

Izvorni znanstveni rad
UDK 796.034.6:373.5057.874
373.5:796.034.6-057.874
Primljeno: 10.5.2021.

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ATHLETES' OPINION OF A DUAL CAREER IN CROATIAN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to present the Croatian dual career system (DC) and observe its implementation in secondary schools that provide DC special conditions and support. The participants of this study are 54 student-athletes (31 female and 23 male), who are representatives of three secondary schools that were partners in the project "Sinergy of Sports Culture, Olympic Value and DC for Young Athletes", supported by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the European Olympic Committee (EOC) programs (2019). Despite the mandatory flexibility in education, 55.56% athletes confirmed that they had faced the problem of balancing between school and sports commitments. The majority of athletes (57.41%) trained every day, while 33.33% athletes trained several times a day. This study confirmed that student-athletes got most help and support on DC from family (83.33%) and coaches (9.26%). Monitoring the implementation of DC special conditions and support services designed specifically for athletes could be more successful.

Key words: dual career, professional support services, special conditions

MIŠLJENJE UČENIKA SPORTAŠA O DVOJNOJ KARIJERI U HRVATSKIM SREDNJIM ŠKOLAMA

Sažetak

Cilj je rada predstaviti sustav dvojne karijere u sportu u Republici Hrvatskoj i implementaciju u srednjim školama koji omogućuju posebne uvjete i stručnu podršku mladim sportašima u sustavu obrazovanja. U istraživanju su sudjelovala 54 učenika sportaša (31 sportaš i 23 sportašice), predstavnici triju srednjih škola koje su sudjelovale u projektu „Sinergija sportske kulture, olimpijskih vrijednosti i dual karijere za mlade sportaše“, financiranom iz programa Olimpijske solidarnosti Europskih olimpijskih odbora (2019). Unatoč propisanim fleksibilnim obrazovnim uvjetima, 55,56 % učenika sportaša suočavalo se s problemom usklađivanja školskih i sportskih obveza. Najveći broj učenika sportaša (57,41 %) trenira svaki dan, od čega njih 33,33 % i nekoliko puta dnevno. Analizom rezultata potvrđeno je da je sportašima najveća potpora u dvojnoj karijeri obitelj (83,33 %), a potom trener (9,26 %). Praćenje primjene propisa koji se tiču posebnih uvjeta i stručne podrške u dvojnoj karijeri učenika sportaša moglo bi se provoditi uspješnije.

Ključne riječi: dvojna karijera, posebni uvjeti, stručna podrška

Introduction

The EU dual career background

“The development and promotion of the Dual Career (DC) concept started back in 2004, and was connected to the European Year of Education through Sport (EYES). The experience obtained throughout that year showed the need for more concrete actions in this field. Some of the subsequent policy documents, i.e. the Commission’s White Paper on Sport (2007, p.5-6) and the Communication “Developing the European Dimension in Sport” (2011, p. 6-7) confirmed the importance of sport and education. The documents also highlight that the cooperation between sports organisations and educational institutes is beneficial for both sectors as well as employment. At the highest political level, the European Council in its Declaration on Sport (12/2008, p. 21) called for strengthening the dialogue with the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and with the other representatives of the world of sport, in particular on the matter of young people combining sports training and education.” (Kazandziewa, 2018) “In the past decade, the European Parliament and Commission, the IOC, the European Athlete as Student (EAS) network, and researchers have fostered the development of a balanced combination of sports and education/work commitments (i.e., DC) in elite athletes.” (European Parliament, 2015). Further work on dual careers was the document “EU Guidelines on Dual Careers of Athletes”, which was approved by the European Commission on the 28th of September, 2012. The document focused on the ways of addressing the challenges related to the combination of high-level sports training with general education or work. The Republic of Croatia started with the DC projects in 2007, although at that point Croatia was not an official member of the European Union (it became a member of the EU on the 1st of July 2013). In order to provide a better understanding of DC, we are going to provide a brief description of the Croatian DC system, with an emphasis on secondary school system.

