



Emma Saunders

Health Sciences and Sport

University of Stirling

**Exploring Dual Career Practice and Experiences of Third-
Level Student-Athletes and Stakeholders in Ireland**

Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,

June 2021

Abstract

A dual career refers to the pursuit of two careers simultaneously and is a complex topic for investigation due to the interaction of micro, meso, and macro dimensions (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019; Stambulova et al., 2020). This thesis aimed to explore dual career from an Irish perspective, providing novel insight into dual career practice and experiences of third-level student-athletes and stakeholders. Four studies were conducted using web-based analysis, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups to generate data. Study 1 investigated the types of support available in the 43 third-level institutes in the Republic of Ireland in order to provide an understanding of the dual career landscape. The results suggest that while positive measures are in place in many institutes, many are informal, suggesting that a Laissez-Faire approach to dual career support is prominent in Ireland. Study 2 explored student-athletes experiences of combining education and sport, along with their perceptions of dual career support in third-level institutes. In line with the Holistic Athletic Career Model (Wylleman et al., 2013; Wylleman & Rosier, 2016) and Athletic Career Transition Model (Stambulova, 2003), the results found that student-athletes experience various demands and stressors associated with a dual career such as time demands, travel demands, and conflict with key stakeholders. Key resources to assist dual career experiences included financial support, academic flexibility, and social support. Study 3 explored the concept of social support from a provider and receiver perspective, which was a prominent theme from Studies 1 and 2. Overall, the results found that social support, particularly perceived support, played an important role for student-athletes. However, there were factors to consider regarding the provision of social support. In particular, providing awareness and training for support providers may be of value to both providers and receivers. Study 4 investigated support providers experiences and recommendations to enhance dual career practice in Ireland. Study 4 results identified several challenges and barriers for dual

career practitioners in Ireland from a macro level perspective. In particular, lack of dual career leadership (i.e., direction) and lack of formal dual career policy were key challenges identified. In conclusion, the overall findings presented throughout this thesis provide an original and distinct contribution to the knowledge of dual career support for third-level student-athletes in Ireland, the experiences of third-level student-athletes, and the experiences of key dual career stakeholders. The results have implications and considerations for practitioners and policymakers regarding the development and provision of dual career support.

Declaration

I declare that I alone composed this thesis and that it embodies the results of my own research. Where appropriate, I have acknowledged the nature and extent of work carried out by others included in the thesis.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Emma Saunders".

Signed:

Date: 25/06/2021

Word Count: 62,617

Acknowledgements

- I would like to express my extreme gratitude to my supervisors, Dr Pete Coffee, Dr Hee Jung Hong, and Dr Niamh Fitzgerald. Your expertise, guidance, enthusiasm, encouragement, and patience throughout this journey have been unwavering. I am forever grateful.
- I would like to sincerely thank Dr David Lavalley, who played a significant role in inspiring and guiding me at the beginning of this process. Thank you for your expertise and kindness.
- To Dr Michael Harrison and Waterford Institute of Technology, thank you for funding this PhD and providing the flexibility to pursue this fantastic opportunity.
- A sincere thank you to all the participants. It was an honour to learn from you. Thank you for sharing your experiences.
- To Laura (my PhD friend) and Jean (my “PhD pusher”), thank you for your endless encouragement and voice of reason; it was needed on many an occasion.
- To my incredible family, my dad Tom, my mum Geraldine, and my big sister Elaine. Words are really not enough to express my gratitude for the endless support you have always provided me. You are simply amazing people, and in my eyes, the best family one could wish for. A special thank you for the feedback big sis!
- Finally, to Ian and Keelan, what can I say. You have been nothing but supportive throughout this journey. Without your support, this genuinely would not have been possible. You are both wonderful, and I am so happy that I can finally say to you - we have our weekends back!

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	2
Declaration.....	4
Acknowledgements	5
Table of contents	6
List of Tables	10
List of Figures.....	10
Chapter One: Introduction	11
Introduction	12
Structure of Thesis	13
Chapter Two: Literature Review	15
Literature Review.....	16
An Introduction to Transitions	16
Athlete Development and Transition Models	17
The Emergence of the Whole Person Perspective	17
The Emergence of the Athletic Career Perspective	19
Student-Athletes and Dual Careers	22
Third-Level Student-Athlete Experiences	24
Common Demands and Stressors	25
Resources.....	27
The Micro Dimension: The Impact of Personal Resources	28
The Meso Dimension: The Impact of Others	29
Structural Component	30
Functional Component	31
Considerations of Social Support	33
The Macro Dimension: The impact of the Environment (systems)	34
Dual Career Systems at a National Level: Policy Perspective	36
Dual Career Practice in Third-Level Institutes	39
Dual Career Practice in Ireland	43
Conclusion and Statement of Problem	47
Chapter Three: Main Methodology	50
Main Methodology.....	51
Qualitative Research	51

Research Design.....	52
Philosophical Stance.....	54
Choice of Research Methods	55
Participants and Sampling Strategy.....	56
Design Choices	59
Data Analysis Methods	64
Ethical Considerations and Data Management	65
Rigor.....	65
Chapter Four: Study 1.....	71
Introduction.....	72
Methodology	73
Study Design	73
Study Procedure	73
Participants	75
Data Analysis	75
Results.....	78
Programme Features.....	82
Support Available.....	83
Day to Day Practices	87
Competitiveness of Programmes.....	91
External Relationships	93
Most Valuable Support	94
Discussion.....	96
Strengths and Limitations	102
Conclusion	104
Chapter Five: Study 2.....	105
Introduction.....	106
Methods.....	107
Study Design	107
Participants.....	108
Study Procedures.....	108
Data Analysis	110
Results.....	112
Experiences Influences by Transitions and Context	112

The Need for Support Resources for Student-Athletes	118
Discussion	125
Strengths and Limitations	133
Conclusion	134
Chapter Six: Study 3.....	136
Introduction.....	137
Methodology	142
Participants	142
Procedures	143
Data Analysis	145
Results.....	148
Social Support Practice	150
Influencing Factors of Social Support.....	163
Discussion	175
Strength and Limitations	180
Conclusion	181
Chapter Seven: Study 4	183
Introduction.....	184
Methodology	185
Study Design	185
Participants	185
Procedures	185
Data Analysis	186
Results.....	188
Providing Support for Student-Athletes.....	189
Perceived Requirements for Change	197
Discussion	208
Strengths and Limitations	211
Conclusion	211
Chapter Eight: Final Discussion.....	212
Introduction.....	213
Theoretical Implications.....	214
Practical Implications.....	220
Strengths in the Research	223

Limitations in the Research.....	225
Recommendations for Future Research	226
Conclusion	228
References	229
Appendix A. Study 1 Interview Schedule	266
Appendix B. Study 2 Focus Group Interview Schedule	268
Appendix C. Study 3 Support Provider Interview Schedule	270
Appendix D. Study 3 Student-Athlete Interview Schedule	272
Appendix E. Study 4 Interview Schedule	274

List of Tables

Table 1: Summary of Third-Level Sport Scholarship Programmes	79
Table 2: Categories of Support	82
Table 3: Study2 Participant Information.....	108
Table 4: Study 4 Participant Information.....	142
Table 5: Type of Support	151
Table 6: Enhancing Dual Career Practice in Ireland	198

List of Figures

Figure 1: The Holistic Athletic Career Model	19
Figure 2: Athletic Career Transition Model.....	21
Figure 3: Study 3 Results Diagram.....	149
Figure 4: Study 4 Results Diagram.....	188

Chapter One

Introduction

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an introduction to the topic under investigation, beginning with a brief overview of the literature and concluding with the overall aim and structure of the thesis. A dual career is defined as “a career with a foci on sport and studies or work” (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2015, p. 1), and the attention of this thesis relates to the third-level student-athlete population. Dual career research in this area has developed over the past 20 years (Stambulova et al., 2020), with scholars focusing on various perspectives such as experiences of student-athletes (micro perspective), social support for student-athletes (meso perspective), and a systemic focus regarding dual career (macro perspective). From a micro perspective, there are many associated benefits from engaging in a dual career, including personal development (Fuchs et al., 2016), more rounded personal and social identity (Harrison & Lawrence, 2004; Jetten et al., 2009; Killeya-Jones, 2005; Lally, 2007; Murphy et al., 1996; O’Halloran & Haslem, 2020; Stambulova et al., 2015; Torregrosa et al., 2015), positive distraction (Aquilina, 2013; Price et al., 2015; Price et al., 2010), healthier adjustments to transitions (Brown et al., 2015; Debois et al., 2015; European Commission, 2012; Park et al., 2013; Stambulova et al., 2015), and future employability (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007; Aquilina, 2013; Burden et al., 2004; Coffee & Lavalley, 2014; Danish et al., 1992; European Commission, 2012; McKnight et al., 2009). However, student-athletes also experience a variety of transitional demands (Stambulova, 2003; Wylleman & Lavalley, 2004; Wylleman et al., 2013) and combining sport and education can be difficult (Condello et al., 2019; Cosh & Tully, 2014; Geranosova & Ronkainen, 2015). As such, engaging in a dual career can be a concern for many elite athletes (Ryba et al., 2014).

Successfully combining education and high-level sport is more likely when resources match or exceed demands (Cosh & Tully, 2014; Giacobbi et al., 2004; MacNamara & Collins, 2010; Stambulova, 2003; Stambulova et al., 2015). Demands and resources can be internal and external and include the person, the situation, and the environment. For example, student-athlete competencies (MacNamara & Collins, 2010), the type and level of social support available (Burden et al., 2004; Giacobbi et al., 2004; Rhind et al., 2011), and elements of the environment (Aquilina & Henry, 2010; Morris et al., 2020; European Commission, 2012, 2016).

Extant literature suggests that Ireland has a predominantly Laissez-Faire approach to dual career policy and practice (Aquilina & Henry, 2010; European Commission, 2012, 2016). This approach can negatively impact student-athletes experiences as structures tend to be more rigid and inconsistent (Aquilina, 2013; European Commission, 2012, 2016; Kuettel et al., 2017). However, minimal dual career research has been conducted from an Irish perspective (e.g. Gomez et al., 2018; Lane et al., 2015). Researchers have recommended conducting cultural-specific research (Lupo et al., 2015; Stambulova et al., 2009; Stambulova & Ryba, 2014) in order to fully understand student-athletes experiences and context. This current thesis aims to explore dual career practice and experiences of third-level student-athletes and stakeholders in Ireland from a micro, meso, and macro perspective.

