



MOTIVATION, CHALLENGES AND SUPPORT FOR DUAL CAREERS OF ELITE STUDENT ATHLETES OF STATE UNIVERSITIES IN SRI LANKA.

Thisuri R. Ekanayake¹, Akhila I. Nilaweera², Jayampathy K. Dissanayake³

Affiliations:

- ¹. Faculty of Arts, University of Colombo, Colombo, Sri Lanka, 2016ba21062@stu.cmb.ac.lk
- ². Faculty of Medicine, University of Colombo, Colombo, Sri Lanka medmbbs140509 @stu.cmb.ac.lk)
- ³. Department of Anatomy, Faculty of Medicine, University of Peradeniya, Peradeniya, Sri Lanka (jayamkd@yahoo.com)

ABSTRACT

Although few students may achieve an elite status in sports while pursuing academic qualifications, dual careers have many positive impacts including recognition to the country and the creation of better professionals. Understanding the strengths, challenges, weaknesses and opportunities in the existing system is essential in planning and implementing successful career transition programs. In the present study, undergraduate athletes categorized as elites on the basis of performance and competition participation, were interviewed on their motivation, and perception of factors associated with dual careers. 12 who expressed consent were selected from the University of Colombo and University of Peradeniya. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was used as the approach to analyze the results obtained through semi-structured guided interviews on an online platform. Extrinsic and Intrinsic motivation were studied using Deductive Thematic Analysis based on Self-Determination Theory. The participants indicated a high level of motivation for a dual career during the undergraduate period, and several wished to continue their elite athletic career with an occupation based on their graduate qualifications. Many perceived that a dual career improved personal and professional development, but indicated difficulty in balancing their activities in the absence of sufficient support systems. Inflexible academic programs, lack of academic staff cooperation, financial constraints, social norms, disparity between sports, insufficient opportunities and lack of research based implementation were seen as major challenges. An absence of programs supporting dual careers has been a major obstacle for the student athletes of state universities of Sri Lanka, and future strategies require enhancing the strengths identified, while mitigating perceived challenges.

Keywords: Dual career, Career transition, Motivation

1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of dual careers has been gaining increasing interest as it promotes elite level athletes engaging in work or education while maintaining a high level of athletic performance. The European Commission (2012) identified dual careers in sports as involving the process of successfully initiating, developing and completing a career as an elite athlete through one's life course, while engaging in other activities including education and/or work. Widely recognized benefits of dual careers include creating opportunities for individuals to reach their fullest potential, enabling smooth career transitions as well as providing a sense of safety for athletes (European Commission, 2012). Moreover, implementation of dual career programs may directly and indirectly influence the life styles, health and social well-being of individuals, societies and the elite athletes as well.

However, participants who engage in dual careers are exposed to a higher level of physical and mental exertion, which in turn can lead to difficulty in balancing the athletic, academic and social roles, cause burnout and stress as well as result in a tendency to prioritize one role over another (Miller and Kerr, 2002; Sorkkila et al., 2017; Davis et al., 2019; Subijana, et al., 2015). In the face of such challenges, studies have indicated that support systems enable athletes to successfully maximize the benefits of engaging in dual careers (Geranosova and Ronkainen, 2014; Davis et al., 2019).

Condello et al. (2019) suggested that Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States have created formal systems which facilitate athlete engagement in dual careers, while athletes of African and Asian nations rely on less formal structures. There appears to be a greater interest in the implementation of the dual career concept in Europe, indicated by extensive literature and the EU Guidelines on Dual Careers of Athletes (European Commission, 2012).

