

A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO THE DUAL CAREER OF THE STUDENT-ATHLETE

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Challenges of the Employee-Sportspersons: An Integrated Multi-Sectorial Partnership for Dual Career through the BRAVA-DC Project

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Abstract

The European Union supports the rights of the sportsperson to develop a professional career in combination to their sporting career (e.g., dual career). To encourage the effective recognition of the right to a dual career of the employee-sportspersons, an innovative Erasmus+Sport transnational cooperation between for academic institutions, three sport organizations, and two corporate partners from 7 European Members States (BEL, DRK, IRE, ITA, MAL, SLO, and SRB) focused on the BRAnd Alignment Value through Dual Career (BRAVA-DC). The innovative methodological approach to the co-construction of a European framework based on evidence and eminence of the actual needs of employee-sportsperson is described, and the development of BRAVA-DC guidelines are foreseen. Finally, the potential impact of the findings to provide opportunities for improving the working conditions of sportspersons are envisaged.

Keywords: corporate social responsibility, brand alignment, working conditions, dual career guidelines, multidisciplinary approach.

1. Introduction

Following the European Year of Education Through Sport (e.g., EYES 2014) and the publication of the White Paper on Sport (European Commission, 2007), the European Union has recognized the significant social and economic impacts of sport, and the athlete's role in representing the European sports model and the European identity (Arai et al., 2014; Council of the European Union, 2020, 2021; De Bosscher et al., 2015; European Athletes, 2016; European Commission, 2018; Kleissner & Grohall, 2015). In this framework, the athlete's right to combine sport and education/work career (e.g., dual career) has been a priority of the European Union, and the European Commission has published recommendations for the Member States, in which common guiding principles are enforced and solid dual career agreements between sports bodies, educational institutions, companies, and agencies of the labour market are advocated (European Commission, 2012). In considering that Member States have full competence in the field of sports, the European Union could adopt only a 'soft' policy to overcome the different dual career approaches, policies, and provisions in place at national level (Aquilina & Henry, 2010; European Commission, 2016). To further support dual career, the European Commission encourages effective dialogue and cooperation between sports bodies, educational institutes, non-governmental organizations, and enterprises through a progressive distribution of European funds allocated to the European Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students (ERASMUS) + Sport Collaborative Partnerships (European Commission., n.d.). More recently, the European dual career of athletes has been expanded to all the sportspersons, including coaches, physical trainers, referees, sports managers, and volunteers (European Parliament, 2021). These efforts have triggered the development and publication of several reports, specific guidelines, educational tools, and thorough research on European dual career (Capranica et al., 2021; Capranica & Guidotti, 2016; European Commission, 2016; Sánchez-Pato et al., 2017). In particular, the bidirectional relationship between European dual career policies and evidence- and eminence-based research has been summarized in three systematic literature reviews and a journal special issue, which

ascertained the advancement of the European dual career discourse in different socio-cultural contexts, and highlighted future challenges related to those aspects which currently diverge from the European guidelines (Guidotti et al., 2015; Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019; Torregrossa et al., 2021; Vidal-Vilaplana et al., 2022).

Starting their sport career at young ages and progressing from adolescence into adulthood, elite athletes typically experience progressively greater training loads through increasing volume, frequency, and intensity of training and competitions. During their developmental years, athletes undergo different career stages and transitions at the athletic, psychological, psychosocial, academic/vocational and financial levels, occurring at distinctive times, having various influences on each other (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). In many sporting disciplines the career of athletes progresses into adulthood, with peak performances and/or retirement occurring in the late years of the third decade of life (Allen & Hopkins, 2015; Barth et al., 2021; Vretaros, 2022). In sustaining their sports careers during their adulthood, not only athletes but also referees, coaches, support staff, sports managers, and other volunteers need to combine their dual career work-sport commitments (International Labour Organization, 2020). Advancements in dual career at educational levels and in the provision of financial support are often available for Olympic and professional athletes, however dual career support programmes provided at an elite sport level, are less likely to be available for sub-elite sportspersons despite their high commitment to training and competition in their respective sports (Capranica & Guidotti, 2016; European Commission, 2016; Robnik et al., 2022; Zafeiroudi et al., 2020). Furthermore, difficulties in the transition to post-sport career have been reported for both elite and sub-elite athletes, with gaps between their formal education and a successful employment mainly due to a lack of sufficient working experience sacrificed to sports commitments (Knights et al., 2016; López de Subijana et al., 2020; Robnik et al., 2022; Zafeiroudi et al., 2020). To provide support for themselves and their families, athletes and sportspersons engaged in non-professional or sub-elite sports typically need to seek some form of part-time or full-time employment to overcome the financial uncertainty and the

economic burden of long-lasting sports careers (Moreno et al., 2021). In recognition of these challenges there is a growing need for the establishment of formal agreements between educational institutions, sports organizations, and for-profit companies to support an effective dual career during and after the competitive years of a sportsperson (Capranica & Guidotti, 2016; European Commission, 2016, 2020). Therefore, the lack of dual career support arrangements for effectively combining work-sport commitments (i.e., working schedule that offers flexibility and/or athletic leave when preparing for competitions) may place the employee-sportspersons at risk of dropping out of sport or employment.