Structure of Thesis

Following the current Chapter One introduction and structure of thesis, Chapter Two presents the literature review that frames the four studies of this thesis. This chapter contains the theoretical frameworks on which this thesis is based, key dual career research, and concludes with an overview of Irish specific research. Chapter Three presents an overview and rationale of the methodological approach chosen, including the researchers'

philosophical position. Chapter Four presents Study 1, providing a comprehensive overview of the type of support available in Irish third-level institutes in order to provide an understanding of dual career structures in Ireland. Chapter Five presents Study 2, an examination of student-athletes experiences of combining education and sport, along with their perceptions of dual career support in third-level institutes. Chapter Six presents Study 3, which further explores the concept of social support from a provider and receiver perspective, which was a main theme from Studies 1 and 2. Chapter Seven presents the final Study (4). Study 4 investigated support providers experiences and recommendations to enhance dual career practice in Ireland. Finally, Chapter Eight presents the final discussion, including theoretical and practical implications, strengths and limitations, recommendations, and concluding remarks.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

Literature Review

An Introduction to Transitions

The study of athletic career transitions has developed significantly over the past half a century (Hatamleh, 2013; Stambulova, 2000, 2003; Stambulova et al., 2020; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004; Wylleman et al., 2013). A transition is defined as “an event or non-event which results in a change in assumptions about oneself and the world and thus requires a corresponding change in one’s behaviours and relationships” (Schlossberg, 1981, p. 5). An event is something that happens, whereas a non-event is something that is expected and planned for but does not happen (e.g. deselection). Transitions can also be normative or non-normative. A normative transition is expected and predictable and is typically a natural occurrence or progression. An example of a normative transition in sport is transitioning from junior to senior level, or from competitive sport to discontinuation. On the other hand, a non-normative transition is an event that is not planned or predictable and is usually not a typical occurrence. An example of this type of transition is experiencing a season ending injury, which is unpredicted and involuntary (Schlosberg, 1984; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004).

More recently, the term quasi-normative transition was proposed as an additional transition category that reflects predictable transitions related to specific groups or categories of athletes. For example, a cultural transition where an athlete travels abroad to study and train in a different country (Stambulova, 2016; Stambulova et al., 2020). Transitions are of interest in sport psychology as they typically result in change, requiring an athlete to adapt to manage the transition successfully.

Athlete Development and Transition Models

Early transition research initially focused on retirement (McPherson, 1980; Rosenberg, 1981, 1984) and viewed transitions as a conclusion. As research advanced, focus shifted from transitions being a single and negative event to a process with several potential outcomes (Schlossberg, 1981; Stambulova et al., 2020; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). As there are overlapping timeframes regarding some research perspectives, with many of these developments running in parallel, the transition models will be presented in two sections: Whole Person Perspective and Athletic Career Perspective.

The Emergence of the “Whole Person” Perspective

Early researchers studied athlete development solely from an athletic lifespan perspective (Bloom, 1985; Côté, 1999; Stambulova, 1994). An elite athlete can take roughly 10 years to attain elite status and a further 5-10 years of elite-level competition, depending on the sport (Wylleman et al., 2004; Wylleman & Reints, 2010). During these years, an athlete is also developing in various areas of their life (e.g. personally and socially). Researchers began to recognise significant developments outside of the athletic sphere and started exploring transitions outside of sport (Danish et al., 1992; Stambulova, 1994; Wylleman & Lavalée, 2004).

Wylleman and Lavalée (2004) first proposed the “Developmental Model of Transitions” in sport which presented four normative transitions throughout an athlete’s lifetime. The model illustrates a multidimensional approach to transitions and considers; athletic, psychological, social, and academic/vocational elements. This model was later updated (Wylleman et al., 2013; Wylleman & Rosier, 2016) to include two additional transition categories, financial and legal, and renamed the “The Holistic Athletic Career

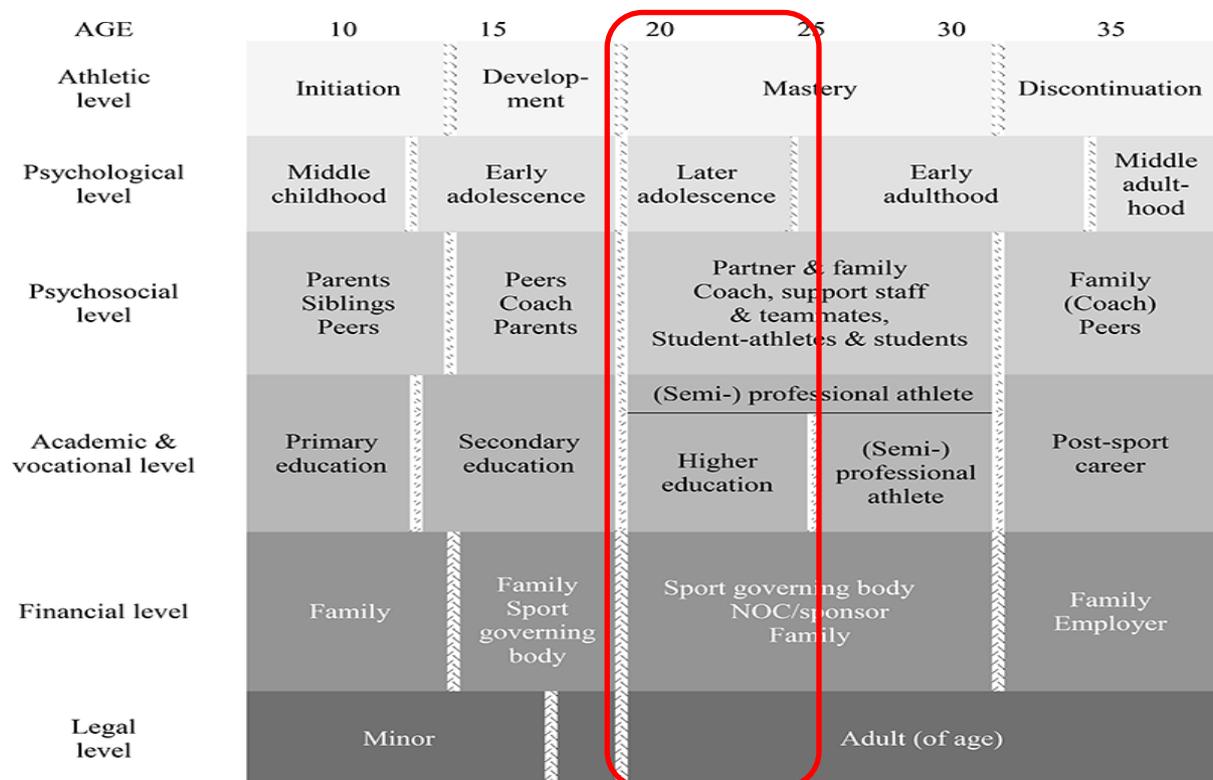
Model” (Figure 1). A red line has been inserted into Figure 1 to illustrate the population of interest of this thesis which is third-level student-athletes.

The top layer represents the athletic level from initiation into the sport until discontinuation/retirement. This layer is similar to the earlier stage development models (e.g. Bloom, 1985). As an athlete progresses in age and skill level, so does their athletic level as they advance from junior to senior. The second layer represents the psychological level of development. This relates to chronological and biological age and moves from childhood through to adulthood. The third layer represents the psychosocial level associated with the athlete’s social development and represents their relationships and who is influential at stages of their life. The fourth level represents the academic/vocational level. This level views transitions within the athletes academic training, representing transitions from primary to secondary school, onto higher education and finally to a professional occupation. The fifth layer represents the financial level and illustrates changes regarding financial status as they progress from being dependant on their family to potentially receiving funding from a national or sporting organisation. The final and most recently added level is the legal level. This layer illustrates the legal change from dependence to independence from others.

Although this model can be viewed in six individual parts, it is intended to show the interaction of all transitions and that more than one transition can occur at one time (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004, Wylleman et al., 2013; Wylleman & Rosier, 2016). To illustrate, an athlete may be transitioning from secondary to third-level education, transitioning in their sporting career from junior level to senior level, while also moving away from home. These transitions can result in changes in coaches, social networks, and financial security. It is just as important to consider these developmental demands and how they may impact or influence each other as opposed to isolated events (Wylleman & Reints, 2010).

Figure 1

The Holistic Athletic Career Model (Wylleman, 2019)



Note: The red rectangle has been inserted by the researcher of this thesis to demonstrate the age profile and transition stages of this thesis's target population.

The Emergence of the “Athletic Career” Perspective

While the previous model has presented a normative developmental stage-based approach, other models have focused on the process of adapting and coping during the transition process (Schlossberg, 1981; Stambulova, 2003; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). Schlossberg (1981) was one of the first to develop a view of the transition as a process, developing the “Model of Human Adaptation to Transitions”. This model is based on four S's: situation, self, support, and strategies. Schlossberg felt the transitions themselves were not the primary significance, but rather how they correspond with a person's situation and available resources at a particular time. Along similar lines, Danish et al. (1992, p.406)

proposed that “crisis means opportunity, not catastrophe”, suggesting that transitions do not have to result in something negative, but are dependant on various interrelated elements.

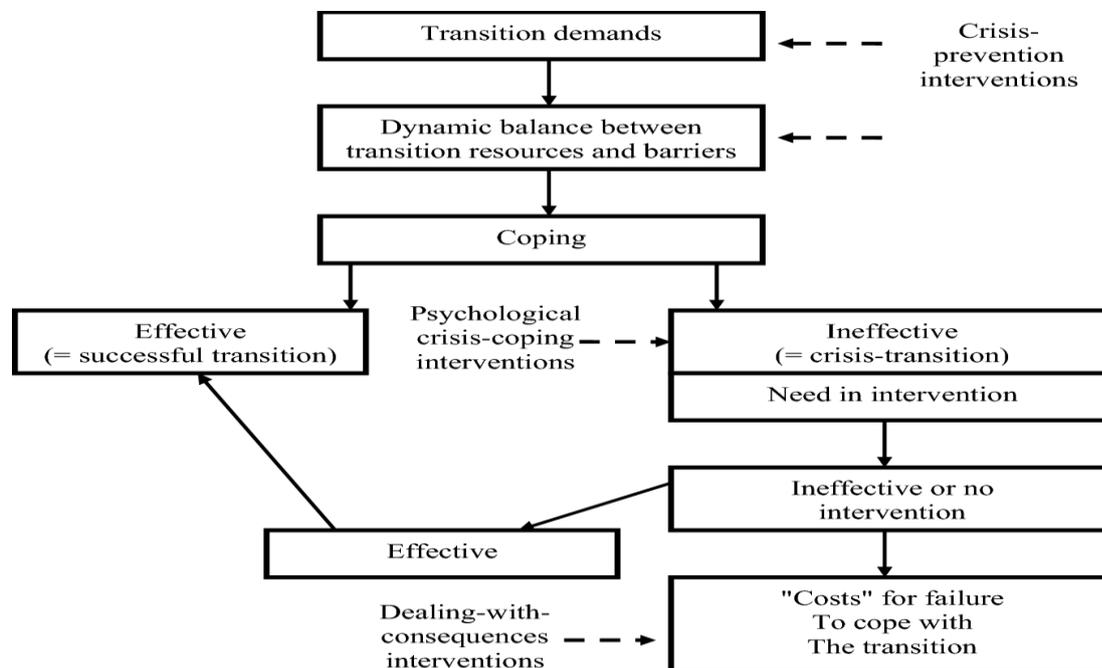
Several sports researchers began applying Schlossberg’s model in sport psychology and social psychology research (Danish et al., 1992; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993; Stambulova, 2003; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). Stambulova (2003) proposed the “Athletic Career Transition Model” (Figure 2), introducing the concept of coping strategies to help manage and progress through transitions. This model suggests that for the athlete to transition successfully, they must find a balance between the resources available and the demands of that situation. Both demands and resources can be internal and external and can relate to the person, the situation and the environment. Examples of these include an athlete’s characteristics, the level and type of social support available, and the characteristics of the environment.

As can be noted from the model (Figure 2), there are two possible transition outcomes. An effective transition, where the athlete successfully balances the necessary resources and can cope with the transition demands effectively in order to progress. Or an ineffective transition where the athlete does not successfully cope with the demands of the transition and an intervention is necessary. In addition, there are also two possible outcomes relating to the ineffective transition. The first requires intervention and leads to a successful yet possibly delayed transition if the intervention is effective. However, the latter occurs when the intervention is not successful and results in the “cost of failure”. In this instance, the athlete does not successfully transition.

