

Efficacy of European Sport Tutorship model (ESTPORT) in the dual career of athletes in Spain

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to know the influence of Estport model in the dual career of student-athletes, from San Antonio Catholic University (Spain), as part of the Erasmus + project: Development an innovative European Sport Tutorship model for the dual career of athletes- ESTPORT, through of the evaluation of their perceptions, regarding their sports and academic career within the sports tutor service. The sample consisted of 109 student-athletes, of which 59 were men and 50 were women with ages between 19 and 40 years ($M = 26.10$; $SD = 4.62$) belonging to the Universidad Católica San Antonio de Murcia (UCAM) and of different sports level: amateur (2.8%), semi-professional (40.4%) and professional (56.9%). Results showed that the pace at which the athletes carried out their studies was 1.8 ± 0.8 years per academic year. Regarding the difficulties of athletes to reconcile sports and studies, men lost more rhythm than women in studies ($z = 3.2$; $p = .001$). The role of the sports tutor was valued to a greater extent by the athletes who competed at the national level ($z = 3.2$; $p = .001$) since they consider it important to have someone who listens to them and were at their disposal ($z = 3.4$; $p = .001$), provide guidance with the necessary academic procedures within the university ($z = 2.9$; $p = .003$), be also a personal help ($z = 2.8$; $p = .004$) that assists and support them when managing the time in their academic career ($z = 2.8$; $p = .005$).

Keywords: Elite sport; Dual career; Athlete support programs; Barriers; Sports tutor.

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INTRODUCTION

For several years, researchers have demonstrated the problems that exist in the lives of elite athletes who spend most of their time in training and competitions and who have great difficulties developing their academic career (Conzelmann & Nagel, 2003; Hallinan & Judd, 2009). Interest in issues related to the dual career of athletes has not stopped growing in recent years (e.g., De Brandt et al., 2017; López de Subijana et al., 2015; Reifsteck & Brooks, 2018; Ryba et al., 2015; Sánchez-Pato et al., 2017). Adequate conciliation of the sports career and academic life allows the athlete to face the transition processes more easily, as well as prepare an alternative work life outside the sports world as the moment of retirement approaches (Puig & Vilanova, 2006; Wylleman et al., 2004). Among the different transitions that elite athletes have to face throughout their lives, sports withdrawal, as a common and inevitable moment, occurs at an early age when the person still has a large part of their life ahead of them. The absence of a complementary training to sports activity prevents the use of sports capital obtained throughout the athlete's career (Puig & Vilanova, 2006).

The problem was taken into account by the European Commission in an effort to promote the development of sport in a socially responsible environment (European Commission, 2012). EU considers the improvement of athletes' learning and education through university training of great importance because it allows them to develop their skills and competences outside the world of sport (European Commission, 2007, 2012). The initial ethical idea of the EU's interest in the education of athletes has to do with the fact that education is a human right and the athlete, as a human being who has served the community through sports and has been useful to society, deserves to be helped to enjoy this right at all stages of life (Schweiger, 2014). Consequently, the dual career represents a challenge for European universities that need to determine new ways of organising the knowledge, rules, and learning models they offer their students.

University should not only look after the athlete as a student and improve their skills through education; in addition, student-athletes should feel like members of an educational system that involves the entire community and that supports them in all stages of professional life (Sánchez-Pato et al., 2017). Therefore: *"it would be necessary to provide a full coverage service to this population in order to provide permanent advice and draw a continuous line from sports life to working life in athletes"* (López de Subijana, Conde, et al., 2014, p. 47). The current dual career concept, therefore, needs to reflect on the concept of sports as an educational practice and a form of human capital capable of facilitating athletes and helping them improve their skills as people within the framework of a lasting learning and a system continuing education (Zagelbaum, 2014).

Regarding the programs to help elite athletes in Spain (López de Subijana, Conde, et al., 2014, p.7), despite the fact that a lot of universities have an advisory service, there are many that do not offer any type of training. Regarding different supports for athletes: *"although academic support measures are more frequent than economic ones, only those that imply a lower cost are implemented with ease"*. In recent years, studies reflect not only the need to implement support programs that are appropriate to the needs of student-athletes (Stambulova & Wylleman 2014), but also to verify if the measures implemented by sports and academic institutions are ensuring that athletes can develop their sports and academic careers simultaneously. In this sense, it's stated that although aid programs are based mainly on the needs of athletes, which seems to be positive, they lack the support of scientific evidence derived from their evaluations (Torregrossa et al., 2020). Studies in this line affirm that, despite existing aid, athletes continue to encounter barriers related to both the information process and the application of the established training measures (López de Subijana et al., 2015).