In some Members States, a limited number of elite athletes and coaches are recruited to join the Military, which facilitates opportunities to train and to compete at national and international levels within their respective services. However, at the end of their sports career Military sportspersons could be automatically dismissed or placed at the lowest levels of their respective services career pathway. At a for-profit company level, business-oriented companies value elite athletes and consider them primarily as vehicles for advertisements or product endorsement (Shanklin & Miciak, 1997). In fact, marketers increasingly involve elite athletes in the promotion of their products (Openendorse, 2019) as a critical element of brand strategy (Ding et al., 2011), in mediating the brand equity creation process (Seno & Lukas, 2007), and in creating meaning and value transfer of their products (Halonen-Knight & Hurmerinta, 2010). Companies with a strong vision and brand-related values grounded in sport or in health-related activities should consider the enhancement of a dual career not only through their internal strategies (i.e., vision and cultural values) but also through the promotion of an external image. To enhance an effective synergy between brand's internal values, the company's vision (i.e., internal dimensions) and image (i.e., external dimension), companies are called to define and implement strategic processes that align their internal and external dimensions (Balmer, 2012; Hatch & Schultz, 2008; Mingione, 2015). This could allow companies to achieve an authentic behaviour and a proactive translation of dual career into their own policies and practices for ameliorating their working conditions and for facilitating the

employment of athletes. Moreover, a strategic process of alignment may help in achieving collaborative practices of employees-athletes/coaches, who co-create the sport-related values of the companies (Mingione & Leoni, 2020). In fact, companies should recognize also that athletes can achieve specific working outcomes having developed critical life skills such as goal setting, emotional control, positive thinking, self-awareness, problem solving, goal attainment, teamwork, skill development, hard work ethic, international experience, cross-cultural understanding, adaptation to different environments, master of media communication, and healthy behaviours (Goudas, 2010; Robnik et al., 2022). Recently, the Council of the European Union urged business enterprises to engage in new approaches on upskilling and reskilling of their employees through employer-sponsored training (Council of the European Union, 2022). As the labour market evolves, the continuous informal education acquired through high-level sport participation could allow sportspersons to upgrade their skills and achieving a competitive employment advantage when compared to their non-athlete counterparts (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005). Finally, business enterprises could engage in promoting dual career initiatives within their framework of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), which is a process to achieve sustainable development in societies, treating all stakeholders of a company or institution ethically and responsibly (Hopkins, 1998).

Industry-funded initiatives and sponsorship of programmes, public policies, and dissemination of scientific research could help shaping the socio-economic and cultural dual career environment at the workplace. There is currently a growing need for a cross-sectoral and innovative dual career multi-stakeholder partnership to fill in the gap in knowledge of the employee-sportspersons phenomenon, to structure an evidence- and eminence-knowledge base on dual career employee-sportspersons, and to implement the European dual career guidelines for facilitating appropriate brand alignment strategies and CSR policies in the workplace. To provide sound evidence- and eminence-based information for the identification of potential company strategies and approaches to support dual career of the sportspersons, the Erasmus+Sport Collaborative Partnership Brand Alignment Value through Dual Career (BRAVA-DC, 622824-EPP-1-2020-1-IE-SPO-SCP) aims to coordinate the efforts of four

high-profile academic institutions with a long-term international knowledge in education and research related to the field of sport and business (e.g., University of Limerick, IRL; University of Ljubljana, SLO; University of Nis, SRB; and University Roma Tre, ITA), three sport organizations with a consolidated experience at national and European dual career (EAS, MLT; ESAA, DNK; EUSA Institute, SLO), and two corporate partners with an international expertise in the talent development in the business sector (EPSI, BEL; Human Age Institute, ITA). In this context, BRAVA-DC intends to be innovative at a number of levels: 1) academic level by bridging the gap of the knowledge on the working conditions and dual career needs of employee-athletes, and fostering the inclusion of the dual career issue in the academic courses involving of sports and management, sport, and also business programmes; 2) sport level by raising the awareness and calling for action of sport bodies (e.g., National Olympic Committees, High performance centers, Sport federations, Sport academies, Clubs) on issues related to the status of employee-athletes as well as former athletes as future employees, and stimulating a commitment for the establishment of a strong alliance with the business sector to facilitate the transition of athletes into the labour market; and 3) labour market level by raising the awareness of dual career-oriented companies on the career needs of athletes/former athletes as employees. This will be achieved through a strategic process based on the alignment between their sport-oriented vision, cultural values and brand image through an authentic and proactive translation of dual career into their own policies for ameliorating their working conditions and for facilitating the employment of athletes. In this context, the implementation of dual career of the employee-athlete will be the common denominators of dual career providers across Europe and sectors.