This model highlights the importance of support for athletes experiencing transitions and proposes that support is vital to prevent “crisis transitions” (Cacija, 2007; Stambulova, 2003). Similar to previous models and research (Danish et al., 1992; Schlossberg, 1981; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993), Stambulova (2003) suggested that it is the athlete’s current situation and perception of the transition that contributes to the outcome.

Figure 2

Athletic Career Transition Model (Stambulova, 2003)



Considerable research has been conducted in the area of retirement from sport and within athletic career transitions using guidance from the Holistic Athletic Career Model and the Athletic Career Transition Model (Alferman & Stambulova, 2007; Brown et al., 2015; Kadlcik & Flemr, 2008; Samuel et al., 2019; Samuel & Tenenbaum, 2011; Torregrosa et al., 2015; Wylleman & Reints, 2010). Over the past twenty years, research relating to student-athlete transitions has received more attention (Brown et al., 2015; Condello et al., 2019; Cosh & Tully, 2014; Fryklund, 2012; Guiotti et al., 2015; Harrison & Lawrence, 2004; MacNamara & Collins, 2010; Stambulova et al., 2015; Tekavc et al., 2015). This current thesis focuses on third-level student-athletes and is guided by both the Holistic Athletic Career Model and the Athletic Career Transition Model.

Student-Athletes and Dual Careers

Student-athletes are defined as “a group of individuals who are still in education but also train at a high level in sport” (Aquilina, 2009, p.27). Student-athletes come under the umbrella term of “dual career”, which is defined as “a career with a foci on sport and studies or work” (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2015, p. 1). The terms student-athlete and dual career athlete have been used interchangeably in the research to describe the participants of interest. For clarity, throughout this thesis, student-athletes will be the term used to describe the person/group (e.g. the majority of student-athletes expressed a positive experience of combining education and sport), whereas the term dual career will be used to describe the concept of combining third-level education and sport (e.g. engaging in a dual career has a number of associated benefits).

Much research has been conducted relating to dual career athletes worldwide (Aquilina, 2013; Brown et al., 2015; Burnett et al., 2010; Condello et al., 2019; Cosh & Tully, 2010; Kane et al., 2008; Miller & Kerr, 2002; Potuto & O’Hanlon, 2007). In Europe, 2004 marked the “European Year of Education Through Sport” (EYES) with the purpose of supporting and promoting communication between sport and education in research and practice. In the same year, the “European Athlete as Student” network (EAS) was formed to support European efforts in promoting dialogue between education and sport. Since 2004, there has been a consistent wave of dual career funded projects and individual studies conducted in European countries, and dual career research in Europe has become “flourishing and dominant” (Stambulova et al., 2020). Dual career research has varied in focus from student-athlete experiences, dual career policy, social support, to environmental support (Aquilina, 2013; Aquilina & Henry, 2010; Brown et al., 2015; Capranica et al., 2015; Caput-Jogunica et al., 2012; ECO-DC, 2018; European Commission, 2012, 2016; Fuchs et al., 2016; GEES, 2016; Henriksen et al., 2020; Morris et al., 2020; Stambulova et al., 2015).

Dual careers are becoming more widespread, with several studies reporting an increase in the volume of student-athletes attending third-level (De Bosscher et al., 2016; Kane et al., 2008; Price et al., 2010; Wylleman & Lavallee 2004). Although the exact number is hard to quantify, it is estimated that there are approximately 120,000 student-athletes across Europe per year (European Commission, 2016). There are several benefits associated with engaging in a dual career. Education is a crucial aspect of personal development (Fuchs et al., 2016) and engaging in a dual career can help athletes develop transferable skills and increase the chance of future employability (Aquilina, 2013; Burden et al., 2004; Coffee & Lavallee, 2014; MacNamara & Collins, 2010; Danish et al., 1992; European Commission, 2012; McKnight et al., 2009; Stambulova et al., 2009). Developing such transferable skills can also help prepare for and adjust more positively to a post-athletic career (Debois et al., 2015; European Commission, 2012; Park et al., 2013; Stambulova et al., 2015; Torregrosa et al., 2015).

Having a strong or exclusive athletic identity can negatively impact athletes by increasing the risk of identity foreclosure (Erpič et al., 2004; Petitpas et al., 2013; Pummell et al., 2008). It can also cause delayed independence as a result of over-dependence on the coach or significant others. This delayed independence can impact developing other identities, hindering transitions and the ability to cope with the effects of critical life events (Howard-Hamilton & Sina, 2001). Having an alternative focus such as a dual career can help develop more rounded and integrated identities, help formulate a healthier adjustment to a post-athletic career, and reduce the risk of experiencing an identity crisis (Anderson, 2012; Aquilina, 2013; Brown et al., 2015; Harrison & Lawrence, 2004; Killeya-Jones, 2005; Lally, 2007; Murphy et al., 1996; Stambulova et al., 2015; Torregrosa et al., 2015). In addition, being a student-athlete can help widen one's social network (social identity) by developing

friendships outside of sport. Belonging to multiple social groups is a protective factor during transition and retirement from sport (Jetten et al., 2009; O'Halloran & Haslem, 2020).

In the shorter-term, focusing on more than one aspect of life provides a sense of intellectual stimulation and relief from the pressure of sport, with many student-athletes reporting that this helps them perform better athletically and lengthen their athletic career (Aquilina, 2013, Pink et al., 2015; Price et al., 2010).

Third-Level Student-Athlete Experiences

Although there are many benefits of engaging in a dual career, there are also several demands and stressors which have been referred to as the “cost of dual careers” (Stambulova, 2003; Stambulova et al., 2015). According to Henry (2010, p.12), the “pursuit of goals in two different fields at the same time might be regarded by some as at best a compromise, and at worst as generating conflicting priorities which undermine performance in both education and elite sport”. There is general agreement that student-athletes experience more demands than their non-sporting counterparts (Harrison & Lawrence 2004; Kissenger & Miller, 2009; MacNamara & Collins, 2010; Watt & Moore, 2001).

Research exploring student-athletes experience has found varying results as experiences may be influenced by the context (Brown et al., 2015; Buner et al., 2008). Studies have revealed divergent experiences ranging from positive yet challenging, to more difficult and problematic experiences (Brown et al., 2015; Condello et al., 2019; Cosh & Tully, 2014; Geranosova & Ronkainen, 2015; Li & Sum, 2017; McKenna & Dustan-Lewis, 2004; Parsons, 2013; Potuto & O'Hanlon 2007; Stambulova et al., 2015). Utilising the Athletic Career Transition Model (Stambulova, 2003), successfully combining education and sport is more likely when resources match or exceed demands (Cosh & Tully, 2014; Giacobbi et al., 2004; MacNamara & Collins, 2010; Stambulova, 2003; Stambulova et al., 2015). An

important point to note in existing research is that elements of demands and resources are connected. For example, having academic flexibility in place is a resource for some student-athletes, whereas a lack of academic flexibility is a demand for others (Aquilina, 2013; Condello et al., 2019; Stambulova et al., 2015).

Common Demands and Stressors

Several commonalities regarding demands and stressors have been found in dual career research. In line with transition models such as the Holistic Athletic Career Model (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004, Wylleman et al., 2013; Wylleman & Rosier, 2016), as student-athletes progress in their development, the demands of sport and education also tend to increase (Fuchs et al., 2016; MacNamara & Collins 2010; Ryba et al., 2014; Stambulova et al., 2015). As such, many high-level student-athletes in third-level education have complex time demands. Some athletes train 20 to 30 hours per week, with the same amount of time recommended for sufficient education (Aquilina, 2009, 2013; Condello et al., 2019; Guidotti et al., 2015). In addition, many third-level institutes have requirements to play in return for sport-scholarship support (Amara et al., 2004; Ryan et al., 2017), causing additional time demands that can impact tiredness, recovery and academic engagement (Brown et al., 2015; Burnett et al., 2010; Condello et al., 2019). These time demands can force student-athletes to choose between education and sport due to conflicting demands (Bengtsson & Johnson, 2012; Calvo et al., 2010; Cosh & Tully, 2014; Giacobbi et al., 2004). In line with the previous reference to experiences being context dependant (Brown et al., 2015; Buner et al., 2008), these time demands may be situation dependant (e.g. level and sport). For example, some studies have reported that higher level athletes (e.g. international) perceive higher effects on their education role (e.g. missing classes due to training or travel for sporting commitments) than national level student-athletes (Aquilina, 2013; Fuchs et al., 2016).

Many third-level student-athletes have reported financial challenges due to a lack of time to engage in part-time work (Geraniosova & Ronkainen, 2015; Papanikolaou et al., 2003; Wylleman & Rosier, 2016). This may also be magnified due to increased responsibility and less dependence on parental support. As such, student-athletes can struggle to fund their dual career without financial support from National Governing Bodies (NGB) or their third-level institute (Brown et al., 2015; Wylleman & Rosier, 2016).

Student-athletes may have several “stakeholders” involved at different levels of their dual career, and researchers have found that student-athletes report higher levels of stress from a variety of personal relationships (e.g. coach, family, peers, academic staff) compared to non-student-athletes (Papanikolaou et al., 2003; Wilson & Pritchard, 2005). In particular, relationships with coaches and academic staff have been regularly cited as a source of stress (Aquilina, 2013; Condello et al., 2019; Engstrom et al., 1995; Ferrante et al., 1996; Hassell et al., 2010; Henriksen et al., 2010; McKenna & Dustan-Lewis, 2004; Parsons, 2013; Potuto & O’Hanlon 2007; Puskas & Perenyi, 2015; Pummell et al., 2008). Factors contributing to the perceived stress and demands from others include lack of understanding of dual career demands and support, poor communication between sport and education stakeholders, conflicting messages provided by different stakeholders, and conflicting priorities between different stakeholders (Adams et al., 2015; Brown et al., 2015; Caput-Jogunica, 2012; Marx et al., 2008; Rees, 2007; Skinner, 2004). According to Caput-Jogunica (2012), stakeholders may have different interests resulting in different opinions on what the student-athlete should be doing, which can cause confusion for student-athletes. For example, in some cases, coaches lacked tolerance or appreciation for the education side of athlete development (Guidotti et al., 2015; Hassell et al., 2010; Henriksen et al., 2010). One suggestion for this is due to education being viewed as a “rival” in terms of time and energy. In comparison, other research has highlighted a lack of understanding or awareness of dual career demands from

academic staff impacted support available from within the third-level institute (McKenna & Dustan-Lewis, 2004; Puskas & Perenyi, 2015).

Organisational factors have also been found to cause additional stress for student-athletes. Specific to this thesis, inconsistent dual career practice (e.g. the existence or lack of dual career policies) within third-level institutes is a primary source of stress (Aquilina, 2013; Brown et al., 2015; Cosh & Tully, 2014; Stambulova et al., 2015). According to Brown et al. (2015), student-athletes may have divergent experiences depending on the third-level institute they attend due to the systemic and interpersonal structures. This will be discussed in more detail in a later section called “The Macro Dimension: The Impact of the Environment (systems)”.