Dual career of athletes in Croatia

In the Republic of Croatia, the Ministry of Tourism and Sports as a GO¹ and the Croatian Olympic Committee as an NGO² present the umbrella organizations that are responsible for the DC policy. According to the EU directives, the Croatian Olympic Committee (COC) proposed the “National Program for the development of Sports Career and Post-Sports Career 2014 – 2020”, which was approved by the National Council of Sport in 2014. Great support in the implementation of the DC actions is given to the COC by the European Olympic Committee (EOC) (financial support for the DC projects) and the International Olympic Committee (IOC) (workshops for athletes, etc.). In Croatia, there are some specific educational regulations, reward mechanisms, as well as assistance and employment programs at universities and in secondary schools. The COC signed the agreement with the Rectors’ Council of the Republic of Croatia and the Croatian Academic Sport Association (2015) regarding the DC for categorized athletes as well as for categorized para-athletes. One of the results of the agreement with the Rectors’ Council is the document “Regulations on the Study of Student-Athletes at Universities in the Republic of Croatia” (May, 2016). Despite the regulations at most universities in Croatia, the adjustments of study and sport obligations depend more or less on informal or individual negotiations of the individual student-athlete. Between 2007 and 2016, the activities of the DC were focused on the university level: round tables at universities, promotional DC days organized by Croatian universities, agreements with the Rectors’ Council, the elective course (Sports Career) for kinesiology students in Zagreb, etc. In this process, attempts were made to promote and strengthen Croatian university sport. Each of the mentioned DC activities have raised awareness in the academic society about the minimum standard of DC (adjustment of the timetable, the possibility of increasing the allowed hours of absence from classes, extension of student status by two years, knowledge test by agreement, etc.). Since the beginning of the DC projects in Croatia (2007), two kinesiology faculties (in Zagreb and Split) have supported the activities of the DC as project partners, as they are the institutions with the majority of athletes who, after their sports career, decide to become PE teachers, coaches

¹ Governmental Organisation

² Non-Governmental Organisation

of a specific sport, conditioning coaches, or sports managers, etc. The actions of these faculties, the regulations prescribed by the University of Dubrovnik, i.e. "Study Regulations for Categorised Athletes in Bachelor's and Master's programmes at the University of Dubrovnik" (2009) and the latest regulations of the University of Pula (2019) are good examples of providing and securing DC services for athletes at universities. Private universities and high schools have special interest in the education of athletes and some of them have signed a special agreement with the COC, which defines the specific conditions and special support for athletes during their studies. Since 2017, according to the Sports Law, every athlete who has won a medal at the Olympic or Paralympic Games and at the Deaflympics is entitled to a scholarship. In addition, Croatian athletes receive financial and material support through four COC support programs (2018: 239 athletes from 32 sports). From program to program (from the cadet category (15 years old) to the promising A and B programs and the program for quality athletes (older than 20 years old), the financial and material support becomes increasingly significant and the possibility to enter some of the COC support programs is open throughout the competition year (according to COC Public Support Program and Financial Plan, 2018). Croatian DC system has been focused mainly on universities and after initial successes more effort should be put in secondary schools.

According to the Croatian Bureau of Statistics (2019), there are 436 secondary schools in Croatia; the majority of which are grammar schools (41.9%), while the rest are industrial and vocational schools (9.9%). There is one public (Sports High School "ŠPOGI") and one private business and sports high school (PEŠG) for athletes, while there are sports classes in 10 secondary schools, which offer many forms of coordination of teaching obligations and sports career, such as a small number of students in the class, distance learning methods, support of teaching and sports coordinators in coordination of obligations, individual assistance, sports holidays, etc. Regarding the DC system, the prevailing mode is individual adaptation of learning obligations formally defined for the student-athlete. In a previous DC study on a sample of 564 young athletes, of which 337 were male athletes and 227 female athletes (ages 15-20), namely the participants of Croatian Sports Secondary Schools Games in Poreč (2013), it was found that 192 student-athletes rarely had problems in primary school,

while 46 stated faced problems "very often". During secondary school, more student-athletes had problems with the teachers' adjustment and understanding: 262 rarely and 62 very often. The majority of student-athletes (252) were absent from school several times per month for up to a few hours, while a small number, 39 students, were absent for the same amount of time during most of the school year (Caput-Jogunica, R., 2013).