As part of the Erasmus + Project: Sport, Development of an Innovative European Sports Tutorship Model - Estsport (557204-EPP-1-2014-1-ES-SPO-SCP), the ESTPORT model evaluated the dual career of student-athletes from the San Antonio Catholic University from Murcia, Spain.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Participants

The student selection procedure was of a sample type and on purpose since participation in the program was voluntary. The athletes were informed of the implementation of the project, as well as the importance of their participation in it for the improvement of the conciliation of sports and studies.

The study sample consisted of 109 athletes (26.1 ± 4.6 years) who were studying at the Catholic University of Murcia, Spain. In terms of sex, 52.7% ($n = 59$) were men, while 44.6% ($n = 50$) were women, and 44% competed at the international level and 56% at the national level. Regarding the level of professionalism, 2.8% considered themselves amateur, 40.4% semi-professional, and 56.9% professional. They were all working towards one of three degrees: Certificate of Higher Education (0.9%), University Degree (74.3%), or Postgraduate-Master (24.8%). The athletes had been in university for an average of 2.8 ± 1.5 years and the rate of completion of their studies per academic year was 1.8 ± 0.8 years. The participants considered themselves student-athletes (67%) or athletes-students (33%) and considered the conciliation of their sports and academic career very easy (0.9%), easy (13.9%), regular 33.9%, difficult (33%), or very difficult (12.8%).

Measures

Data were taken through the perception scale of high-level university students-athletes about the dual career (Sánchez-Pato et al., 2016). The items followed a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (totally disagree or never) to 5 (totally agree or always). The questionnaires were completed anonymously and individually online. Participants took less than 30 minutes to complete the questionnaire. Through the explanation on the first screen of the questionnaire, they were able to know that it was not a test, but instead a few questions to find out their perceptions and help them improve the conciliation of their sports and academic career. No additional explanation appeared in the questionnaire itself.

Analysis

Data was tabulated in an Excel workbook. Later, they were imported from the PASW v 21 program to carry out the different analyses. A Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was performed on continuous quantitative variables. Since the result was significant ($p < .05$), it was decided that Mann-Whitney U tests would be applied for the analysis of quantitative variables and the Chi-Square test for categorical variables. In the Chi-Square test, the reported p-value is adjusted according to the Bonferroni method. The effect size (ES) was measured with η^2 (0.01 small; 0.09 medium; 0.25 large; Cohen, 1988) and Cramer's V (CV), taking into account the degrees of freedom (Kim, 2017). The level of significance was established at $p < .05$.

RESULTS

Sports career

Table 1 shows the results of the characteristics of the sports career. In regard to levels of athleticism, 56.9% classified themselves as professional, while 40.4% considered themselves to be semi-professional and 2.8% as amateur. In terms of the timing of their careers, 19.3% reported that they were at the beginning of their sports career, 58.7% were at the time of maximum performance, and 22% were finishing their sports career. Regarding their plans once they finish their sports career, 52.8% expressed that they would like to continue

a career that is related to sports, 39.8% indicated that they would like to work in what they study, and 5.6% wanted to continue with their sports career. Regarding support for reconciling sports and academic life, 94.5% indicated that their support is from family, 0.9% indicated that they receive this support from their peers, 1.8% receive support from the university sports service, and 2.8% do not have any support. In terms of their identity, 67% of the athletes considered themselves student-athletes and 33% considered themselves athlete-students.

Table 1. Analysis of the differences in sports career according to gender and level of competition (percentages).