Resources

Transitions are connected to the resources and perceptions of the event (Danish et al., 1992; Schlossberg, 1985; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993; Stambulova, 2003). In line with the Athletic Career Transition Model (Stambulova, 2003), combining education and sport can be mutually complementary and successful when resources match or exceed demands (Aquilina 2013; Cacija 2007; Pummell et al., 2008; Stambulova, 2003; Stambulova et al., 2015). Support for athletes experiencing transitions is vital in order to prevent a “crisis transition” (Cacija, 2007; Stambulova, 2003). The latest systematic reviews on European dual career and athletic transitions note that resources can fall under; Micro (personal), Meso (interpersonal/social support), and Macro (environment/external agents) dimensions (Guidotti et al., 2015; Li & Sum, 2017; Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019; Stambulova et al., 2020). The next three sections will discuss these individually.

The Micro Dimension: The Impact of Personal Recourses

The micro dimension of dual career research relates to the individual. Connecting to the Athletic Career Transition Model (Stambulova, 2003), personal competencies are an example of internal resources. Research recognises the impact and importance of personal competencies in helping student-athletes navigate and manage dual career demands (Brown et al., 2015; De Brant, 2017; GEES, 2016; MacNamara & Collins, 2010; MacNamara et al., 2010). These researchers propose the importance of student-athletes taking responsibility for their dual career and highlight a need to develop personal competencies as protective factors. Competencies such as time-management, planning, communicating effectively with support networks, and effective decision-making are noted as essential skills. One focus of this research has been on providing support programmes within third-level institutes and sporting organisations to help facilitate student-athletes developing necessary personal skills (Condello et al., 2019; De Brant, 2017; GEES, 2016; MacNamara & Collins, 2010; Sharp & Sheilley, 2008; Watt & Moore, 2001).

Even when support services and programmes are available, ensuring student-athletes engage in the available programmes is also important as research has demonstrated that student-athletes may have low familiarity or engagement with dual career policies and support programmes within their institutions (Condello et al., 2019). Many researchers have emphasised that in order for student-athletes to gain sufficient skills and be actively involved, they require guidance to help them access this support (Kuettel et al., 2018; Marx et al., 2008; Stambulova, 2010; Williams et al., 2010). Consideration is required to develop programmes and support services and also how to engage and involve student-athletes in these programmes.

The Meso Dimension: The Impact of Others

The meso dimension of dual career research focuses on the impact of interpersonal relationships and social support. Social support was initially researched in the context of health and wellbeing, with several early researchers reporting the importance of social relationships or lack of, on health-related aspects (Cassel, 1976; Cobb, 1976; Sarason et al., 1990). In 1976, both Cassel and Cobb wrote papers outlining social support as a moderator of stress, specifically in crisis and transition situations. These early works initiated interest in the meaning of social support, the effect of social support, and the mechanisms underlying social support.

The definition of social support has caused great debate. Although many variations have been presented, one of the most common definitions recognises social support as “an exchange of resources between at least two individuals perceived by the provider or the recipient to be intended to enhance the wellbeing of the recipient” (Shumaker & Brownell, 1984, p.13). While social support is referred to as a complex multidimensional process (Holt & Hoar, 2006; Rees, 2007; Rees & Hardy, 2000; Richman et al., 1989; Sarason et al., 1990; Shumaker & Brownell, 1984; Udry, 1996), research suggests that supported people are healthier both physically and emotionally than unsupported people (Bianco & Eklund, 2001; Jowett & Lavalley, 2007; Shumaker & Brownell, 1984). Social support can help reduce the effect of stress and uncertainty (Lackey & Cohen, 2000; Rosenfeld et al., 2000).

As a resource, many studies have found the impact and benefit of a rich support system in a variety of sport settings such as injured athletes (Bianco & Eklund, 2001; Hardy et al., 1999; Urdy, 1996), decreasing burnout and stress and increasing wellbeing (Burns et al., 2018; Coan et al., 2006; DeFreese & Smith, 2013; Gabana et al., 2017; Jeon et al., 2016), competitive performance (Freeman et al., 2011; Rees & Hardy, 2000; Rees & Hardy, 2004; Sarason et al., 1990), and effectively managing athletic career transitions (Adams et al., 2015;

Schlossberg, 1984; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). More specifically to this thesis, researchers propose that social support is one of the most positive resources to help student-athletes balance a dual career in higher education (Alferman & Stambulova, 2007; Cacija, 2007; Giacobbi et al., 2004; Lavallee & Wylleman, 2000; Pummel et al., 2008; Stambulova et al., 2015; Tracey & Corlett, 1995; Wylleman et al., 2004). Social support includes a structural component (who provides support) and a functional component (what support is perceived to be available or received).

Structural Component

The structural component relates to social support providers and can be referred to as the social support network (Holt & Hoar, 2006). The social support network is person dependant. It can be narrow (parents and partners) or broad (global networks such as teammates, housemates, coaches, peers, institute support, acquaintances), highlighting the complex nature and volume of influential stakeholders student-athletes potential global supporting network (Aquilina, 2013).

Interpersonal relationships are important as they can influence decision making and coping strategies through their perceptions or attitudes of dual career development (De Bosscher et al., 2006; Li & Sum, 2017). As can be appreciated from the Holistic Athletic Career Model (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004; Wylleman et al., 2013; Wylleman & Rosier, 2016), an athletes' support network (psychosocial level) evolves with age. Family has been found to be the most stable form of social support throughout an athletes' life due to developmental, emotional and financial support (Holt & Hoar, 2006; Wureth et al., 2004; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). However, as student-athletes move away from their main source of social support, they become more independent from their families and begin to rely more on others (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). Three significant support providers cited most

frequently for student-athletes are parents, coaches, and third-level support staff (Bell, 2009; Condello et al., 2019; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004).

Functional Component

The functional component of support relates to the type of support we get from others and can be broken down further into perceived and received support. Perceived support refers to the potential availability of social support if required and is subjectively based on the recipient's judgement. In comparison, received support refers to specific resources provided by significant others (Freeman et al., 2011; Uchino, 2009).

Regarding received support, studies have investigated the types and benefit of support that athletes receive (Cutrona & Russell, 1990; Freeman & Rees, 2009; Freeman et al., 2011; Rees & Hardy, 2000). The four most common and reoccurring dimensions are; esteem support, emotional support, tangible support, and informational support (Holt & Hoar, 2006; Rees & Hardy, 2000). Esteem support is described as the support provided by other people through reinforcing one's belief and self-worth. An example of this would be a coach giving positive and constructive feedback. Emotional support is when one feels they are cared for by others and can turn to someone for security during stressful times. Tangible support is a form of material or physical support. An example of this is a financial bursary to help with new equipment or getting a massage for an injury. Informational support is when an athlete is provided with some form of advice. An example of this could be a physical trainer developing a programme to increase an athlete's strength which is necessary for increased performance in competition.

Specific to third-level student-athletes, support required is situation and person dependant. However, the most commonly cited supports by student-athletes for managing their dual career include academic flexibility, financial assistance, and mentoring (Aquilina,

2013; Brown et al., 2015; Burnett et al., 2010; Geraniosova & Ronkainen, 2015; Stambulova et al., 2015), all of which are forms of emotional, esteem, informational and tangible support.

Structural and functional components are interrelated. Different people provide different forms of support (Adams et al., 2015; Udry, 1996; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004), with student-athletes reporting different preferences regarding support networks (Rees, 2007). For example, Rosenfeld et al. (2000) found that teammates and parents provided more listening support and understanding, whereas the coach provided more technical and informational support. Similarly, Brown et al. (2015) found that friends provided a distraction, family members provided emotional and financial support, while coaches provided information support. There is growing evidence for the importance and positive effect of a “combined support” effort between significant support providers, specifically sport and education (Adams et al., 2015; Burden et al., 2004; Giacobbi et al., 2004; Rosenfeld et al., 2000; Sheridan et al., 2014; Vujic, 2004). However, connecting back to the demands and stressors section, conflict between various “stakeholders” is a common source of stress for student-athletes, indicating a potential gap in some cases between social support as a demand or a resource.

Regarding perceived support, the perception of available support can be more important than support received. A vast amount of research to date has found that people with a high level of perceived support feel they have the necessary resources and support to cope with situations (Bianco & Eklund, 2001; DeFreese & Smith, 2013; Holt & Hoar, 2006; Rothberg, 2011; Sarason et al., 1990; Thotis, 1995; Wethington & Kessler, 1986). Relating specifically to student-athlete research, Rhind et al. (2011) found that social support had a positive relationship with student-athletes satisfaction with their dual career. The more people the student-athletes felt were available to provide support when necessary, the more satisfied they were with their support network.

Considerations of Social Support

The above literature illustrates social support as a resource. Yet, social support is also complex, and studies have demonstrated that the mere presence of a support network does not automatically result in effective social support (Freeman et al., 2014; Holt & Hoar, 2006). The same people who provide support can also be a source of stress (Morris et al., 2016). There are several influencing factors to consider regarding the providers and receivers of support.

Athletes can feel more willing to seek support from others if they feel comfortable with providers, feel providers are interested and feel support will be available, emphasising the importance of close trusting relationships (Adams et al., 2015; Bianco & Eklund, 2001; Brown et al., 2015; Freeman et al., 2009; Giacobbi et al., 2004; Puskas & Perenyi, 2015; Rothberg, 2011). However, developing close and trusting relationships is a process that requires time and social skills (Giacobbi et al., 2004).

Understanding student-athletes demands and needs is an important concept in social support and dual career literature. Support provider understanding (e.g. coach or education) contributes to more positive student-athlete experiences (Aquilina, 2013; Brown et al., 2015; McKenna & Dustan-Lewis, 2004). Student-athletes feel more supported by providers when they understand their dual career needs and not just solely focused on role-specific aspects such as coaching or education (Burns et al., 2019; Geranosova & Ronkainen, 2015; McKenna & Dustan-Lewis, 2004; Pummell et al., 2008; Puskas & Perenyi 2015, Skinner, 2004). Understanding dual career needs is also known as contextual awareness/knowledge (Banwell & Kerr, 2016; Brown et al., 2015; Geranosova & Ronkainen, 2015; Knight et al., 2018; Stambulova et al., 2015).

Yet, understanding student-athlete needs is only one element of “understanding”. It is also necessary to understand how best to provide such support (Brown et al., 2015;

Stambulova et al., 2015) as social support provided is not always of benefit to the receiver (Rees, 2007). Unskilled people are often poor providers of social support (Rees, 2007; Rees & Hardy, 2000). Some researchers have expressed that skills gaps may exist in some aspects of dual career support (Banwell & Kerr, 2016; Ronkainen et al., 2018), suggesting that providers may understand the need for particular support but may lack the skills in providing that support effectively. This is referred to as declarative versus procedural knowledge (Banwell & Kerr, 2016). One potential contributing factor associated with this gap is that some support providers (e.g. coaches or third-level sport-scholarship coordinators) have uncertain or broad job profiles, which can result in roles regarding dual career support not being explicit (Banwell & Kerr 2016; GEES, 2016; Ronkainen et al., 2018; Ryba et al., 2014). This may result in limited dual career specific training and can cause a gap in responsibility and awareness for dual career support requirements. For example, some researchers have proposed that many coaches have limited training in terms of providing support on issues outside of technical aspects and often rely on their own experiences (Banwell & Kerr, 2016; Ronkainen et al., 2018). Acknowledging the need for skilled dual career support providers, an Erasmus + project called the ‘Gold in Education and Elite Sport’ (GEES) developed a handbook (GEES, 2016) to help dual career providers identify and develop their own competencies in working with student-athletes. Training modules are also available for dual career support providers through the resources of the project. Like developing student-athlete competencies (micro dimension), support and training for the support providers may be a key element in providing appropriate support.