The situation in Sri Lanka differs in relation to the structures existing in many countries mentioned above as there does not appear to be a clear conceptualization of dual careers despite the existence of elite athletes who meet the dual career criteria. Subsequently, there exists a lack of sufficient support structures. Rathnayaka (2015) identified that the opportunities for dual careers in Sri Lanka were limited by underdeveloped mechanisms for providing academic and work related opportunities to high performing athletes beyond the secondary schooling level. Poor transmission of information with regard to such opportunities, a lack of expertise in creating strategies, financial constraints and weak stakeholder involvement were also identified as obstacles. The interrelationship between sport and work has been widely viewed in terms of the positive attributes developed through moderate physical activity towards work outcomes, as opposed promoting professional sporting careers (Wimalasiri and Jayathilake, 2016; Liyanarachchi and Amarawansa 2018). Opportunities for work related dual careers are commonly seen in sports activities sponsored by large corporations aimed at mercantile tournaments as well as opportunities within the armed forces and police (Rathnayaka, 2015).

Education related dual careers appear more prevalent within the state funded universities due to the relatively larger investments on sporting facilities and opportunities for organized competition. Promotion of dual careers in this setting is likely to yield fruitful results, despite the relatively smaller fraction of the public that gain access to state sponsored higher education institutions. Current academic discourse regarding sports in state funded universities focus primarily on the participation and motivation of students towards physical activities during the period of higher education (Silva and Nayomali, 2017; Sukirthana and Arulrajahb, 2018). It can be surmised that dual career conceptualization has therefore not been fully realized or formalized within this context. This study aims to fulfill the need of a preliminary investigation of the

existing structures that underpin the performance and opportunities for elite student athletes in state funded university programs of Sri Lanka.

1.1 General Objective

To describe the motivation and the perception of factors influencing dual careers of elite student athletes of state universities in Sri Lanka.

1.2 Specific Objectives

- (i) To describe the Motivation for sports, academic activities and a dual careers.
- (ii) Perception of factors that promote or hinder dual careers of elite student athletes in state universities in Sri Lanka.

2. METHODOLOGY

12 Student athletes were recruited for the study and were interviewed via an online platform. The transcripts were generated and analyzed by the researchers according to the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) technique. Ethical clearance was granted by the Ethics Review Committee of Faculty of Medicine, University of Peradeniya.

2.1 Participants

16 Student athletes were invited for this study on the following criteria: 1. Being an undergraduate at either the University of Colombo or University of Peradeniya. 2. Having represented the national team/national university team at an international competition.

They were identified based on the findings of a previous study conducted by the researchers on dual career motivation of undergraduate student athletes in Sri Lanka. 12 (75%) student athletes who granted informed consent were recruited for the study. The two universities were selected as they were considered the highest ranking universities¹ in the country, and admission into these institutions required a high academic standard at a national level competitive examination. All 12 participants were native Sri Lankans. Males and females were equally represented (6 and 6), and they were aged 22 years to 26 years with a mean age of 23.58 (SD 1.31).

Also, these student-athletes have participated in international competitions such as the World cups (1), World University Games/Championships (2), Asian Games/Championships (3), South Asian Games (4), and other competitions representing the national team (5) or national university team (6). Seven of them were engaged in individual sports whereas remaining five in team sports.

TABLE 1
PARTICIPANTS' UNIVERSITY, YEAR AND FIELD OF STUDYING

| Gender | UOC | UOP | 2 nd Year | 3 rd Year | 4 th Year | 5 th Year | Medicine | Management and Finance | Law | Arts |
|--------|-----|-----|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|----------|---------------------------|-----|------|
| Male | 5 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 4 | 0 | 1 |
| Female | 4 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 |
| Total | 9 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 2 | 1 | 3 | 5 | 2 | 2 |

Note. UOC – University of Colombo, UOP – University of Peradeniya

2.2 Data Collection

Data collection was done through semi structured interviews on previously decided topics; academic motivation, athletic motivation, dual career motivation, academic and sports inter- relationships, challenges for dual career and supporting structure for dual career. All

¹ The University of Colombo and University of Peradeniya are ranked as the top two universities of Sri Lanka according to the Webometrics Ranking of World Universities for 2020.

interviews were conducted by one of the researchers on an online platform. The duration of the interviews ranged from 20-30 minutes. Each researcher went through the recordings 3 times. Interviews conducted in English were transcribed directly, whereas interviews conducted in Sinhala, were transcribed in Sinhala and then translated to English resulting in 65 pages of interview transcripts.