Sports career		Gender		Competition level		Total
		♂ (n = 59) %	♀ (n = 50) %	Int (n = 48) %	Nac (n = 61) %	(N = 109) %
Level of professionalism	Amateur	1.7	4.0	2.1	3.3	2.8
	Semi- professional ‡	37.3	44.0	72.9	14.8	40.4
	Professional ‡	61.0	52.0	25.0	82	56.9
Sports career phase	At the beginning *	27.1	10.0	22.9	16.4	19.3
	In maximum sports performance ‡	54.2	64.0	43.8	70.5	58.7
	At the end†	18.6	26.0	33.3	13.1	22.0
Expectations at the end of the sports career	Stay linked to sport	54.2	51.0	47.9	56.7	52.8
	Work on what I studied	37.3	42.9	50.0	31.7	39.8
	Continue sports career †	6.8	4.1	0.0	10.0	5.6
	Other	1.7	2.0	2.1	1.7	1.9
Supports to reconcile sports life with academics	Family	93.2	96	93.8	95.1	94.5
	Mates	1.7	0.0	2.1	0.0	0.9
	Sport service	3.4	0.0	2.1	1.6	1.8
You consider yourself more	None	1.7	4.0	2.1	3.3	2.8
	Student-athlete	72.9	60.0	62.5	70.5	67.0
	Athlete- student	27.1	40.0	37.5	29.5	33.0

Note: ♂ = man; ♀ = woman; Nac. = national; Int. = international; % = percentage; differences according to gender at the level of * p < .05 and ** p < .01; differences depending on the level of competition at the level of † p < .05 and ‡ p < .01.

Academic career

With regard to the pace that athletes carried out their studies, it took them 1.8 ± 0.8 years to complete an academic year. The majority of students could do so in one (36.7%) or two years (45%), but some required three years (12.8%) or four (5.5%). The results of Table 2 show that the majority of student-athletes studied a university degree (74.3%), but some were studying a Postgraduate-Master (24.8%) or Certificate of Higher Education (0.9%). Among the reasons that athletes have to study, 81.7% do so to increase their chances of finding work, 12.8% because they enjoy studying and want to improve, 1.8% to have university experience, and 3.7% indicated other reasons. Regarding the type of scholarship that the athletes received, the majority were granted an exemption from total tuition payment (97.2%), while a small few were exempt from partial payment (1.8%) or received financial aid (0.9%). Regarding the knowledge of the existing legal regulations in the country to help athletes reconcile sports and academic life, 33.9% of athletes affirmed that they did know about them and 66.1% did not. The expectations of the athletes once the academic career was finished were to continue studying (52.8%), work based on what was studied (39.8%), continue with the sports career (5.6%), or other reasons (1.9%).

Dual career

The degree of difficulty was 3.3 ± 0.9 (Likert 1–5 scale; 1 = very easy; 2 = easy; 3 = regular; 4 = difficult; 5 = very difficult). Table 3 shows the results of the analysis of differences regarding the variables related to the conciliation of dual career. Regarding the barriers that hinder conciliation, the fact that the university is far from home was 2.8 ± 1.6 (Likert 1–5 scale; 1 = totally disagree; 2 = somewhat disagree; 3 = neither disagree nor agree; 4 = somewhat agree; 5 = strongly agree). Other notable barriers and challenges included: the distance of the university from the training place (2.8 ± 3.3); feeling that they not able to combine study with training (2.1 ± 1.1); caring for relatives (1.2 ± 0.8); habitual feelings of tiredness (2.9 ± 1.4); loss of rhythm of the courses (2.8 ± 1.4); loss of contact with fellow students (2.6 ± 1.6); the high price of studies (1.7 ± 1.5); not having enough support at the university (1.7 ± 1.1); non-flexible study hours (1.7 ± 1.3); and non-flexible training hours (2.0 ± 1.3).

The study highlighted the importance for athletes to obtain an academic degree that helps them look for work (4.5 ± 4.2), the conviction of athletes that they are capable of obtaining a university degree (4 ± 1.4), and how important it is for athletes to learn what their studies teach them (4.6 ± 0.8). The fact that the university has virtual tools that facilitate their studies was a notable facilitator for pursuing a dual career (4.2 ± 0.9).

Table 2. Analysis of the differences in the academic career according to gender and level of competition (percentages).