Therefore, the purpose of the present work is to highlight the current status and impact of dual career of employee-sportspersons. In addition, we aim to provide the methodological approach to evidence- and eminence-based information for the creation of a dual-career framework for guidelines and sound recommendations, which are designed to enhance the European workplace environment where the implementation of policies could effectively accommodate the dual career of a large population of European employee-sportspersons.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Experimental approach to the problem

The Ethical Committee of the University of Rome Foro Italico approved the BRAVA-DC project (9:2018), which is aligned to the European Parliament Resolution on an integrated approach to Sport Policy: Good governance, accessibility and integrity (European Parliament, 2017); the EU Sport Plan 2021-2024 (Council of the European Union, 2020); the Reflections towards a sustainable Europe by 2030 (European Commission, 2019); the Guidelines regarding the minimum requirements in skills and competences for coaches (European Commission, 2020); the European employer skills survey for sport and physical activity (European Observatory of Sport and Employment, 2019); the Report on EU sports policy: assessment and possible ways forward (European Parliament, 2021); and the Recommendation on individual learning accounts of the Council of the European Union on lifelong learning for upskilling and reskilling of the workforce (Council of the European Union, 2022). In addressing the sport, academic and business-oriented domains, BRAVA-DC intends to implement the principles of the European Commission Erasmus+ programme (Guidotti et al., 2015) specifically relating to the recommendations of the EU Dual Career Guidelines (European Commission, 2012), to “develop and improve the conditions needed for sustainable dual career programmes allowing for tailor-made arrangements for talented and elite athletes throughout Europe, either in their position as a student-athlete or employee-athlete (p.4)”; to envisage “the balance between sports training and employment (p.4); and to enhance “future employment prospects (i.e.,. higher employability and access to well-paid jobs) (p.5)”.

The BRAVA-DC project promotes and implements dual career by means of the standardization of methods, procedures, and data management across Europe for the development of dual career recommendations in the business sector. To achieve its aim, BRAVA-DC is structured in interrelated key phases encompassing preparatory, implementation, and dissemination aspects. In the preparatory phase,

the partners in BRAVA-DC combine their extensive experience in dual career research on development and policy gaps, especially related to corporate brand alignment and social responsibility. To ensure a rigorous research design, methods, procedures, data analyses, and construction of the BRAVA-DC recommendations, the implementation phase encompasses a comprehensive needs analysis and a very strong evidence-based statement regarding the project relevance to European dual career policies. To understand the values, beliefs, behaviors, and needs of dual career sportspersons from different countries, sports, and working environments, an ethnographic stance is adopted to gain a comprehensive understanding of dual career at the workplace as shaped by different social and cultural settings (Genzuk, 2003). Thus, a step-by-step methodological approach aims to gather evidence- and eminence-based information on dual career of the employee-sportspersons through a systematic literature review, and the organization and conduction of workshops involving employee-sports persons and managers of governmental organizations and for-profit companies. This information represents a sound basis for a concept mapping procedure employed to construct a dual career BRAVA-DC framework based on the opinions, working experiences, perceptions, and needs of employee-sportspersons and their employers, and dual career experts on the possible implementation of dual career in the workplace. Finally, the dissemination phase is intended to increase the awareness of dual career of the employee-sportspersons at national and international sports bodies (e.g., Olympic Committees, National Sport Federations, and sport clubs), educational institutions (e.g., university courses in sports management), public and private companies, and scientific communities.

2.2. Inclusion/exclusion criteria of participants

Participation to the BRAVA-DC is voluntary and based on a process of informed consent designed to co-create and implement dual career at the workplace. From the recruitment of participants in the BRAVA-DC eminence-based knowledge targets a fine stratification of employee-athletes/former athletes, employee-coaches, sports managers, corporate marketing managers, CSR managers, human resources (HR) managers

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and dual career National and International delegates. General information will also include the sex and nationality of the respondents and the size (e.g., number of employers) of their workplace.

