both dual career and future employability for their target groups, substantiating the relevance of providing dual career sportspersons with adequate tools to cope with the challenges of their actual and prospective career (European Commission, 2021; European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training, 2015; European Commission, 2020, 2023a). Coherently, most of the projects were focused on the implementation of training courses and/or programmes (especially in the form of digital and remote education) and the provision of recommendations and guidelines to export projects' activities and outcomes within different settings (European Commission, 2022b). One special mention should be made for entrepreneurship skills, which were included in several projects.

In analysing the findings related to the representation of countries, it is important to consider that applications are evaluated based on the variety of cooperation between organizations from different geographical areas, aims, and past experiences in projects. Furthermore, the size of countries and their dual career culture and policies, as well as memberships in networks might influence the number of potential applicants.

Finally, dual career research and activities characterize some groups that established a solid cooperation over time. The representation of countries as applicants and partners in the included projects shows a leading role for Italy, Slovenia, and Spain, substantiating the major interest of these Member States in advancing their national dual career paths. Interestingly, Bulgaria was highly represented as an applicant, suggesting the specific focus of several organizations in playing a relevant role within the European Community. Actually, this finding should be also seen in the light of national-specific policies and concrete investments in dual careers (Aquilina and Henry, 2010; European Union, 2016). In fact, a higher representation of countries more relying on European funds for the promotion of dual careers at the national level might be expected. The case of Spain represents a unique example of the presence of a State-based dual career programme (CAR) and a parallel major involvement in dual career projects and research. Conversely, other countries with well-established dual career assistance programmes and allocated budgets for dual career schemes (such as France, with the INSEP; United Kingdom, with the TASS; Germany, with the SPORTSHILFE; and Austria with KADA), elite sports programmes (De Bosscher et al., 2015, 2019), and international sports achievements (World Ranking of Countries in Elite Sport, 2022) showed a limited representation, suggesting the lower need of these countries to apply for European funds in this field. Another aspect potentially explaining the high representation of several countries and their intertwined relationships within the included projects might be their activity within dual career networks, such as the EAS (Capranica et al., 2021). This platform of exchange between relevant dual career stakeholders might facilitate not only the establishment of solid links between organizations but also help potential partners to join projects' proposals. Therefore, the establishment and strengthening of links between organizations of different nature and typology should be considered a critical aspect for future potential applicants and partners to European projects on dual careers (European Commission, 2022b). In fact, the Erasmus+ programme (European Commission, 2022a) encourages the "creation of long-term partnerships for establishing or reinforcing international, national, regional and sectoral skills competitions. The impact of these activities can be optimised by working closely together with businesses, VET providers, chambers of commerce, and other relevant stakeholders along the different phases of the project cycle" (European Commission, 2022a).

Results related to the main outcomes of the included projects substantiate the need for flexible, digital educational resources and the implementation of relevant recommendations and guidelines in the field of dual career (European Commission, 2022b). According to the Erasmus+ programme, eligible projects should display a strong emphasis on a long-term sustainable perspective, providing adequate plans for scalability and financial sustainability after the project has finished. In fact, the

Erasmus+ programme encourages top-quality education, research and innovation, and digital education, calling for strategic project activities leading to significant results and outcomes to promote a greater project impact and support long-term changes in the target population beyond the project's life (European Commission, 2022a). Actually, the findings of the present work showed a lack of available results in the Erasmus+ platform for several projects and a dismissed status of official projects' websites. Furthermore, to the knowledge of the authors, several projects led to the publication of scientific manuscripts presenting research carried out to implement project-related activities. However, this information was not available for a relevant number of projects. This aspect should be taken into consideration for future project applications. In particular, the implementation project's webpages in the Erasmus+ platform, reporting all the relevant documents and useful materials should be envisaged to ensure the transparency and replicability of the performed activities and to promote the dissemination of the main outcomes. Furthermore, a stronger link between projects' outcomes and related published research should be encouraged to enhance the overall projects' quality, sustainability, and impact on the international community.

Despite the European Dual Career Guidelines support the cooperation between the sport and labour market sectors, the present analysis highlighted a paucity of projects addressing the employee-sportspersons, who suffer the lack of dual career support arrangements (i.e., flexible working schedules, athletic leave for preparing or take part in competitions, training facilities at the workplace) for effectively combining work-sport commitments and prevent drop out of sport or employment. Thus, dual career should not only envisage possible solutions for facilitating the transition of the sportspersons to the labour market at the end of their sport career, but also support the employee-sportspersons through full recognition of their dual career status, the development of agreements safeguarding their right to pursue their sport commitments, and for envisaging improvements of their working conditions. Another gap that needs to be addressed in the future is the dual career of the coaches, physical trainers, and referees, in line with the policy recommendations of the European Union (European Union, 2020), which expanded the dual career to these important actors in recognition to the crucial role they play in sports.

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## CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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