Academic career		Gender		Competition level		Total
		♂ (n = 59) %	♀ (n = 50) %	Int (n = 48) %	Nac (n = 61) %	(N = 109) %
Studies	Certificate of Higher Education	1.7	0.0	0.0	1.6	0.9
	University degree **	84.7	62.0	75.0	73.8	74.3
	Postgraduate or Master **	13.6	38.0	25	24.6	24.8
Reasons to study	To increase my job possibilities	81.4	82.0	85.4	78.7	81.7
	Because I enjoy studying and I want to improve	11.9	14.0	6.3	18.0	12.8
	To have college experience	3.4	0.0	4.2	0.0	1.8
Type of scholarship from the educational center	Other	3.4	4.0	4.2	3.3	3.7
	Exemption from full tuition payment‡	98.3	96	93.8	100	97.2
	Exemption from partial payment of tuition	1.7	2.0	4.2	0.0	1.8
Knowledge of legal regulations	Financial assistance	0.0	2.0	2.1	0.0	0.9
	Yes	37.7	30.0	29.2	37.7	33.9
	No	62.7	70.0	70.8	62.3	66.1
Expectations when finish	Keep studying	54.2	51.0	47.9	56.7	52.8
	Work based on what has been studied	37.3	42.9	50.0	31.7	39.8
	Continue sports career	6.8	4.1	0.0	10	5.6
	Other	1.7	2.0	2.1	1.7	1.9

Note: ♂ = man; ♀ = woman; Nac = national; Int = international; % = percentage; differences according to gender at the level of * $p < .05$ and ** $p < .01$; differences depending on the level of competition at the level of † $p < .05$ and ‡ $p < .01$.

Sports tutor

Table 4 shows the help provided by the sports tutor (Liker scale: 1 = totally disagree; 2 = somewhat disagree; 3 = neither disagree nor agree; 4 = somewhat agree; 5 = totally agree). All the actions carried out by the sports tutor were valued above M = 2.9. The specific results were as follows: sports tutor maintains constant

contact with me ($M = 2.9 \pm 1.4$); I appreciate having someone who listens to me and is available ($M = 3.6 \pm 1.5$); the sports tutor provides assistance through academic help, orientation, study techniques, and organization ($M = 3.6 \pm 1.5$); the sports tutor provides personal help ($M = 3.4 \pm 1.5$); and the tutor helps with time management $M = (3.1 \pm 1.4)$. The three highest rated items were: sports tutors' help in aspects related to academic procedures for orientation in their studies (3.6 ± 1.5), I appreciate having someone who listens and is available (3.6 ± 1.5), and I appreciate personal help that the sports tutor provides them (3.4 ± 1.5).

Comparisons based on gender

The men were at an earlier stage of the sports career than the women ($X^2 [2] = 5.2$; $p = .073$; $CV = 0.219$; large ES), and there were significantly more of them pursuing undergraduate studies than the women ($X^2 [2] = 9.258$; $p = .010$; $CV = 0.219$; large ES). This in turn presented significant differences with respect to men, as they were studying Postgraduate-Master's studies ($X^2 [2] = 9.258$; $p = .010$; $CV = 0.219$; large ES). Regarding the difficulties of athletes to reconcile sports and studies, it was observed that men lost more rhythm than women in studies ($z = 3.2$; $p = .001$).

Comparison based on the level of competition

Regarding sports careers, international athletes self-classified themselves more frequently as semi-professionals and professionals ($X^2 [2] = 37.9$; $p = .000$; $Vc = 0.590$; large ES) than nationals. The athletes who competed at the national level presented significant differences with respect to the international competitors when they were at the moment of maximum sporting performance ($X^2 [2] = 8.852$; $p = .012$; $Vc = 0.285$; large ES). The athletes who competed at the international level were significantly higher than the athletes who competed at the national level at the time of completion of their sports career ($X^2 [2] = 8.852$; $p = .012$; $CV = 0.285$; TE large). Regarding the type of scholarship received, it should be noted that athletes who competed nationally and internationally received total exemption from tuition to carry out their studies significantly more often than the athletes from national competitions ($X^2 [2] = 3.920$; $p = .041$; $Vc = 0.190$; mean ES).

With regard to the figure of the sports tutor, there were significant differences with respect to the contact he maintains with the athletes; it was greatest among athletes who competed at the national level ($z = 3.2$; $p = 0.001$). This contact is also valued largely by athletes who compete at the national level since they consider it important to have someone who listens to them and is available ($z = 3.4$; $p = .001$). Help for the necessary academic procedures within the university is more important for athletes who compete at the national level ($z = 2.9$; $p = .003$) and who immensely value the personal help offered by the sports tutor ($z = 2.8$; $p = .004$). Finally, these athletes also value the assistance it offers them when it comes to managing their time in their academic career ($z = 2.8$; $p = .005$).