2.3 Data analysis

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used in data analysis. IPA is a qualitative analysis method commonly used in psychology based studies (Shinebourne, P., 2011). Generally, a small sample is used to explore the in-depth experiences of participants, who are selected on the basis of their expertise in the given field.

The initial step of the analysis process consisted of reading the interview transcripts, adding notes and comments. Quotes expressing the motivation towards dual career engagement and associated factors were highlighted and codes were created. The codes were then categorized into clusters under themes. Clustered codes, along with the transcripts were cross checked by the researchers. Once all transcripts were analysed separately, they were compared and common themes were identified across all interviews.

A Deductive Thematic Analysis based on self-determination theory (SDT) was used to analyse the motivation towards dual career engagement and associated factors. SDT explains two arms in human motivation; extrinsic and intrinsic (Deci and Ryan, 2008). Developed themes were then broadly clustered into the components of SDT. Selected quotes and relevant themes are presented in results section.

3. RESULTS

The study identifies 4 major themes in relation to the motivation and perceptions of elite student athletes of state universities in Sri Lanka towards dual careers:

3.1 Motivation for sports, academic activities and a dual career

3.1.1 Intrinsic regulation

Most (83.3%) participants indicated experiencing joy, self-satisfaction and relief from stress with respect to their current participation and future goals within the academic and sporting arenas. Half of the interviewees expressed motivation toward either their academic discipline or sporting activity, while several showed some level of intrinsic motivation towards both careers. Three individuals clearly indicated motivation with respect to goals in both careers.

3.1.2 Integrated Regulation

Motivation relevant to self-awareness and identity formation was observed by some (41.6%) participants. A majority of those who expressed some level of integrated regulation indicated a long term habitual engagement in sports, incorporating an athletic identity into their sense of self. Very few participants conceptualized their identity in terms of a combined academic and athletic goal.

3.1.3 Identified Regulation

Conscious valuing and personal importance were present among many (66.6%) of the interviewees in academic activities, sports and dual career related motivation. They valued sports both for its inherent value and for its outcomes such as a positive impact on health, opportunities for social interaction as well as a sense of contribution towards the affiliated team. Valuing academic activities was linked with long term career goals. Only some interviewees attached value to the concept of attaining goals in both sporting and academic activities simultaneously.

3.1.4 Introjected Regulation

Interviewee's internal sense of reward and punishment was expressed in terms of their personal goals and ambitiousness towards a dual career. 58.33% participants held high, long term goals in sports including participation at national and international level competitions. The other 41.6% held moderate, medium to short term goals in sports such as excelling at the university level. Expected academic goals varied; a majority held moderate to high level goals, which ranged from short to long term. This included specialization in a field, post graduate education and aiming for a higher position during employment. Only two individuals held short term, low academic goals.

3.1.5 External Regulation

External factors influencing student athlete motivation was seen among 91.6% of the participants. External motivation can be identified either as direct personal impacts or indirect impacts in relation to others. The former includes social recognition, availability of opportunities in sports, academics and employment as well as convenience, while the latter includes factors such as prestige for the nation, a sense of obligation and expectations.

3.1.6 Non Regulation

Several participants (41.6%) indicated a-motivation for sports beyond the schooling or university period. The commonly cited cause was a shift in priorities as the individuals prepared to enter the workforce. Several of these student athletes (25%) did not indicate motivation towards a dual career in the future while others showed some inclination given a more conducive environment. Students of intensive academic courses² such as MBBS and LLB programs showed a greater level of non- regulation for dual career motivation beyond the university level. One participant indicated some level of a motivation towards academic activities in the long term. This can be considered as a unique case as the sport in question is well-established in the country and presents a high level of career opportunity for athletes.