Although the majority of Croatian athletes have an overall grade very good or excellent in primary and secondary schools (Caput-Jogunica, 2007), some of them drop out of regular secondary schools due to lack of understanding in schools (problems with some of the teachers, too many school commitments, exhaustion due to preparation for competitions, poor grades and lack of motivation, etc.) and continue their education at secondary level through correspondence courses or give up education for a sports career. The second scenario is the abandonment of a sports career for a successful performance in secondary education and enrollment at university. In reference to the European Commission document: Europe 2020 "A Strategy for Smart, Sustainable and Inclusive growth"(p. 9), one of the priorities was to "tackle the problem of school leavers by reducing the school drop-out rate from the current 15% to 10%, while increasing the share of 30-34 year olds who have completed tertiary education from 31% to at least 40% by 2020. Better educational attainment boosts employability".

An example of the importance of this priority is confirmed on the sample of 73 former and active Croatian top athletes who participated in the Olympic Games or in the World or European competitions and won a medal. The data was collected and presented at Action Day "For and after Sports Career", which was held in Split in 2013. The majority of athletes (42%) had a secondary school degree, 37% had a vocational school degree and 14% had a university degree. During the implementation of this study, 7% of athletes had a student status at the University in Split. The results on employment showed that 5% of the athletes are unemployed (all of them have a secondary school degree), while 6% are still professional athletes and 38% are employed in sports and other services. The majority of the athletes (23%) with secondary education are employed in other services, while the athletes with secondary education

are mainly employed in sports as coaches, or secretaries in various sports organizations (sports clubs, sports federations, etc.). The main conclusion of the study is that athletes with higher education have more opportunities in different services, as well as in the private and public sector.

According to Europe 2020, Croatia, as a member state, must at national level: "...ensure efficient investment in education and training systems at all levels (from pre-primary to tertiary); improve educational outcomes by addressing each segment (pre-primary, primary, secondary, vocational and tertiary) within an integrated approach that includes key competences and aims to reduce school dropouts (p. 15)."

At the end of this introductory part, where the Croatian DC system and documents were presented, it is important to emphasize the lack of monitoring or quality assessment procedures of public policies, which is the subject of this paper. The purpose of this paper is to present the Croatian DC system and its perspective for athletes in secondary schools. In order to achieve this goal we have included the following guiding questions: 1. *Are there differences between student athletes in three secondary schools (one of which is specialized for student athletes, while the other two schools have special classes for athletes) in terms of observed sport variables and prescribed DC special conditions and support for student athletes?*, 2. *What is necessary to improve DC support in secondary schools and how can young athletes be helped in the future?*, and 3. *Is our DC system meeting the needs of student-athletes in secondary schools?*

Methods

Participants

The participants of this study were 54 young athletes - students (31 female and 23 male) with an average age of 17 in 2019 (the majority of the athletes (38, 70.37%) was born in 2002). Most of them are student-athletes in the 3rd grade of secondary school (40, 74.07%), with representatives from three secondary schools: Sports Grammar School (21 athletes), Grammar School Sesvete (16 athletes) from Zagreb, and grammar school from Rijeka (17 athletes), namely "Prva riječka hrvatska gimnazija". All these grammar schools provide the

DC special conditions and support that athletes need in education and sports. The athletes - participants of this study are mostly engaged in: sports games (55.56%), martial arts (14.81%), aquatics (11.11%), racquet sports (7.41%) and field and track (5.6%). The sample for this study includes one student athlete, each from: shooting (1.85%), bowling (1.85%), and skiing (1.85%).

Instrument

The study was conducted in 2019 as part of the project “Sinergy of sports culture, Olympic values and dual careers in sport (“Synergy”).” The instrument used was a 19-item questionnaire, designed to collect information on: demographics (Q 1-5) (gender, age, sport, school, and grade), sport engagement (Q 6-8) (experience in sports, time dedicated to sport, and level of categorization), problems in DC (Q 9-10) (school changes, main problems), DC support athletes receive at personal, sport, and school levels (Q 11-13), DC policy implementation in school (Q 14-15), career transition and interest in future education (Q 16-18). The last question related to the impact of the workshop on DC terminology. Close-ended questions were chosen for data collection (e.g., checklist type with one or more responses). The participants were given an opportunity to additionally explain their answers to some questions (Q-9 - problems, Q10 - changing schools, Q-12 DC - support, Q16 and 17 - transition, and Q18 - interest in future education).

Procedure

The study was conducted following DC workshops held in 2019, in Croatian Sports Museum, as part of the project “Sinergy”, launched by the Olympic solidarity program of European Olympic Committee (EOC). The student-athlete leaders provided signed parental consent forms for all student-athletes who participated in this study. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and the athletes were informed that incomplete responses would not be considered.