DISCUSSION

According to recent studies (Torregrossa et al., 2020), two general typologies of sports aid programs that have been implemented over the last decades in different countries can be distinguished: programs that aim to provide financial aid to student-athletes and offer solutions to their problems once they have arisen; and other programs that adopt a preventive approach and provide athletes with information and different resources and information, as can be found in programs intended for student-athletes (López de Subijana et al., 2015; Sánchez-Pato et al., 2018). Although both approaches have a common goal to help athletes, the latter emphasises autonomy and increases athletes' willingness to face future situations, while the former has the potential to generate dependency (Torregrossa et al., 2020).

Table 3. Analysis of differences in dual career according to gender and level of competition (Means, Standard Deviations and 95% Confidence Interval).

(Scale 1 = totally disagree; 2 = somewhat disagree; 3 = neither disagree nor agree; 4 = somewhat agree; 5 = totally agree)	Gender								Competition level								Total			
	♂ (n = 59)				♀ (n = 50)				Int (n = 48)				Nac (n = 61)				(N = 109)			
	M	SD	Li	Ls	M	SD	Li	Ls	M	SD	Li	Ls	M	SD	Li	Ls	M	SD	Li	Ls
Conciliation is difficult for me because the university is far from my home	3.1	1.5	2.7	3.5	2.5	1.7	2.0	3.0	2.8	1.7	2.3	3.3	2.8	1.5	2.4	3.2	2.8	1.6	2.5	3.1
Conciliation is difficult for me because the university is far from my training place	3.2	1.4	2.8	3.5	2.4	1.7	1.9	2.9	2.7	2.6	2.3	3.2	2.9	2.5	2.5	3.3	2.8	3.0	2.5	3.1
Conciliation is difficult for me because I do not see myself able to combine study with training	2.3	1.2	2.0	2.7	1.8	1.0	1.5	2.1	2.1	1.3	1.7	2.5	2.1	0.9	1.8	2.3	2.1	1.1	1.9	2.3
Conciliation is difficult for me because I have to take care of family members	1.4	1.0	1.3	1.6	1.0	0.5	0.9	1.2	1.3	0.9	1.0	1.6	1.1	0.7	0.9	1.3	1.2	0.8	1.0	1.4
Conciliation is difficult for me because I am usually tired	3.2	1.3	2.8	3.5	2.5	1.4	2.1	2.9	2.6	1.4	2.2	3.0	3.1	1.4	2.7	3.4	2.9	1.4	2.6	3.1
Conciliation is difficult for me because I lose the rhythm of the courses *	3.2	1.4	2.8	3.6	2.3	1.2	1.9	2.7	2.5	1.5	2.0	2.9	3.0	1.3	2.7	3.4	2.8	1.4	2.5	3.0
Conciliation is difficult for me because I lose contact with my colleagues	2.9	1.6	2.5	3.4	2.2	2.2	1.7	2.6	2.6	1.4	2.1	3.0	2.6	1.7	2.0	3.0	2.6	1.6	2.3	2.9
Conciliation is difficult for me because the price of studies is high	1.7	1.6	1.3	2.1	1.8	1.5	1.2	2.1	2.1	1.7	1.7	2.7	1.3	1.3	1.0	1.6	1.7	1.5	1.4	2.0
Conciliation is difficult for me because I don't have enough support at the university	1.9	1.3	1.6	2.3	1.5	0.9	1.2	1.7	1.9	1.2	1.5	2.2	1.6	1.1	1.3	1.9	1.7	1.1	1.5	1.9
Conciliation is difficult for me because study hours are not flexible	2.2	1.5	1.8	2.6	1.7	1.1	1.4	2.1	2.3	1.8	1.9	2.7	1.7	1.3	1.4	2.1	1.7	1.3	1.7	2.2
Conciliation is difficult for me because training schedules are not flexible	2.2	1.5	1.8	2.6	1.7	1.1	1.4	2.1	2.3	1.3	1.9	2.7	1.7	1.3	1.4	2.1	2.0	1.3	1.7	2.2
University has virtual tools that favor dual career	4.1	1.0	3.8	4.3	4.4	0.8	4.1	4.6	4.0	1.0	3.7	4.2	4.4	0.8	4.2	4.6	4.2	0.9	4.0	4.4
It's important for me to learn what is taught in my studies	4.5	0.8	4.2	4.7	4.7	0.7	4.5	4.9	4.6	0.7	4.3	4.8	4.6	0.8	4.3	4.8	4.6	0.8	4.4	4.7
I'm willing to invest time to get excellent grades in my studies	3.9	0.9	3.6	4.1	4.0	1.0	3.6	4.2	3.4	1.1	3.6	4.2	3.8	0.9	3.6	4.0	3.9	1.0	3.7	4.0
I will be able to use what is taught in my studies in different aspects of my life outside of university	4.2	1.0	3.9	4.5	4.3	0.8	4.0	4.5	4.1	1.2	3.8	4.5	4.3	0.7	4.1	4.5	4.2	0.9	4.0	4.4
I have some doubts about my ability to obtain high grades in my studies	2.7	1.5	2.3	3.1	2.2	1.3	1.8	2.5	2.7	1.5	3.2	3.1	2.3	1.3	1.9	2.6	2.5	1.4	2.2	2.7
I'm sure I can get a college degree	4.4	1.4	4.0	4.4	4.4	1.4	4.0	4.8	3.9	1.8	3.4	4.4	4.8	0.8	4.6	5.0	4.4	1.4	4.1	4.6
It is important for me to get a degree as it will help me find a job	4.7	1.3	3.7	4.4	4.3	1.0	4.0	4.6	4.2	1.1	3.9	4.6	4.1	1.2	3.8	4.5	4.2	1.2	4.0	4.4