TABLE 2
SUB THEMES AND SELECTED QUOTES BY PARTICIPANTS ON MOTIVATION TOWARDS DUAL CAREERS

| Sub theme | Quote |
|------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Intrinsic regulation | ‘So balancing both gives me that stability of mind and it’s obsessing like a stress relieving method as well.’ ‘From my childhood I always wanted to enter to a university and play my sport [...]’ |
| Extrinsic regulation | ‘Every organization is not just looking for people who have done well just in their academics. They want people who have excelled in both sports and academics [...]’ ‘[...] sir [coach] said there is no point in doing a sport if you don’t have an education.’ |
| Introjected regulation | ‘No, for now my only target is to get a first class or second upper so I don’t have anything beyond that.’ ‘Especially, I wanted to win a medal for my motherland since my childhood’ ‘[...] I want to do my best at university level. My academic goal is to do Masters [...]’ |
| Identified regulation | ‘Then I felt like my sport is not important to me if I don’t get an education.’ ‘[...] professionals going to those sorts of sports would also benefit the country’s national sports [...]’ |
| Integrated regulation | ‘I have done it [sports] since childhood.’ ‘[...] so sports have always been there for me to boost up my confidence and maintain it. So that’s an important part of me personally’ |
| Non- regulation | ‘[...] if you’re trying to go for a national arena competition it’s not just your practice, eating would come to play. Your rest has to be very optimal. So I don’t think that kind of a freedom I could gain with the career path that I’ve chosen.’ ‘I think students are more academics oriented. Because you get only very few students doing sports, especially in our faculty.’ |

3.2 Interrelationship between sports and academic activities

Participants identified an interrelationship between sporting activities and academic performance when considering both advantageous and disadvantageous outcomes of dual

² Such programs have a longer completion time, require greater number of hours of class participation and/or tend to have fewer students with extremely high academic performance on average.

careers. The major positive aspects included development of personal and professional skills and the emergence of balanced, empowered individuals. The major skills acquired included a greater sense of productivity, time management skills, ability to cope with stressful situations, formation of a strong and confident personality, and development of interpersonal skills. The chief negative outcome identified was the difficulty in adequately balancing two careers, which may lead to poor performance in both. Other concerns included the lack of time available for rest and leisure. However, most interviewees emphasized positive as opposed to negative outcomes, stating that adequate planning could minimize the disadvantages of a dual career during higher education.

TABLE 3.
SUB THEMES AND SELECTED QUOTES BY PARTICIPANTS ON THE INTERRELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SPORTS AND ACADEMIC ACTIVITIES

| Sub theme | Quote |
|---------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Advantages | ‘You’re really good at managing stresses [...]’ ‘[...] when we do a sport, we develop a lot of moral values such as the ability to make instant decisions, team spirit, discipline, mental strength. Then all of them help us in our academics too.’ ‘[...] if you only do studies I think most of the time since you have more time on your hands you get lazy and you procrastinate on study also.’ |
| Disadvantages | ‘It can hinder both if you don’t prioritize them effectively.’ ‘[...] I don't think there are disadvantages. I mean, it's more like our own weakness.’ |

3.3 Challenges for a dual career

The most frequently cited challenge towards dual careers was financial constraints. Financial needs were viewed as vital in meeting the requirements of elite level sports, facilitating the purchase of sports equipment, access to adequate nutrition and transport facilities. The lack of consistent earnings in professional sporting careers was seen as another challenge for long term athletic motivation, extending beyond the higher education period. Also, the lack of a properly structured system with funding for student athletes in Sri Lanka was identified as another causative factor.

Negative attitudes towards sporting careers in the society, especially among parents and educational professionals resulting in fewer support structures and an inflexible education system was yet another demotivating factor. Almost all participants stated that greater understanding by academic staff regarding the value of dual careers and the situation faced by student athletes as well as the provision of more flexible schedules with their curriculum would have resulted in a greater support towards dual careers.