The Macro Dimension: The Impact of the Environment (systems)

The macro dimension represents the environment and includes the system, policies, and people. Student-athletes will experience various environments throughout their dual

career, such as sports, education or vocation, and the national sport organisation environments. Researchers and practitioners are encouraged to acknowledge and understand the entire environment in which student-athletes are based (Guidotti et al., 2015; Henriksen et al., 2020; Stambulova et al., 2015; Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019). This thesis will focus specifically on the third-level institute as the macro environment.

As a dual career resource (Bianco & Eklund, 2001; Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; Freeman & Rees, 2009; Howard-Hamilton & Sina, 2001; Wylleman & Reints, 2010), the environment is noted as a key “dual career success factor” (Henriksen et al., 2010; Henriksen & Stambulova, 2017; Henriksen et al., 2020; Morris et al., 2020; Stambulova et al., 2015; Storm et al., 2021). A suitable dual career environment requires understanding and consistent, structured support from all stakeholders involved (Capranica et al., 2015; Carodine et al., 2001; Christenson & Sorensen, 2009; Fuchs et al., 2016; Guidotti et al., 2015; Park et al., 2013). Yet, several environmental issues can affect student-athletes, such as inconsistent practice or rigid structures, which can cause added pressure and stress (Fuchs et al., 2016; Pummell et al., 2008; Watt & Moore, 2001). The macro environment is noted as one of the most complex elements in dual career research as it is not under the direct control of the individual, and differences exist in third-level institutes worldwide (Aquilina & Henry, 2010; European Commission, 2012, 2016; Condello et al., 2019; MacNamara & Collins, 2010).

Existing research on the third-level environment has focused on: the types of dual career environments and policies that exist at a national level (Amara et al., 2004; Aquilina & Henry, 2010; Caput- Jogunica, 2012; Cartigny & Morris, 2020; Morris et al., 2020), single case investigations and comparisons of multiple third-level environments (Aquilina, 2013; Brown et al., 2015; Cloes et al., 2007; Cosh & Tully, 2014; Henriksen et al., 2020; Kuettel et al., 2018; McKenna & Dustan-Lewis, 2004; Ryan et al., 2017), and best practice guidelines for supporting dual career athletes (European Commission, 2012; 2016; ECO-DC, 2018;

Morris et al., 2020; Storm et al., 2021). The remainder of this chapter will focus on the third-level education environment considering research on policies, resources, and best practice guidelines.

Dual Career Systems at a National Level: Policy Perspective

For student-athletes, optimal balance requires flexibility in prioritising different aspects (e.g. sport and education) at different times of the year (Stambulova et al., 2015). This emphasises the need for awareness and acknowledgement of dual career needs and communication between all environments involved (Henriksen et al., 2010; Henriksen & Stambulova, 2017; ECO-DC, 2018; Henriksen et al., 2020; Storm et al., 2021). Yet, outside of America (NCAA), most other nations have separate education and sport domains (Ryan et al., 2017; Ryba et al., 2014). Sport and education in many countries in Europe have little to no relationship and are organised differently in each country (Aquilina & Henry, 2010; Capranica et al., 2015; Fuchs et al., 2016; Ryba et al., 2014; Wylleman & Reints, 2010), making it more difficult to coordinate.

Several studies have explored dual career structures within European Union countries (Amara et al., 2004; Aquilina & Henry, 2010; Caput- Jogunica, 2012; Morris et al., 2020). An initial review of dual career structures in place in 25 European Union member states (Amara et al., 2004) found that third-level institutes had either positive measures to accommodate athletes' needs or none at all. These positive measures included sport-specific services (e.g. sport psychology, strength and conditioning), sport-scholarships (e.g. finance), specific legislation, and special provisions and flexibility within academics. In a later related study, Aquilina and Henry (2010) extended these findings and proposed four different categories (typologies) of dual career systems in place at a national level:

1. *State Centric Regulation* (e.g. France, Hungary) - characterised by legislation or state regulation requiring academic institutions to provide adjusted supports and opportunities to their student-athletes (e.g. entry requirements, flexibility with exam dates and course delivery).
2. *State as Sponsor/Facilitator* (e.g. Belgium, Finland) - a formal system of acknowledgement for student athlete's needs where the Government enables rather than regulates universities roles in dual career.
3. *National Sporting Federations/Institutes Act as Intermediaries* (e.g. UK) - Sporting Institutions and National Governing Bodies cater for the needs of student-athletes, with staff from these organisations liaising with academic institutes to help secure flexible or "appropriate" arrangements.
4. *Laissez-Faire* (e.g. Ireland) - no formal structures exist at a national level and "negotiations" are made individually.

Since Aquilina and Henry's (2010) study, to the researcher's knowledge, Ireland has been included in two other national level dual career systems review (European Commission, 2012, 2016). The European Commission (2016) document states that the response from the Irish respondents was incomplete. However, the data generated suggests no formal dual career policy or structure exists, consistent with Aquilina and Henry's (2010) findings.

These findings are relevant as divergent policies and practices can impact student-athletes retirement career path (Capranica et al., 2015; Kuettel et al., 2018). For example, a Laissez-Faire approach may not adequately support a dual career resulting in some student-athletes not completing third-level education (European Commission, 2012). A cross-national comparative study (Kuettel et al., 2017) revealed that athletes from countries with different dual career systems (Laissez-Faire [LF], State as a Facilitator [SasF], and State Centred [SC]) differed in the education level attained by retirement from sport. The study found that 39% of

Swiss athletes (LF) had a degree upon retirement, in comparison to 65% of Danish athletes (SasF), and 85% Polish athletes (SC) (Kuettel et al., 2017). These results suggest that divergent structure may influence the level of study attained upon retirement. Researchers have expressed value in conducting cultural specific dual career research, encouraging studies to consider theory, practice and context of the country and environment within their results (Ryan et al., 2017; Brown et al., 2015; Lupo et al., 2015; Stambulova & Ryba, 2013, 2014; Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019).

Inconsistencies in dual career practice prompted the publication of the “European Union Guidelines for Dual Career Practice” (European Commission, 2012). Broadly, these guidelines were produced to raise awareness of the concept of dual career at a national level. The guidelines were also produced to inspire and guide policymakers to formulate and adopt national-level dual career guidelines in member states, as no single dual career practice model exists. The document proposed 35 guidelines ranging from specific sector recommendations (e.g. flexible online learning for student-athletes) to national level recommendations (e.g. develop a joined-up approach or “common statute” for countries with no dual career legislation). The publication of the European document (2012) provided a benchmark for dual career practice and helped some countries develop their own cultural specific dual career framework (e.g. Sweden’s National Guidelines, 2018). However, a follow-up study of member states (European Commission, 2017) regarding the “state of play concerning the implementation of the European guidelines on dual careers” has revealed that many countries have not adopted the 2012 guidelines. In particular, 35% of participants responded with a negative evaluation of the development and position on dual career measures in their country, 42% of respondents reported there was no lead agency regarding dual career in their country, and 52% of respondents reported that there was no dual career policy at a national or regional level in their country. Although the 2012 guidelines have provided a valuable contribution

towards awareness and discourse of dual career policy and practice, each country has specific political and cultural factors that influence the interest, direction, and provision of policy (Aquilina & Henry, 2010; Vasileiadou, 2016). Interest in dual career provision and barriers to creating and implementing dual career policies may exist in individual countries. It is important to explore and consider potential challenges and barriers to implementation within each country to bridge the gap between research and practice.

Existing research regarding barriers for implementing dual career policy and support services at a national and individual institute level has revealed that lack of policy to support dual career practice and implementation of support, lack of awareness and understanding of dual careers from within countries, and lack of finance to fund dual career services are among the common barriers (Nite, 2012; European Commission, 2017; STARTING 11, 2019). Although research has categorised Ireland's dual career systems as Laissez-Faire, a gap exists in the research regarding a comprehensive review of the current situation in individual third-level institutes and potential challenges or barriers to implementing dual career practice.

Dual Career Practice in Third-Level Institutes

From a third-level institute perspective, research attention has also focused on specific types of support available to student-athletes within the third-level environment (Amara et al., 2004; Aquilina & Henry, 2010; Condello et al., 2019; Fuchs et al., 2016; Lottes, 1994) and also on the environment as a whole (Brown et al., 2015; Henriksen et al., 2020; Kuettel et al., 2020; Morris et al., 2020). Regarding the former, the most commonly cited and recommended types of support to help student-athletes manage a dual career include formal academic flexibility (e.g. flexibility of course delivery, rearranging exam dates or location due to competitions), financial support, lifeskills support, and mentoring and tutoring (Aquilina, 2013; Aquilina & Henry, 2010; Brown et al., 2015; Burnett et al., 2010;

MacNamara & Collins, 2010; Fuchs et al., 2016; GEES, 2016; Geranosova & Ronkainen, 2015; Lottes, 1994; Pink et al., 2018; Puskas et al., 2015; Ryan et al., 2017; Stabmulova & Wylleman, 2019).

Although no single ideal program has been found (Aquilina & Henry, 2010; Guidotti et al., 2015; Li & Sim, 2017), most dual career researchers agree that dual careers are rarely possible without flexibility and support (Aquilina, 2013; Brown et al., 2015; Condello et al., 2019; Fuchs et al., 2016; Stambulova et al., 2015). Dual careers appear to be more manageable if there are arrangements and coordination to ensure that sporting commitments are in accordance with the athlete's vocation or education, along with supporting services available (Geranosova & Ronkainen, 2015). To help develop dual career practice, the European Commission (2016) published the "Minimum Quality Requirements for Dual Career Services". The report provides a minimum quality framework designed to assess and help guide the development and provision of dual career services (e.g. dual career support programmes in third-level institutes) in various dual career sectors. Some of the key minimum standards relating to the third-level education environment include (European Commission, 2016, p. 75):

- "The subject of dual career is included in the institution's vision, strategy and policy.
- Athletes in dual career have access to all available educational programmes.
- The institution has a point of contact and/or counselling for student-athletes.
- An educational tool is available to enhance tutors' awareness and understanding of dual career, preferably online.
- Flexibility is provided with regard to deadlines, examination dates, and attendance.
- Talented, elite and post-elite statuses are understood and recognised, preferably internationally.

- Sports and training facilities are within a reasonable distance of the educational facilities.
- Accommodation can be provided on campus for qualifying student-athlete groups.
- Post-educational lifelong learning programmes are provided to keep knowledge and skills up to date.
- The institution encourages and supports blended learning using new technologies, social media, etc.”