Note: ♂ = man; ♀ = woman; Nac. = nationals; Int. = International; M = Average; SD = Standard Deviation; 95% Confidence Interval where Li = lower limit and Ls = upper limit differences according to gender at the level of * p < .05 and ** p < .01; differences depending on the level of competition at the level of † p < .05 and ‡ p < .01.

Table 4. Analysis of the differences in sports tutoring based on gender and level of competition (Means, Standard Deviations and 95% Confidence Interval).

(Scale 1 = totally disagree; 2 = somewhat disagree; 3 = neither disagree nor agree; 4 = somewhat agree; 5 = totally agree)	Gender								Competiton level								Total			
	♂ (n = 59)				♀ (n = 50)				Int (n = 48)				Nac (n = 61)				(N = 109)			
	M	DE	Li	Ls	M	DS	Li	Ls	M	DS	Li	Ls	M	DS	Li	Ls	M	DS	Li	Ls
Sports tutor maintains constant contact with me	2.8	1.4	25	3.2	2.9	1.4	2.5	3.3	2.4	1.2	2.0	2.7	3.2	1.4	2.9	3.6	2.9	1.4	2.6	3.1
Rate the following characteristics of the sports tutor service (having someone who listens to me and is available).	3.6	1.5	3.2	4.0	3.6	1.5	3.2	4.0	3.1	1.6	2.6	3.6	4.0	1.3	3.7	4.4	3.6	1.5	3.3	3.9
Assesses the following characteristics of the sports tutor service (academic help: orientation, study techniques, organization ...).	3.6	1.5	3.2	4.0	3.6	1.5	3.2	4.0	3.2	1.6	2.7	3.6	4.0	1.4	3.6	4.3	3.6	1.5	3.3	3.9
Evaluate the following characteristics of the sports tutor service (personal help).	3.5	1.4	3.0	3.8	3.3	1.5	2.9	3.7	3.0	1.4	2.6	3.4	3.7	1.4	3.3	4.1	3.4	1.5	3.2	3.7
Evaluate the following characteristics of the sports tutor service (time management).	3.1	1.3	2.8	3.5	3.2	1.4	2.8	3.6	2.7	1.3	2.3	3.1	3.5	1.3	3.1	3.8	3.1	1.4	2.9	3.4

Note: ♂ = man; ♀ = woman; Nac. = nationals; Int. = International; M = Average; SD = Standard Deviation; 95% Confidence Interval where Li = lower limit and Ls = upper limit differences according to gender at the level of * $p < .05$ and ** $p < .01$; differences depending on the level of competition at the level of † $p < .05$ and ‡ $p < .01$.

Results obtained in the present study are in the same line as those that obtain positive results in the implementation of programs with similar characteristics in other countries (Albion & Fogarty, 2003; Lavalley & Wylleman, 2000; North & Lavalley, 2004), which are characterised by determining new ways of reorganising their knowledge, rules, and learning models they offer to their students.