The next major factor was the lack of resources including infrastructure and resource persons both at the university and national levels. Additionally, inadequate information, social awareness and disparity between types of sport were seen as significant obstacles. Such issues were severe in sports that did not receive sufficient promotion at the university and national levels by sporting bodies, media personnel and other stakeholders.

Other challenges mentioned consist of constraints in time, a lack of research, insufficient opportunities for competition, physical and mental strain as well as gender norms.

TABLE 4
SUB THEMES AND SELECTED QUOTES BY PARTICIPANTS ON THE CHALLENGES FOR A DUAL CAREER

| Sub Theme | Quote |
|----------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Resources and financial constraints | ‘A Sri Lankan sport is not like a field that you can merely just survive off of, because most of the sports persons I know do other jobs as well.’ ‘We are not rich right? Being poor, financial need is the major problem.’ |
| Lack of dual career support structures | ‘[...] the academic staff not having an understanding about the actual state of sports in the university system right now [...].’ ‘We never know when the tournaments will be, when the exams will be [...].’ |
| Social constraints | ‘Especially parents and teachers have this mentality, that only academic education is useful in life.’ |

3.4 Support structures for a dual career

Participants identified two forms of support structures; informal and formal. All participants stated that their colleagues and teammates offered a high degree of support, while most also expressed that parents and other friends are supportive of their needs both in a physical and psychological sense. In addition, two of the student athletes indicated support from sources such as their employers.

While formal systems provided some amount of support, it was generally viewed as insufficient. Several athletes noted that the coaches and sporting bodies within the university led by staff or students offered a fairly high amount of support in terms of motivation, facilities and funds. The support extended by the general administration was limited to certain instances of special allowances in the case of minimum class participation requirements, as well as rescheduling of examinations which take place during competition periods. The participants indicated that the lowest level of support was extended by academic staff at the university level, and teachers at the school level who were, in some instances, explicitly demotivating towards participation in sports.

TABLE 5
SUB THEMES AND SELECTED QUOTES BY PARTICIPANTS ON SUPPORT STRUCTURES FOR A DUAL CAREER

| Sub theme | Quote |
|-----------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Informal | ‘[...] from friends, from family, from some academic individuals. Yeah, the moral support is there.’ ‘I receive support from my team members.’ |
| Formal | ‘[...] there are a lot of lecturers that are helping me and also they have given me attendance allowance. So I only have to attend 50% of the lectures.’ ‘[...] they [university] give all the facilities, we have a proper coach, we have a great team, so all those things motivate me, actually it really helps me.’ ‘They should definitely be more flexible in the way they [are] giving us permission to go for these tournaments, get excused from lectures.’ ‘When we [student athletes] ask them [lecturers] whether they can teach us the lessons that we missed, they try to avoid us.’ |

4. DISCUSSION

The elite student athletes selected for the study indicated a high degree of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation towards sports and academic activities during the undergraduate period. Due to the limited availability of studies on dual careers in Sri Lanka, comparison of findings at the country-level is not possible. However, the high level of motivation of elite student athletes contrasts with the low level of motivation for sports activities by the general student body in state universities of Sri Lanka has been reported (**Sukirthana and Arulrajahb, 2016; Silva and Nayomali, 2017**).

Motivation towards tertiary education suggests a mixed result; some indicated an inherent desire to pursue academic goals, while others discussed the necessity of higher education for future work opportunities. The motivation for higher education as a means of financial stability is in line with the findings of **Geraniosova and Ronkainen (2014), and Puskás and Perényi (2015)**.

Only a few participants conceptualized engagement in elite level sports and academic activities explicitly as a dual career. Most participants viewed their academic and athletic identities as distinct and at times conflicting careers. This suggests that awareness on the dual career concept is not widespread, and can therefore have an impact on the tendency to prioritize one career over another. While a majority of student athletes indicated an interest in continuing an elite athletic career beyond the undergraduate level, a significant portion did not. As mentioned by **Puskás and Perényi (2015)**, a range of factors affect the decision to prioritize one career and terminate the other including sport-specific factors such as whether the sport is an individual or team event, the general age at which an athlete reaches their peak performance, future goals, support systems and the intensity of the academic and athletic programmes. Providing adequate support systems and flexibility in academic and athletic schedules therefore appears to play a role in promoting dual careers beyond the undergraduate period.