Statistical analysis

Prior to the analysis, the data were checked for missing data and outliers. Descriptive statistics expressed in frequencies and percentages were calculated

for questions for which a single response (Q 1-11, Q 13-15, Q 17-18) or multiple responses (Q 12, 16) were allowed. With the aim of estimating an association between schools, gender, and sport-related variables such as: experience in sports, categorization, training frequency, etc., Chi-squared test (χ^2 test), and the Cochran-Mantel-Haenszel (CMH) test were applied. If the expected cell frequency was <5 , Fisher's exact test was used instead of the χ^2 test. Finally, with the aim of determining if there were differences between the three schools in terms of student – athletes gender and experience in sports, a two-factor analysis of variance with interaction was implemented. The statistical analysis was performed using SAS 9.4.

Results

A large number of studies on a sample of athletes have been conducted using online questionnaires (Adams, Cofee and Lavallee, 2015; Linner, Stambulova, Lindahl and Wylleman, 2019; Condello, Capranica, Doupona, Varga and Burk, 2019) or interviews (Geranosova and Ronkainen, 2015). The unique feature of this study is the implementation of a live anonymous survey with young student-athletes at the end of workshops on: Sports Culture, Fair Play, and Dual Careers organized at the Croatian Sports Museum. Analyzing the categorization of the young athletes who were the participants of this study, it was found that 43.59% of them were categorized athletes: 16.67% were elite athletes (category III), 5.56% were elite athletes (category II), while 14.81% belonged to category IV (excellent athletes), with 3.70% and 1.85% being gifted athletes (categories V and VI respectively), in accordance with the COC register of athlete categorization. According to the analysis of the athletes' responses to the frequency of training, the majority of athletes (57.41%) trained every day, while 33.33% of athletes trained several times a day. Unfortunately, two athletes ended their sports career during secondary school, and 5.56% trained fewer than 3 times a week.

In absence of a study monitoring schools with special conditions for athletes, we asked student-athletes if they had difficulty meeting their commitments to school and sports. Despite mandated flexibility in schedule, time off, deferral of homework, special material to overcome tardiness due to practice

and games, deferral or adjustment of regular exams, mentor, etc., 55.56% of student-athletes confirmed that they face the problem of adjusting to commitments. The reasons given by the student-athletes were lack of time to study due to commitment in sports and socializing with friends. This finding was supported by the athletes' statements: "Sometimes I don't have enough time to study, play a game and hang out with friends, and I usually neglect school"; "Fatigue - it is hard to rest for training after school commitments"; "Most teachers have no understanding for frequent absences due to club and national team commitments"; "I'm thinking about giving up training because I think I won't be admitted to the faculty I want (medicine) because I can't manage to study".

The analysis of student-athletes' responses about absence from school revealed that 38.89% of student-athletes are absent several times a month for several hours of instruction, 16.67% student-athletes are absent 2-3 school days a week, while 14.81% student-athletes are absent up to 2 weeks a month. This study has confirmed that student-athletes got most help and support (83.33%) in the DC from family and from coaches (9.26%) for the first response, while for the second response most athletes obtained support from their coach (27.78%) and friends (22.22%), with the note that 35.19% did not respond. We asked the athletes if there was a defined DC support system in their sports club (meeting with parents, coach's interest in school results and problems, etc.). Only 22.22% of the athletes answered affirmately, with the explanation that support is organized in the form of parent meetings and coaches who care about students' school results or problems.

With the aim of reviewing what kind of DC support is offered to athletes in their school, we asked which of the following specific conditions (mentoring, peer support, exam timetable adjustments, school-sports club collaboration agreements, opportunity to complete compulsory lessons online) applied (Table 1). The students indicated as their first choice that the following special conditions were most common at their school: for 37.04% athletes there was an opportunity for a knowledge test (oral, written); 27.78% received teacher-mentor support; and 18.52% got peer support. The second response option most frequently mentioned was agreements between the sports club and school (24.07%). Only 25.93% indicated that their sports club signed an agreement

with the school, 53.70% answered negatively, and 20.37% had no information about such collaboration.