The line of work that UCAM is committed to is similar to that developed in Finland, where students can set their own pace; therefore, higher education is not a problem for athletes (Aquilina, 2013). Much like UCAM in Germany, there are around 90 universities that assist athletes with everything from admission through assessment and tutoring, including adapting the curriculum, exam dates, and preparing for the job market (Alfermann & Preis, 2013). In addition, in Belgium, the Vrije Universiteit Brussel leads the "*Top Sport and Study*" program that helps student athletes with a wide range of academic-related barriers assistance and flexibility (Wylleman et al, 2013). In this sense, Albion and Fogarty (2003) reported results similar to those obtained in the present work after learning about the implementation of ACE in the Australian sports system.

According to the results of the athletes' perception of different aid programs to achieve conciliation, the results on Tutorsport show that, in general, the athletes are satisfied (Mateos et al., 2010), but they don't offer insight regarding the results they obtain as university students. This could reveal whether these programs really influence the athlete-students to finally obtain a degree during or at the end of their sports career.

The results obtained showed that women have a higher level of academic studies than men, as well as fewer problems to lose the rhythm of studies while they are at the highest level of sports, which is consistent with the results obtained in recent studies (López de Subijana et al., 2015). Results indicated that gender is a factor to take into account when investigating perceived barriers related to studying (especially those related to time management). This result is significant given that female athletes dedicate more hours to training than men, so it could be assumed that the greater effort that women are making to reconcile career and studies is paying off, despite the fact that they need a great capacity for sacrifice, planning, and adaptation in order to achieve their objectives (Selva et al., 2013).

These results are in line with the current situation in Spain, where the percentage of women between 25 and 34 years who have a degree in higher education (43%) was higher than men in 2009 (34.2%; Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport, 2012). Along this same line, other studies affirm (Conde, 2013) that athletes who are part of an aid program (in this case, PROAD) have a higher level in the enrolled studies than non-users (45.8% of users enrolled in Bachelor's degrees, compared to 32.3% of non-users). This could indicate that, in the future, athletes at a higher level of training may be equipped with better tools to face the termination of their sports career if they belong to an aid program.

Tutoring, flexibility, and the need for a systematic approach represent the main pedagogical challenges for the dual career of athletes-students (Cassuci, 2002; Regüela, 2011). In this sense, the proposed model made a positive perception of belonging to the aid program by student athletes possible, which achieves the desired objective; in other words, the model demonstrates that athletes can adequately reconcile sports and academic life through the aid that they receive. The proposal thus favours a methodology that can help athletes reconcile their education and professional careers in the best possible way and according to their needs.

CONCLUSIONS

The implementation of aid programs for the student-athlete through such models that are proving effective for the adequate conciliation of sport and studies could be presented as an opportunity for countries that, although aware of the problem, do not have specific measures due to legislation and different support policies. An academic year of implementation of measures that have already been successful in other countries, as in the case of UCAM, seems to have a positive effect with regard to the perception of student athletes and seems to be considered a possible path for an improvement of the adequate conciliation of sports and studies. The main pillar would be an effective tutoring system based on communication and designed for the development of a dual career among student-athletes, which would facilitate individualised attention. An action protocol could be created for the incorporation of athlete-students in support programs where certain conditions were taken into account to indicate whether the athlete-student was a potential academic “*risk*” (depending on their sport discipline, gender, etc.), which could help anticipate potential academic problems. In practical terms, the model works: (1) to detect and identify the athletes' needs; and (2) to guide and advise future work, simultaneously taking into account the particular sport and academic career. It is necessary to emphasize that the monitoring of incidents is vitally important in the model so that, in the event that they occur, they are either resolved quickly or transmitted to the corresponding department or tutor. Examples of such incidents may be: adaptation of exam dates to training programs or competitions; the management of class absences due to attendance at competitions; various administrative procedures; or the need to access and interpret information on academic aspects. Therefore, the methodology used in this program to help student-athlete helps athletes to reconcile their education and professional careers in the best possible way and according to their needs.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Conceptualization, E.C.-P., J.A.G.-R., A.S.-P.; methodology, E.C.-P., A.L.-A., J.A.G.R., A.S.-P.; software and formal analysis, E.C.-P., L.M.M.-A.; investigation, E.C.-P., A.L.-A., J.A.G.R., A.S.-P.; writing-original draft preparation, E.C.-P., L.M.M.-A.; review and editing, E.C.-P., L.M.M.-A., A.L.-A., J.A.G.R., A.S.-P. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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