In discussing the interrelationship between the academic and athletic careers, participants appeared to be motivated by the perceived advantages of doing both sports and education at an elite level. This included personal development, increased availability of opportunities, and the ability to achieve one's full potential. Although facing difficulty in maintaining a high performance in both careers, time constraints, and sacrificing other interests were perceived as some of the disadvantages of dual careers, most participants interviewed did not appear to be highly demotivated by these perceptions. Similarly, **Geraniosova and Ronkainen (2014)** also have suggested that despite low levels of formal support, elite student athletes are willing to manage their dual careers. Therefore, increasing support would both serve to improve the performance of existing elite student athletes, and encourage students with athletic potential to engage in dual careers.

Moreover, the study identified the major challenges indicated by the elite student athletes in the context of the state university system of Sri Lanka. The most commonly cited obstacle for a dual career was financial constraints. However, due to the publicly funded university system, financial concerns with respect to academic activities was not emphasized, although several studies conducted in other countries highlighted the cost of tuition and accommodation as well (**Wilson and Pitchard, 2005; Simiyu, 2010**). Financial instability in professional athletic careers was also perceived as a major future obstacle. And at a broader level, participants indicated the disparity in the national resources among countries which affect the outcome of athletes at international level competitions.

Participants perceived the lack of formal dual career pathways to be associated with an inflexible education system, inadequate information and awareness on dual careers and disparities among sports. In addition to this, interviewees identified challenges that were commonly seen

among elite level student athletes in a global context. These included time constraints and the physical and mental strain of dual careers (Davis et al., 2019; Subijana et al., 2015; Gomez et al., 2018).

The necessity in enhancing the available support structures was also emphasized. Proper support is crucial in developing dual career competencies of students which enable them to properly navigate their two-fold career (Wylleman and Rosier, 2016; Puskás and Perényi 2015; Condello et al., 2019). With regard to the existing support system, participants perceived a high degree of informal support. However, formal support including that extended by the academic staff and university administration was insufficient and at times, detrimental to the motivation towards dual careers. Many preceding studies also highlight the importance of improved support extended by these bodies towards elite level student athletes (Kristiansen, 2016; Marinšek, 2015; Brustio et al., 2020).

5. CONCLUSION

Despite the difficulties of managing an academic and athletic career at a high-performance level, elite student athletes of state universities in Sri Lanka appear to be highly motivated towards engaging in dual careers during their undergraduate period. Many also indicate a desire to continue their athletic careers beyond this period, given certain external factors to facilitate their needs.

It appears that while the overall attitude towards dual careers remains positive, elite student athletes encounter several major challenges requiring more comprehensive policies and support structures. While constraints may exist on meeting the needs of athletes with regard to enhancing national level resources and facilities, more easily addressed issues include providing greater access to existing facilities and convenient, nutritious food. Other actionable concerns involve provision of financial and administrative support including increased academic flexibility for elite student athletes. Greater awareness on dual careers may be achieved through awareness programmes aimed at the general public, parents, academic and administrative staff and students at secondary and tertiary educational levels. In addition, increased research in the area of dual careers is essential in providing effective strategies for intervention.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 6.1 A course of action recommended by the authors on the issue of financial constraints faced by elite student athletes within state universities, is the implementation of athletic merit based scholarships, similar to existing academic merit based scholarships. Facilitating dual careers is also likely to improve with greater support extended by academic staff and the administration through the use of online learning tools, providing additional support on request and enacting more flexible schedules for high performance athletes.
- 6.2 At present, there remains a need for further research on this topic within Sri Lanka especially with a wider representation of sports, academic fields and backgrounds, as well as considering the perspectives of other relevant stakeholders such as staff, coaches, sporting and educational bodies and family members.

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