Interestingly, research has reported that even with dual career policies and support services in place (e.g. academic flexibility and mentors), gaps still exist regarding the implementation and communication of such policies and services throughout the full environment (Ryan et al., 2017), which can be a source of stress for student-athletes. One of the key findings regarding support at the macro level is the importance of awareness and understanding of all support providers within the dual career environment (Brown et al., 2015; McKenna & Dustan-Lewis, 2004; Henriksen et al., 2020; Rankin et al., 2011; Ryan et al., 2017). Focusing on the third-level institute, this includes the sport support providers, the academic staff, and effective communication between sport and education. Developing clear and strong relationships among support providers has been stressed as an essential ingredient for dual career success (Brown et al., 2015; Condello et al., 2019; Guidotti et al., 2015; Larsen et al., 2013). As such, more research attention has been given to the Holistic Ecological Approach to Dual Career Environments from a third-level perspective (Cartigny & Morris, 2020; ECO-DC, 2018; Henriksen et al., 2020; Kuettel et al., 2020; Linner et al., 2020; Morris et al., 2020; Storm et al., 2021). This approach stresses the importance of the whole environment (the support and the process of providing support) for successful dual career development as opposed to solely focusing on the individual types of support provided. Recently, 10 shared features of successful “Dual Career Development

Environments” (DCDE’s) that can be applied to a third-level setting was published (ECO-DC, Work Package 4, 2018; Storm et al., 2021):

1. Dedicated dual career support team
2. Integration of efforts across the whole environment
3. A clear understanding of dual career issues and support from across the environment
4. Role models and mentorship
5. Access to expert support
6. A whole person approach
7. An empowerment approach
8. Flexible dual career solutions
9. Care of dual career athlete’s mental health and wellbeing
10. An open and proactive approach to the development of the environment

As can be noted, similar dual career success factors (ECO-DC, 2018; Storm et al., 2021) relate to some of the previously suggested minimum standards and guidelines for dual career practice (European Commission, 2012; 2016). In addition, the 10 success factors relate to all essential elements discussed throughout this chapter in the micro, meso, and macro “resources”, emphasising the importance of developing an environment of combined support and not just isolated supports. For example, the “empowerment approach” emphasises the need to develop student-athletes own competencies as they progress through dual career transitions (micro). The need for “expert support” highlights the requirement for training and upskilling of dual career support staff (meso and macro). While the “flexible solutions” emphasise the need for bespoke support and flexibility within the system (macro). Key aspects for attention at a macro level include: having a dedicated dual career person/team,

having formal policies in place, having a clear implementation system to ensure consistency in practice, and having formal training for support providers.

Dual Career Practice in Ireland

From a policy perspective, dual career research from an Irish context is scant. To the researchers' knowledge, dual career policy and practice in Ireland has been referenced in three main European reviews (Amara et al., 2004; Aquilina & Henry, 2010; European Commission, 2016). In these reviews, Ireland has been classified as having positive measures in place in third-level institutes to support student-athletes (Amara et al., 2004). However, it was also categorised as "Laissez-Faire" (Aquilina & Henry, 2010; European Commission, 2016), suggesting that no formal policies or structures are in place at government level, national governing body level, or third-level institute level. According to this category, arrangements would be negotiated individually, and third-level institutes could develop their own guidelines and dual career structures. This final section of the literature review presents context regarding Ireland's sport, education, and political regime that may influence the dual career landscape.

Ireland is located in the Northwest of Europe with a population of just over five million people and is a Member State of the European Union (Central Statistics Office, 2021). The political regime in the Republic of Ireland is a parliamentary democracy and can be described as having a liberal welfare system (Citizens Information, 2016, 2020; Irish Government, 2018.). At Government level, sport is situated in the Department Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (TCAGSM), meaning that funding and priority for sport is divided between six different sectors (e.g., tourism, culture, sport etc.). Education has a separate department within the Government (Department of Education) and is not directly connected to sport. The impact of this can be noted in school sport where National Governing

Bodies of Sport (NGB's) are not formally integrated into school sport. However, some NGB's have Sport Development Officers who can be contracted by a school to deliver sport classes within the school term. This decision is at the discretion of each school.

Sport Ireland (formerly known as the Irish Sports Council) was founded in 1999 and is the statutory agency for sport in Ireland that oversees the development and funding of sport. Before 1999, Government level sport strategies existed. However, due to the lack of status of sport and the social-democratic regime, any changes in Government resulted in sport strategies being discontinued and changed. The impact of this for sport was limited sustained vision for sport, limited longevity of sport strategy, and no long-term plan or commitment to sport. Ireland has a long history of participation sport as a priority regarding national policies and national strategy documents. In 1999, Sport Ireland assumed the role of sports governance in Ireland. Sport was given recognition and status, resulting in a shift in the sporting political climate, and the first High-Performance Strategy was launched in 2001. However, the first "National Sports Policy" was not developed until 2018, which sets out a strategic sporting roadmap for sport in Ireland for the next 10 years (Federation of Irish Sport, 2019; National Sports Policy, 2018-2027). Within this new policy, the Government has pledged to double sports funding from €111 million per year to €220 million per year (Federation of Irish Sport, 2019; National Sports Policy, 2018-2027) and has highlighted high-performance sport as a pillar within the strategy. In addition, the Government pledged to establish a working group of several key sporting agencies across Irish sport "chaired by Sport Ireland, comprising of representatives of Sport Ireland, Sport Northern Ireland, National Governing Bodies, Olympic Council of Ireland, Athletes Commission, Paralympics Ireland and the Department of Transport, Tourism & Sport to develop the high-performance strategy" (National Sports Policy, 2018-2027, p.56).

Most significantly, that commitment has resulted in developing and publishing a new High-Performance Strategy (Sport Ireland, High-Performance Strategy, 2021-2032). Of particular interest and relevance to dual career in Ireland, this new High-Performance Strategy references the role of third-level institutes and the concept of dual career within the system for the first time. According to Sport Ireland, “At present, the provision of high-performance sport across the higher education sector lacks coordination and strategic direction. If this can be addressed, the sector could play a major role in the high-performance ecosystem in Ireland, as is the case in many other countries” (Sport Ireland, High-Performance Strategy, 2021-2032, p.20). Out of the seven strategic pillars for high-performance development within the new Strategy, two reference dual career and third-level institutes; Athlete Performance and Holistic Support (Pillar 2), and Partnerships (Pillar 5). Within pillar 2, the concept of dual career is referenced regarding assisting student-athletes to engage in dual career options and referenced the commitment to developing an athlete welfare policy for NGB’s. Within pillar 5, the document outlines the need and commitment to acknowledge and engage in more formal partnerships with third-level institutes in the future to develop the role of high-performance sport in third-level institutes in Ireland. These objectives demonstrate a new focus and potential for developing dual career vision in Ireland in the future for the first time.

Although the Policy and Strategy presented above provide good evidence of the commitment to developing high-performance sport, support, and the concept of dual career within third-level institutes, no specific dual career programme exists currently. However, several individual sports organisations have “life skills support” available for student-athletes. For example, Sport Ireland Institute provides support for elite Olympic and Paralympic athletes in Ireland. There is a performance life skills service in place that has connections with many third-level providers to help support carded athletes develop a high-

performance sport and education plan (Sport Ireland Institute, n.d.). This involves liaising with third-level institutes to help coordinate timetables, exams, and assessments, along with other support structures such as life skills, planning and coping strategies and providing training facilities (Sport Ireland Institute, n.d.). Other National Governing Bodies and Players Associations also have similar informal “connections” with third-level institutes in place in order to help student-athletes (e.g., Gaelic Players Association, Ruby Players Ireland).

From an individual third-level perspective, dual career research from an Irish context is also scant. Regarding support services in third-level institutes, to the researcher’s knowledge, only one Irish study has explored the types of support services available for student-athletes in third-level institutes (Murphy et al., 2016 – SASSI study). They found that the majority of third-level institutes in Ireland have sport-scholarship programmes (Murphy et al., 2016). The support available through a sport-scholarship programme is dependent on the third-level institute but can include; financial support, sport science support (e.g. strength and conditioning, access to facilities, sport psychology support), academic support (mentoring, academic flexibility). However, the SASSI study focused on analysing the environment and provision in third-level institutes to support student participation in sport and physical activity. As such, the focus on dual career was minor.

The limited existing research regarding student-athlete experiences in Irish third-level institutes has reported levels of stress while engaging in a dual career (Gomez et al., 2018; Drew & Matthews, 2018; Lane, 2015). The Gaelic Players Association investigated GAA student-athletes experiences (Lane et al., 2015). Fifty-five per cent of participants reported feeling under pressure to represent their institute team, 41% felt pressure from their county team coach due to their-level athletic commitments and reported feeling “torn”, 50% stated they were overwhelmed by their dual commitments, while 40% reported they had to repeat exams. This study highlights some demands student-athletes face from an Irish context;

however, it only represents one particular sport. Gomez et al. (2018) conducted a study exploring student-athletes challenges in one third-level institute in Ireland (single case), including student-athletes from various sporting backgrounds. The study found that participants reported demands such as time and lack of formal support structures (e.g. policy), which is in line with previous literature referenced in this Chapter (Aquilina, 2013; Brown et al., 2015; Stambulova et al., 2015).

Dual career specific research from an Irish perspective is limited to studies using one single sport investigation (Lane et al., 2015), experiences from a single institute (Gomez et al., 2018), and high-level sport only forming part of a study (Murphy et al., 2016). Further research is required in Ireland to better understand the types of dual career systems and supports in place in third-level institutes and the experiences of student-athletes within them.

Conclusion and Statement of Problem

This current thesis aims to explore dual career practice and experiences of third-level student-athletes and stakeholders in Ireland from a micro, meso, and macro perspective. The literature to date demonstrates that gaining a third-level education has many associated benefits for athletes. Yet, student-athletes experience a variety of demands and stressors that can hinder successful transitions. Combining education and sport is still a concern for many elite athletes (Ryba et al., 2014). Student-athlete's success within their dual careers largely depends on a balance between dual career demands and resources (both internal and external) in order to avoid the "cost of dual careers" (Brown et al., 2015; MacNamara & Collins 2010; Stambulova, 2003; Stambulova et al., 2015). Henriksen et al. (2020, p.3) refer to this as a "complicated mosaic of various internal and external factors interplaying in student-athletes development". Minimal standards for service providers and dual career guidelines exist (European Commission, 2012; 2016). Nonetheless, there are divergent dual career

approaches within and between countries (Amara et al., 2004; Aquilina & Henry, 2010; Morris et al., 2020). These variations can impact student-athletes experiences and as such, gaining a dual career is not always possible.

Dual career researchers are encouraged to consider cultural specific research (Caput-Jugunica et al., 2012; Stambulova & Ryba, 2014; Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019; Stambulova et al., 2020). Ireland has been classified as having a Laissez-Faire approach to dual career practice (Aquilina & Henry, 2010; European Commission, 2012). However, this is from a national perspective and many dual career supportive environments can exist within a country (Cartigny & Morris, 2020; Morris et al., 2020; Storm et al., 2021). To the researcher's knowledge, no internal national level review of all third-level institutes regarding dual career support has been conducted in the Republic of Ireland. The aim of *Study 1* was to *examine sport scholarship programmes and the types of support available to student-athletes through third-level institutes.*

In addition, minimal Irish dual career studies exist exploring student-athlete experiences (Gomez et al., 2018; Lane et al., 2016), and so little is known about Irish student-athlete experiences. The aim of *Study 2* was to *explore Irish student-athletes experiences of combining education and sport, and their perceptions of support available in third-level institutes.*

Social support has been emphasised as an essential resource for dual career support (Brown et al., 2015; Rhind et al., 2011). Many dual career studies have provided the student-athlete perspective with a gap regarding the stakeholder perspective (Aquilina, 2013). The aim of *Study 3* was to *explore social support from a provider and receiver perspective.*

Finally, although European level guidelines exist for dual career policy and practice, challenges and barriers to implementing dual career structures have also been identified (European Commission, 2017; Ryan et al., 2017; STARTING 11, 2019). The aim of *Study 4*

was to explore support provider's experiences of, and recommendations for, dual career practice in Ireland.