2.3. Procedures

For the evidence-based knowledge on relevant factors for dual career of the employee-sportspersons, a systematic literature review of scientific contributions on dual career for employee-sportspersons will be organized based on a consensus on the search strategy, inclusion criteria of research topics and research methodologies of the scientific contributions, a defined string for the search at the main electronic databases, and definition of categories for data extraction and analysis. To overcome the rigidity of the mechanistic search, a snowballing technique will be applied to identify relevant papers not emerging during the electronic search.

The perspective of individual employee-sportspersons, sports managers, corporate marketing managers, and CSR managers could provide the current status of European dual career policies of the employee-sportspersons. To explore organizational practices, and to highlight dual career challenges and possible solutions, focus groups organized at national level in 6 European Member States (e.g., Belgium, Bosnia, Denmark, Ireland, Italy, and Slovenia) will collect eminence-base knowledge from employee-sportspersons, sports managers, corporate marketing managers, and CSR managers confronting competencies and experiences. To identify relevant factors emerging from the opinions, needs, challenges and perceptions of the participants, a series of open-ended questions will be considered the most appropriate method for stimulating the individual thoughts and experiences, and for encouraging exchanges and comments on each other's points of view (Kruger & Casey, 2009). The outcome of the focus groups will be the identification of a set of factors to be considered in the development of a dual career of employee-sportspersons, as well as the importance of integrating efforts by companies, governments, sports bodies and academic institutions. Finally, to uncover possible

cultural perspectives arising from diverse European geographic areas and countries adopting dual career policies (Aquilina & Henry, 2010), the final list of potentially relevant factors for a dual career at the workplace established at the end of the focus groups and emerging from the systematic literature review will be submitted to European dual career experts for evaluating their clarity.

For the definition of a European framework of dual career at the workplace based on an integrated obligation-opportunity conceptual model, a standard online concept mapping procedure will be adopted to create a logic model integrating practical with scientific knowledge (Condello et al., 2016; Trochim, 1989; Trochim & Kane, 2005; Trochim et al., 2008; Varga et al., 2021). Thus, a pre-notification email providing information on the development of the European framework of dual career at the workplace will engage participants to rate each statement in relation to its perceived importance and feasibility for dual career at the workplace, by using a 5-point Likert-type scale from 1 (lowest value) to 5 (highest value); additionally, they will sort the statements in groups (min 2, maximum 10) according to their individual logic. Data will be entered into a concept mapping software (Group Wisdom, Concept Systems Inc., Ithaca, NY, www.conceptsystems.com, 2022) and used to generate a ladder map illustrating the concordance between ratings at the cluster level and a go-zone graph showing the concordance of feasibility and importance ratings (Trochim & Kane, 2005).

These evidence- and eminence-based findings represent key conceptual components and a solid scientific background for the implementation phase of European dual career guidelines of the employee-sportsperson, and for raising the awareness of companies, enterprises, employers, academic and sport staff, and policymakers on the needs of working dual career sportspersons, and for foreseeing possible solutions.

3. Discussion

According to the Global Dialogue Forum on Decent Work in the World of Sport of the International Labour Organization (International

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Labour Organization, 2020), a number of policies and practices addressing issues of decent work in the world of sport, should be implemented through social dialogue. With its transnational character and demand-driven methodological approach to generate an integrated understanding of current dual career challenges, needs, and problems of employee-sportspersons, the BRAVA-DC project is overall innovative and at the forefront of dual career in the labour market, which could result in providing significant guidance to anticipate and resolve possible conflicts sportspersons might encounter in combining their sport and meaningful working careers. More specifically, the synthesis of extant evidence-based knowledge on the experiences, perceptions, opinions and needs of dual career employee-sportspersons, employee-former athlete, employers of sportspersons, corporate dual career supports, brand alignment strategies and CSR policies related to dual career, could allow dual career remedy mechanism based on existing knowledge and the identification of knowledge gaps (International Labour Organization, 2020). Furthermore, the development of operational dual career guidelines for the business sector could help the corporate sector envisaging possible arrangements to adapt to the employment needs of sportspersons at different stages of their careers, determining a strategic alignment between multiple actors oriented to the enhancement, implementation, and exploration of possible models for public and private financing of an effective dual career in and beyond Europe.