Table 1 Analysis of the application of the DC special conditions in the secondary schools

DC special conditions in school: athletes 1st answer	f	%	DC special conditions in school: athletes 2nd answer	f	%
adjustment to exam timetable	20	37.4	no answer	21	38.89
mentor – teacher	15	27.78	adjustments to exam timetable	16	29.63
peer support	10	18.52	collaboration between school and sports club	13	24.07
collaboration between school and sports club	3	5.56	peer support	2	3.71
Other	6	11.10	mentor	1	1.85
6 students - athletes (female, handball and volleyball) most of them from Grammar School Sesvete wrote that they were not satisfied with the quality of DC special conditions and support			online education	1	1.85

We calculated Fisher’s exact test with the aim of determining the differences between two nominal variables: school and gender, with variables related to athletes’ training frequency, sports categorization, cooperation between school and sports club, athletes’ absence from school due to sports commitments, and athletes’ perception of DC special conditions in their school. The results were presented in Table 2.

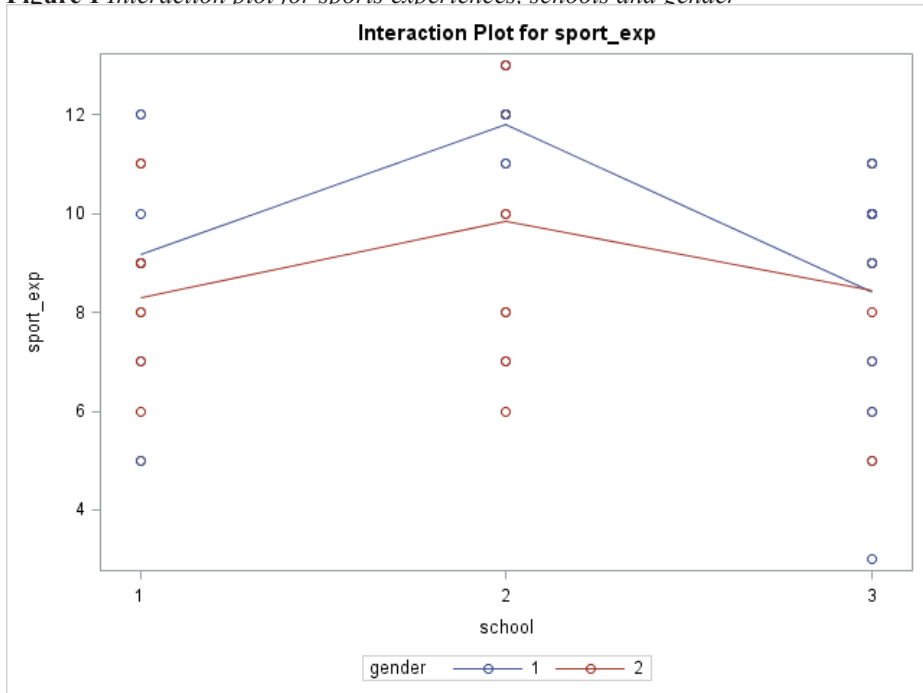
Table 2 Results of χ^2 , Fisher's exact and CMH test

Variables	Fisher's exact test P	3 rd variable	CMH test		
			df	value	prob
Training frequency by school (male)	0.2386				
Training frequency by school (female)	0.6913	gender	6	3.8918	0.6913
Sport categorization by school (male)	0.6894				
Sport categorization by school (female)	0.6009	gender	2	0.3990	0.8191
Collaboration school-club/school (male)	0.5544				
Collaboration school-club/school (female)	0.0987	gender	4	4.3097	0.3657
Absence from school/school (male)	0.5558				
Absence from school/school (female)	0.0869	gender	10	20.6330	0.0238
DC special conditions/school (male)	0.1206				
DC special conditions/school (female)	<0001	gender	8	38.7812	<0.0001

The statistically significant differences were calculated and found for school and female athletes in the interaction of the DC special conditions and school absences. This can be explained by Brandt, Wylleman, Torregrossa, Defruyt, and Rossem's (2017) study, in which they found that female athletes prioritize their academic efforts more often than male athletes. According to Tekave, Wylleman, and Cecić Erpič (2015), male athletes were less serious in organizing their DC than their female counterparts. In order to answer the first question of this paper: *Are there differences between student-athletes in three secondary schools* (one of them is specialized for student-athletes, while the

other two schools have special classes for athletes)?, the results were shown in Figure 1 and presented in the following tables.