Chapter Three

Main Methodology

Main Methodology

Each Study Chapter includes a specific methods section outlining the research process regarding that study. The purpose of this Chapter is to explain the rationale for the methodological approaches implemented. It will begin with an overview and justification for a qualitative research approach, describe each method used, and conclude with research trustworthiness.

Qualitative Research

This research employed a qualitative approach. In general, qualitative research focuses on subjective meanings, assumes there are multiple realities, and helps understand the “why”? Qualitative research has a wide range of views and philosophical underpinnings (also known as paradigms) associated with concepts such as ontology, epistemology and methodology (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Robson, 2011). Ontology is defined as “a philosophical belief system about the nature of social reality” (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p.4). In other words, it relates to how we view reality or the phenomenon under investigation. It involves “considering the filters through which we see and experience the world” (Alison & Pomeroy, 2000, p. 92). Two main categories of ontology include realists and constructivist. Realists see reality as independent of the researcher, stemming from a positivist paradigm. Constructionists see multiple realities constructed through meaning and experiences.

Epistemology refers to how we gain our knowledge and generate data (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2001; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Mason, 2018) and is connected to what we count as evidence. There are many epistemological approaches (e.g. interpretivism, critical realism, pragmatism). Within interpretivism, the researcher may explore and look for meaning. They may interpret meaning by emphasising values and the sense people make of their experiences. Within a critical realism approach, the researcher may acknowledge that a world

exists independent to theories and our perceptions. As such, the researcher may explore mechanisms, causes, perceptions and interpretations (Mason, 2018; Sobh & Perry, 2006). Pragmatism relates to being guided by the research questions and using whatever methodology is deemed suitable (e.g., qualitative, quantitative or mixed). This approach views reality as “what works” (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Robson, 2011). Epistemology is influenced by ontology, with both influencing methodological choices (Alison & Pomeroy, 2000).

The existence of a basic system of philosophical assumptions within research is widely accepted (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Patton, 2002). However, many researchers have acknowledged the growing complexity of qualitative research, with pressure to select one paradigm (Bryman, 2012; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Savin-Baden & Major, 2010). Some have illustrated this as the “paradigm wars” (Alison & Pomeroy, 2000; Gage, 1989; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Denzin and Lincoln (2005, p.20) suggest that “an embarrassment of choices now characterises the field of qualitative research. Researchers have never before had so many paradigms, strategies of inquiry, and methods of analysis to draw upon and utilise”. Considering this, it is not the purpose of this Chapter to provide an in-depth analysis of all concepts. Instead, the purpose is to provide the reader with an explanation and understanding of the approach taken in this thesis.

Research Design

A qualitative approach provided the most suitable platform for this thesis for several reasons. A significant advantage of qualitative research is that it allows researchers the opportunity to study aspects within an environment which is regarded as natural and includes meaning from individuals, providing an insight into their lived experiences and own perspectives (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Patton, 2002). As noted in the literature review, the

topic of dual careers is complex, with many internal and external influencing factors (Henriksen et al., 2020). Researchers and practitioners are encouraged to acknowledge and understand the context in which student-athletes are based (Guidotti et al., 2015; Henriksen et al., 2020; Stambulova et al., 2015; Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019). Qualitative research lends itself well to thinking about the importance of context when analysing and interpreting findings. As the topic of this thesis involves complex real-world life experiences, context is critical. In addition, many research studies relating to the area of interest have used qualitative methods to explore dual careers (e.g. Aquilina, 2013; Burnett et al., 2010; Cosh & Tully, 2014; Stambulova et al., 2015).

Using a qualitative approach can help discover and understand tendencies in thought and opinions, allowing researchers to explore deeper into the context of a topic by providing contextual information (Creswell, 2013; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Patton, 2002).

“Qualitative research is quite remarkable. What other research orientation can really claim to get inside how life is experienced, or why and how things matter, or the meaning of change and fascinations of time and space? What other approach can even begin to explain and evoke sensations, atmospheres and narratives of life itself?”

(Mason, 2018, preface)

As Mason’s quote implies, qualitative research provides a flexible approach (Creswell, 2013; Guest et al., 2013). It provides a platform for the researcher to dig deeper into the “why”. For example, if a participant provides a descriptive answer of a situation (e.g. I received academic flexibility through my academic mentor), qualitative research methods allows the researcher an opportunity to delve deeper by probing further into areas such as “how” support was provided, “what” was the perceived benefit of having that particular type of support, or “why” that may be of value to the participant. The philosophy and features of a qualitative approach are particularly suited to the aims of this thesis.

However, qualitative research is complex as the researcher essentially is the “instrument” (Patton, 2002). Hakim (2000) describes the qualitative researcher as an architect responsible for supervising the construction of a project. As such, a degree of self-awareness of potential bias is key (Robson, 2011). When conducting qualitative research, it is necessary to be able to reflect on and recognise potential biases arising from one’s own position or beliefs. There is also a need to have clarity and trustworthiness in the approach and research process (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Patton, 2002; Mason, 2018). These elements are presented throughout the remainder of this Chapter.

Philosophical Stance

Research philosophy is a personal belief, which is why many academic differences exist (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Nevertheless, knowing a researcher’s stance can provide the reader with a valuable opportunity to understand the interpretations and decisions made throughout the research process (Creswell, 2013; Mason, 2018). I do not believe you must explicitly “be” one way or another, as many views do not fit neatly into one single category (Hood, 2006; Robson, 2011; Mason, 2018). I agree with Mason (2018) that a piece of research may have multiple possible methodological approaches. As such, it is essential for a researcher to become a “critical epistemological thinker” (Mason, 2002; Mason, 2018), considering factors such as: what/who you want to investigate, what is your research for, what do you count as knowledge?

A philosophical stance can change throughout a career (Creswell, 2013; Mason, 2018). My perception is that not only can it change throughout the career, but as experience is gained, it can also develop throughout a project. At the beginning of the PhD process, when I reflected on my own research understandings and beliefs, my philosophical stance straddled interpretivism and critical realism which can be contrasting in terms of application and

interpretation. My initial belief was that reality is not singular. Multiple realities exist and a person's reality is subjective and constructed differently (including the researcher's own interpretation) based on experiences and interactions (interpretivism). Thus, initially, I was interested in understanding experiences, accepting that reality is multiple, socially constructed and interpreted differently. However, whilst I still believe that meaning and experiences are subjective and multiple, I found myself searching for potential underlying mechanisms and influences to potentially explain some experiences, which is more aligned with critical realism (Alison & Pomery, 2002; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Mason, 2018; Sobh & Perry, 2006). As such, I approached this research from a critical realism perspective, acknowledging that a world exists independent of theories and perceptions. While this approach accepts that there may be no single reality, it acknowledges that some knowledge may be closer to a reality, if even imperfectly (Alison & Pomery, 2000). This thesis was led by the view that methodologies are tools that guide, help, and support a researcher to develop an understanding of their research (Chamberlain et al., 2011; Clarke & Visser, 2018; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011; Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2005; Robson 2011; Saunders et al., 2012; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). As such, it is necessary to understand what tools may best fit the research, which is outlined in the following section.

Choice of Research Methods

This section will explain the decisions for the aim of each Study, the sampling methods, the data collection tools, and the data analysis choices. The aim of Study 1 was to examine sport scholarship programmes and the types of support available to student-athletes through third-level institutes. This Study was conducted at the beginning of the research process to provide a comprehensive overview of sport scholarship programmes and the types of support available for student-athletes in Irish third-level institutes. This enabled the

researcher to gain an understanding of the dual career context in Ireland, including a provider perspective. Building upon the knowledge and context from Study 1, the aim of Study 2 was to explore Irish student-athletes experiences of combining education and sport, and their perceptions of support available in third-level institutes. One of the key findings from Study 1 and 2 was the perceived benefit of social support as a dual career resource from a stakeholder and student-athlete perspective. Based on the prevalence of this within the data of the first two Studies, the focus of Study 3 was to explore social support from a provider and receiver perspective. Finally, the aim of Study 4 was to explore support provider's experiences of, and recommendations for, dual career practice in Ireland. This was chosen as the focus of the last Study for two reasons. First, as noted in the literature review, more recent research has acknowledged challenges and barriers to implementing dual career structures (European Commission, 2017; Ryan et al., 2017; STARTING 11, 2019) and this aspect had not been considered in depth during the first three Studies. Second, by considering this aspect, this enabled the researcher to identify several applied recommendations for dual career practice in Ireland, thus providing contextual applications connected to results of the previous Studies.

Participants and Sampling Strategy

Participants were recruited for each study in accordance with the focus of that study and included Irish student-athletes (Studies 2 & 3) and student-athlete "stakeholders" (Studies 1, 3, & 4). All four studies used purposive sampling (Patton, 2002), where clear inclusion criteria were identified. In addition, Studies 1 and 2 used maximum variation purposive sampling (Etikan et al., 2016; Palys, 2008; Patton, 2002), while Study 4 also employed snowball sampling (Johnston, 2014). These sampling methods were deemed most appropriate for the following reasons.

Purposive sampling is commonly implemented in qualitative research to generate a sample of participants that can address the research questions and meets specific inclusion criteria, known as key informants (Teddlie & Yu, 2007). It is used when “particular settings, persons, or events are deliberately selected for the important information they can provide that cannot be gotten as well from other choices” (Maxwell, 1997, p.87). In this case, student-athletes were classified as individuals who were in third-level education and competing at a high level in sport (Aquilina, 2009). Being specific in an Irish context, inclusion criteria for student-athletes recruited for Studies 2 and 3 were: i) full-time students in a third-level course, ii) were currently competing at a high national (representing and competing in top tier county level in team sports [i.e. GAA]) and international level (competing in international competitions and representing Ireland) in their sport, and iii) were in receipt of a sport scholarship from their third-level institute. For Studies 1, 3, and 4, stakeholders were considered as experienced and well-informed for the topic of interest (Patton, 2002). Inclusion criteria for Study 1 included: i) people working directly with student-athletes providing support in third-levels, and ii) people providing dual career support to third-levels in Ireland. Inclusion criteria for Study 4 included: i) people who worked directly with student-athletes providing dual career support in third-levels, ii) and people who were involved in developing policy and standards for dual career support for third-level student-athletes.

In addition, maximum variation purposive sampling involves selecting participants from a wide spectrum (e.g. backgrounds), achieving a greater understanding of the topic, while also providing the opportunity to look at similarities and differences across contexts (Etikan et al., 2016; Palys, 2008). As previous research has noted that context is important to experiences (Giacobbi et al., 2004; Stambulova, 2003; Stambulova et al., 2015), maximum variation purposive sampling was deemed most appropriate to ensure a wide variety of

context. Participants in Studies 1 and 2 were included from a variety of sports, locations, and third-level institutes throughout Ireland to provide the exploration of the concepts broadly as opposed to case-specific. For example, in Study 1, participants were recruited from a sample of Universities and Institutes of Technology throughout Ireland to understand potential cultural and institute specific context, creating the ability to explore similarities and differences. For Study 2, participants were included from a sample of first-year to Masters level student-athletes, including individual and team sports.