In offering recommendations to increase the collaboration between sport and business stakeholders for future employment of a skilled workforce, the BRAVA-DC guidelines not only will establish a framework to take dual career objectives forward, but are also in line with the recommendation of the Council of the European Union on individual learning accounts upholding the individual right to timely and tailor-made assistance for improving employment prospects and for securing an employment (Council of the European Union, 2022). In line with the academic arrangements for dual career sportspersons, adaptable employment, upskilling and reskilling, fair working conditions, and labour protection mechanisms for the sportspersons are strongly encouraged (European Commission, 2012; European

Parliament, 2021). The knowledge-based and participative process in developing the European dual career guidelines at the work place could offer an important condition for subsequent translation of findings and recommendations to increase the collaboration between sport and business stakeholders for future employment outcomes and continuous extension of implementation measures over time; to increase the awareness on dual career at the workplace where awareness is still limited; to establish a unique evidence- and eminence-based European framework of dual career for employee-sportsperson, having a potential generalizability beyond Europe, and also a relevant impact in the scientific community; to generate a precursor for future dual career education programmes for university students in sport and in management, and for coaches, who could become future proactive mediators between sport bodies and enterprises; and to initiate a managerial process that will give strategic guidelines to successfully align the vision, values and brand image of a company through dual career of athletes.

The BRAVA-DC project contributes substantially to the EU strategic priorities on education, employment and social inclusion. In systematically linking European research and managerial practice, BRAVA-DC subsumes national boundaries to meet the EU White Paper on Sport (European Commission, 2007), the EU Guidelines of Dual Career of Athletes (European Commission, 2012) and the Report on the State of Play Concerning the Implementation of the EU Guidelines on Dual Careers of Athletes (European Commission, n.d.), the EU Parliament Resolution on an Integrated Approach to Sport Policy: Good Governance, Accessibility and Integrity (European Parliament, 2017), the recommendations of the European Studies on the Minimum Quality Requirements for Dual Career Services (European Commission, 2016), and on Qualifications/dual careers in sports (Capranica & Guidotti, 2016), and the Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion (European Commission, n.d.).

In fostering a strategic process of business-oriented companies based on the alignment between their sport-oriented vision, cultural values and corporate image (Hatch & Schultz, 2001, 2008) through an

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authentic and effective implementation of the dual career, the guidelines developed with a bottom-up approach encompassing international diversity of political, economic, socio-cultural, environmental and funding backgrounds will reverberate at regional and national level thus fostering also a top-down approach. In being the first approach to involve companies as crucial actors of the European dual career of athletes, the BRAVA-DC project represents an opportunity for the research and dialogue with a range of relevant stakeholders, which will help filling the existing gap of the employee-athlete. The enhancement of alignment strategies (Mingione, 2015) aiming at delivering a sport-oriented brand promise to the employee-athletes/coaches represents a tremendous opportunity to establish solid alliances between the diverse stakeholders (i.e., sport-oriented and business-oriented), for the benefit of dual career athletes. Thus, BRAVA-DC creates an additional legacy for the European Commission and the advancement of a European dual career culture and policy, also beyond Europe. The BRAVA-DC project also meets the demands for evidence-based information and support programmes for European employees (European Commission., n.d.). Furthermore, the outcomes of this project have the potential to contribute to acquire a global dimension of European sports after the competitive years of athletes.

4. Implications

The European Commission urges companies to implement their impacts on society by developing dedicated approaches for the adoption of socially responsible conducts including employment practices, opportunities, health and well-being working conditions, education and training (European Commission, 2011). In this context, the BRAVA-DC guidelines will foster the strategic alignment of a vast number of stakeholders, all driven by the same purpose focused at achieving social awareness thanks to common and collective efforts of the actors participating to the process of value creation (Iglesias et al., 2023). In particular, the project aims to enhance a dual career multi-stakeholder coalition of companies, sporting bodies, and governmental

organizations committed to establish a meaningful dialogue to embrace dual career principles and to operationalize their respective dual career duties for the benefit of the employee-sportspersons. These guidelines will also help to raise awareness of dual career as a topic, which should be included under the umbrella of (internal) CSR programmes, strategies, and communication. In fact, dual career issues are often overlooked or not even included in the contemporary managerial discourses on CSR in the midst of the proliferation of CSR talk and action related to workplace issues, such as the development of family-friendly workplaces within the broader issue of work-life balance (Álvarez-Pérez et al., 2020) and securing the diversity and equal opportunity in the broader context of non-discrimination policies at the workplace (Maier & Ravazzani, 2019). In other words, the BRAVA-DC guidelines could contribute to fill the gap in the existing internal CSR/HR policies by developing policies that would concentrate on improving the conditions for dual career employees. Furthermore, BRAVA-DC intends also to raise the managerial awareness regarding the fact that dual career represents a driver for brand value co-creation as well as an opportunity for upgrading or refreshing the internal branding strategies, since employee-sportspersons can act as trust-worthy internal and external brand ambassadors.

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