Figure 1 Interaction plot for sports experiences, schools and gender



Note: schools: 1. Grammar School Sesvete, 2. First Riječka Croatian Grammar School (Prva riječka hrvatska gimnazija), 3. Sports Gymnasium, Gender: 1 – male, 2 female

The analysis of descriptive statistics showed differences between schools in the athletes’ sports experiences by gender, but not statistically significant (Table 3). Graph 1 shows the interaction between athletes’ experiences in sports with schools and gender. According to this, there are differences between schools from Rijeka (mean± Std Dev 10.41±2.34) and the schools from Zagreb (Sesvete 8.62±2.24 and Sport Gymnasium 8.42±2.31) regarding athletes’ experiences in sports. In general, male student-athletes have a longer experience in sports than female student-athletes from their school (Table 4). Finally, in Table 5, we presented the results of ANOVA for the athletes’ sports experience (years) as the dependent variable and school, gender, and school-gender

interaction as the factors which confirmed that there were no statistically significant differences.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics for secondary school and gender

Secondary School	Gender		Athletes' experiences in sports	
	M-male F-female	N	Mean± Std Dev	
Grammar School Sesvete	M	6	9.16±2.78	8.62±2.24
	F	10	8.3±1.94	
First Riječka Croatian Grammar School	M	5	11.8±0.83	10.41±2.34
	F	12	9.83±2.55	
Sports Grammar School	M	12	8.41±2.57	8.42±2.31
	F	9	8.44±2.06	

Table 4. Descriptive statistics for gender and sports experience

Gender	N	Experience in sports	
		Mean	Std Dev
Male athletes	23	9.34	2.65
Female athletes	31	8.93	2.27

Table 5 Results of ANOVA for experience in sports (years) as the dependent variable and school, gender and interaction between school and gender as factors

	Df	Type III SS	Mean	F values	Pr>F	Tukey-Kramer*
School	2	52.34391172	26.17195586	4.94	0.0112	
Gender	1	10.57317579	10.57317579	1.99	0.1644	(1.3)(2)
School-gender	2	8.34357348	4.17178674	0.79	0.4611	

The last part of the questionnaire was related to career transition and interest in future education (Q16-18). The analysis of these data should help answer the following question: *What do we need to improve DC support in Croatian secondary schools?* The results of many studies showed that secondary school is a sensitive period for young athletes, and some studies confirmed that female student-athletes in particular end their sports careers in large numbers due to school commitments and better preparation for university. This problem was identified in the study of the National Institute for Public finance (2012), where

217.808 athletes and 40.557 female athletes are registered, with the indication that the number of female athletes decreases significantly from cadet to senior category. Therefore, the aim was to find out how many of the participants were thinking about ending their sports career or education. For those who answered affirmatively, we opened the space to write the reasons. Although the participants in this study were students in secondary schools that provide DC special conditions and support for student-athletes, 42.59% athletes responded affirmatively to the question regarding career termination. The main reasons are summarized as follows: "It is hard to balance school and sports commitments", "A two - year break because of sports injury", "Because of poor interaction between the club administration and players", "Lack of time for school commitments because of hard training every day", etc. The analysis of the athletes' responses to the final question about their interest in postsecondary education provided hope and optimism for their future. The students were mostly interested in the study of kinesiology (22.22%), physiotherapy (14.81%), sports psychology (9.26%), and economy and entrepreneurship (5.56%). Other athletes expressed interest in journalism, law, teaching, engineering, nutrition, medicine, pharmacy, and military academy. Only 24.07% athletes responded negatively.

Discussion and conclusion

Based on the current situation, it is important to discuss the following fundamental question: *Does our DC system meet the needs of student-athletes in Croatian secondary schools (grammar schools) that specialize in athletes, as well as in other secondary schools that offer the possibility of post-secondary work?* According to Križelj (2009), we can describe Croatian sports system for young athletes in schools (elementary and secondary schools) as a parallel model in which young athletes compete for the sports club where they train, as well as for their school in school sports competitions at different levels (regional to national). The good sides of this model are the possibility of a quality cooperation between the school and the sports club, the use of school sports infrastructure for training and competitions, and the selection of young athletes. A disadvantage of this model is that the same young athletes participate in competitions, which means that two systems of competitions are

funded for the same athletes and there is no program for the athletes who have not passed the selection in sports.

Based on the current situation, it is important to discuss the following fundamental question: *Does our DC system meet the needs of student-athletes in Croatian secondary schools that specialize in athletes, as well as in other schools that offer the possibility of post-secondary work?* According to Križelj (2009), while considering the results of this study, we can conclude that the cooperation between sports clubs and schools is unsatisfactory. Moreover, the analysis of young athletes' answers revealed that the implementation of DC special conditions and support services in these secondary schools is not satisfactory. In addition, the Croatian law on education in primary and secondary schools is not sufficiently precise regarding DC special conditions and support for young athletes in schools. Schools have some autonomy and opportunities to make their own decisions, which means that the sports sector (sports clubs) must establish cooperation and help athletes, with the aim of avoiding young athletes being left on their own.

To the authors' knowledge, the analysis of Croatian DC services has not been studied. One of the reasons for this could be the lack of a national consensus on the introduction of the National Athletes' Career Program or service (NACP), following the example of IOC Athlete Support Program (2005) or United Kingdom (Performance Lifestyle Program) or Australia (Athlete Career and Education Program), etc. In the EU survey on best practices in the field of athlete DC (2018), the Athlete Career Program or service is described as an integrated and comprehensive combination of educational tools (seminars, workshops), individual counseling or a referral network that provides individualized and/or group-oriented multidisciplinary support services for athletes, from aspiring young athletes to retiring and already retired athletes (Kazandzieva, 2018). Alferman and Stambulova (2007) and Wylleman, Harword, Elbe, Reints and Caluwe (2009) defined a set of principles that need to be implemented in this type of program or service: 'whole career' and 'whole person', developmental and individual approach, multilevel treatment (supporting athletes in transition) and empowerment approach (helping athletes to develop coping resources and strategies, etc.). To sum up, the results of this study show that young athletes

have interest in different courses of study and projections for their post-sport careers in different professions.

The secondary schools that participated in this study have a general program, which means that they do not provide opportunities for employment of athletes with secondary education. It is important to emphasize the quality of education that allows athletes to acquire basic knowledge for successful enrollment at a large number of universities. According to Milas and Ferić (2009) the problem of school leaving is present in the Croatia, with different data: for example, according to the ministry responsible for education in 2005, approximately 30% students dropped out of secondary schools, while 70% of students successfully finish secondary schools in time. The Central State of Statistics counted 12% of people without secondary school education that could be close to the real situation. Unfortunately, we do not have data related to athletes-school dropouts from secondary school, and this is an area that should be monitored in the future. With regard to the improvement of the Croatian DC system in secondary schools they must be reminded to follow the principles prescribed by the Law on Education in Elementary and Secondary Schools (2008), for example, "Educational work in school is based on partnership with all educational partners at the local, regional and national levels". In relation to this topic, this means that the school must open the door to partners and work effectively with them with the goal of supporting and fulfilling the interests of student-athletes. The consequences of young athletes dropping out of secondary school could be detrimental to their post-sport careers. According to Newcomb (1996), dropping out of school is an expression of false maturity that pushes young people to take on adult roles. Geranosova and Ronkainen (2015) found on the sample of Slovak athletes that teachers' prejudices towards athletes because of their roles in sports and the lack of DC structures seem to be significant deficits in DC support. The same problem has been identified in this study, where the student-athletes wrote: "Lack of understanding from teachers", "Lack of flexibility in mandatory attendance in exams", "Frequent absences from school", etc. These reasons were also found in Ferić, Milas and Rihtar's (2010) research. The authors state the following reasons: a wrong choice of school that does not match the students' aspirations or abilities, facing a too demanding school

program, loss of motivation for work and learning, increased absences from school, as well as other, intertwined reasons.

To sum up, the results of this study suggest that student-athletes need better DC support in secondary schools that offer a special program for athletes. In collaboration with the ministries responsible for education and sport. In order to achieve a successful DC in secondary schools and raise the young athletes' interest in different study programs, we should, in collaboration with ministries responsible for education and sport, take into account athletes' responses related to the problems they are dealing with. We can improve the Croatian DC system with establishing a Career Assistance Program or services for athletes supported on the national basis, where all interested athletes would be able find help and support during their sports career. Further research containing data on elementary schools can complete our analysis and show how many athletes drop out of school (elementary, secondary) or sports. This data should be helpful for DC system improvements in the future.

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