Snowball sampling was also used for Study 4 (Johnson, 2014; Patton, 2003). Snowball sampling is a “chain referral system” to help a researcher yield a greater sample “through referrals made among people who share or know of others who possess some characteristics that are of research interest” (Biernaki & Waldorf, 1981, p.141). For Study 4, recruiting stakeholders with knowledge of current third-level dual career systems, structures and policies in an Irish setting was essential, thus snowball sampling provided the researcher with an opportunity to gain access to a wider sampling pool. One of the limitations of snowball sampling includes the potential reliance on informants' “subjective judgments” (Johnson, 2014). Therefore, with any “referral” made by participants, the researcher ensured that all potential participants met the inclusion criteria before being contacted.

Defining a sample size in qualitative research projects has been debated. When using purposive sampling, gaining a statistically representative sample of the total population is not a primary concern (Mason, 2018). Some researchers suggest that there are no exact rules or statistical methods relating to sample size (Malterud et al., 2015; Patton, 2002). However, consideration should be given to the type of research and focus, resources, and time available (Patton, 2002). Each study was guided by the type of data collection tools, the research questions, sampling method, and “data saturation”. The researcher began each study with a projected sample number and continued until data saturation was deemed to be achieved.

Data saturation is a term used in qualitative research as a principle or guide for discontinuing data generation when it is deemed that no new themes are emerging through data collection (Patton, 2002; Robson, 2011; Saunders et al., 2017). However, there have been concerns with data saturation, with some researchers highlighting a need for more guidance on what constitutes saturation (Marshall et al., 2013; Morse, 1995; Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2005). For this thesis, data saturation was deemed to be reached when two sequential interviews did not yield additional information or knowledge to the Study.

To provide an example, for Study 1, using maximum variation purposive sampling the researcher aimed to include a broad spectrum of institutes based on the information gathered from the preceding web-based study. The sample size began by containing a sample of large and small institutes throughout Ireland (with an ideal sample of between 8-10) and ended when two interviews did not add further knowledge to the Study (i.e. data saturation). This process was applied for all four Studies.

Design Choices

Different methods are suited to different projects, and it is essential to have a good fit between the purpose and the methods used (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). Charting was used when choosing the methods for each study (Mason, 2002, 2018) using three considerations: i) what research questions are guiding the study, ii) what choices of methods could be used and what do they offer, and iii) what methods were used in previous similar studies. Throughout the four studies, the design choices included web-based analysis (Study 1), semi-structured interviews (Studies 1, 3, and 4), and focus groups (Study 2).

Web-Based Analysis. Study 1 represented an essential steppingstone informing the focus and design of Studies 2, 3, and 4. The primary aim of study 1 was to create a comprehensive overview of the dual career landscape in third-level institutes in Ireland. A

triangulation approach was deemed most appropriate to gather the data required.

Triangulation can add richness and clarity (Heale & Forbes, 2013) while helping to increase credibility and validity to research findings (Cohen et al., 2002; Robson, 2011). Study 1 began with web-based analysis and concluded with semi-structured interviews.

Web-based research involves gathering specific information from publicly available sources (e.g. webpages and documents). When there is a large volume of data to gather, using web sources can save time and resources (Kim & Kuljis, 2010). As there was very little research available on this topic in an Irish setting, a web-based analysis was deemed an appropriate and critical starting point to gain insight and understanding of the dual career landscape in Irish third-level institutes. Using the Education Providers list on the Department of Education and Skills website, there were 43 third level institutes identified in the Republic of Ireland. This phase of data collection enabled the researcher to gather information on all third-level institutes in an easily accessible way. Information on the types of sport scholarships in place and type of support available for student-athletes on all 43 third level institutes websites was gathered.

One potential difficulty with using this method is the accuracy of the information (e.g. the pace of which the information is updated) and the inability to answer certain questions that may arise in the process (Kim & Kuljis, 2010). In order to increase the reliability of the information gathered during the web-based analysis and the researchers understanding of the context of the information gathered, semi-structured interviews were also used to triangulate and advance the data. This information is outlined in the next section (semi-structured interviews) and in Chapter 4.

Semi-Structured Interviews. Semi-structured interviews are a widely used method in qualitative research. Semi-structured interviews were deemed the most appropriate for Studies 1, 3, and 4 for the following reasons. Firstly, the researcher was interested in

exploring stakeholders and student-athletes experiences of each topic which required an understanding of not just “what” the experiences were, but also “why” this may be, and potential “influencing factors”. This method of data generation provides a “flexible and powerful tool to capture the voices and the ways people make meaning of their experience” (Rabionet, 2011, p.563).

Secondly, semi-structured interviews provide a researcher with the opportunity to gain a more in-depth response by asking probing questions. For example: “can you tell me why you felt this way”, “can you provide an example of this”, “is there anything else that you feel is important to add”. Finally, semi-structured interviews are guided by an interview schedule yet offer the researcher flexibility regarding the exact wording, sequencing, time allocation, and focus given to specific questions (Robson, 2011), guided by each interview's flow.

One limitation in qualitative research and interviews is unconscious bias (Robson, 2011). Bias is recognised as any influence that produces a distortion or misrepresentation in the results (Polit & Beck, 2014). Specific to interviews, bias can manifest in both verbal and non-verbal cues. For example, suggesting agreement or disagreement with participant responses or asking leading questions to “seek” a particular answer (Smith & Nobel, 2014). A researcher needs to remain neutral, especially if they have prior knowledge or experience of the topic. A researcher should reflect on potential research bias which will be discussed in a later section called “research trustworthiness”.

The researcher familiarised themselves with interviewing protocols and conducted pilot interviews for each study to help practice interview skills and help identify and decrease the likelihood of potential bias. Pilot interviews are a useful way to enhance the skills of the interviewer, trial the interview schedules and evaluate the interview process (Patton, 2002; Robson, 2011). The interview guide questions were broad and structured clearly to eliminate

the potential of leading questions (see Appendix A, C, D & E). In addition, after each interview, memos were recorded. Making and reviewing memos during and following interviews is not only to aid the analysis phase but is also an effective way to enhance interview practice (Birks et al., 2008; Given, 2008; Patton, 2002). This helped to regularly review the process and make notes on adjusting or adding questions if required. This process of reviewing was enhanced by consulting my supervisory team after the first interview and at the halfway point as another process of planning, doing and reviewing.

Focus Groups. Focus groups are a “form of group interview that capitalises on communication between research participants in order to generate data” (Kitzinger, 1995, p.299). Unlike individual interviews where the interviewer asks questions directly to one person, with focus groups, primary questions are directed to the group. Participants are encouraged to talk to one another by sharing experiences and exchanging points of view.

Focus groups were deemed the most appropriate method for Study 2 for several reasons. The researcher aimed to explore experiences from a diverse group of student-athletes and focus groups help capture multiple perspectives that are grounded in context within each group setting, compared to individual interviews which obtain individual perspectives (Gibbs, 1997). Focus groups also “empower” participants to discuss their experiences by being stimulated by others’ experiences (Patton, 2002; Robson, 2011). These interactions can enable participants to ask each other questions, reflect on their understanding of their experiences, and help them compare or contrast their own experiences with others, which is not possible through individual interviews (Gibbs, 1997; Kitzinger, 1995). As a result, the depth and range of data that can be generated through group interaction can be richer than data obtained from interviews (Smithson, 2007).

One of the limitations of focus groups is that facilitating and controlling the discussion requires skill to generate in-depth data. The facilitator needs to skillfully involve

all participants to avoid the group being dominated by one or two individuals (Kitzinger, 1995; Mason, 2002; Robson, 2011). Another limitation is the lack of anonymity in a focus group format may make some participants hesitant about expressing their honest opinion.

Steps were taken to minimise these limitations. Before conducting the focus groups, the researcher studied focus group facilitation skills (Krueger & Casey, 2001; Kitzinger, 1995; Robson, 2011). This helped to address the skills element of conducting focus groups. In addition, the researcher conducted a pilot focus group before proceeding with the main research focus groups. This helped to gain an appreciation of the types of issues that may arise (e.g. one person dominating the group, lack of interaction among the group) and to practice facilitating skills (e.g. directly asking other members questions if they have not contributed, asking if anyone else had shared experiences or different experiences to what has already been discussed). Following a similar process as outlined in the semi-structured interviews section, after each focus group, memos were recorded to help regularly review the process individually and in conjunction with the research supervisory team.

In order to address participant comfort in sharing their experiences and anonymity, the researcher did three things. First, confidentiality from participants relating to what would be discussed during the focus group was requested. Second, the room was set up in a circle format so all participants could see one another. Finally, Krueger and Casey (2001) suggest using purposeful small talk to create a sense of a warm environment. Although participants were from various backgrounds, all participants had the shared experience of being a student-athlete in their third-level institute. The researcher asked each participant to introduce themselves by providing an overview of their sport and educational background.

Data Analysis Methods

All studies were analysed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis can be used to identify experiences, analyse meanings and report patterns within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Robson, 2011). The researcher followed guidance from Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach to thematic analysis for Studies 1 and 2: familiarising yourself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for initial themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, producing the report. The researcher followed guidance from Gale et al.'s (2013) seven-step framework method for the management and analysis of the data for Studies 3 and 4; transcription, familiarisation with data, coding, developing an analytical framework, applying the analytical framework, charting data into the framework matrix, interpreting the data. The rationale for the change in analysis framework for the later studies was due to the volume of interviews and data. For example, Study 1 contained 10 interviews resulting in 496 minutes of interview data with transcriptions amounting to 73,761 words. Whereas Study 3 contained 24 interviews resulting in 1,044 minutes of interview data with transcriptions amounting to 174,243 words. Discussion of each data analysis method will be presented in each Study Chapter within the methodology section.

All four Studies used a combined inductive and deductive analysis approach (Fereday et al., 2006; Park et al., 2012; Patton, 2002). An inductive approach is a data driven approach to analysis where the content drives the developing analysis. A deductive approach uses existing theory and or pre-defined codes to analyse data (Braun et al., 2016; Fereday et al., 2006; Patton, 2002). Using guidance from previous research applying a combined inductive and deductive approach (Fereday et al., 2006; Park et al., 2012), an inductive approach was employed in the initial stages of analysis to code openly and search for initial themes. A deductive approach was introduced when reviewing, defining, and refining themes. The deductive approach was guided by literature on dual career as outlined in the literature review

(e.g. Athletic Career Transition Model, Holistic Athletic Career Model). A full account of data analysis is located in each individual Study Chapter.

Ethical Considerations and Data Management

Ethical approval for research undertaken in this thesis was granted by the School of Sport Research Ethics Committee (SSREC) at the University of Stirling (this has since been replaced by the General University Ethics Panel; GUEP). An information sheet was provided to all participants in each of the four Studies which outlined the purpose, study requirements, any potential risk, safeguards, and the researcher's contact details. In addition, all participants involved were over 18, and so consent was sought and provided directly from each participant involved. For face-to-face interviews, consent forms were signed by participants and were provided an opportunity to ask questions prior to each interview and focus group. For phone interviews, participants were emailed a copy of the consent form, were asked for verbal consent prior to interviews, and a signed copy of the consent form was then emailed or posted to the researcher after each interview. To ensure anonymity and confidentiality of participants, original recordings of interviews were transferred to cloud storage within password-protected software and deleted immediately from the Dictaphone. Transcripts were anonymised with names, locations, and any identifying aspects removed. Any paperwork (e.g. consent forms) was stored securely in separate folders to the transcribed data with access only to the primary researcher.

Rigor

The terms 'reliability' and 'validity' tend to be synonymous with quantitative research and have caused much debate within the qualitative research community. Within qualitative research, the existence and use of universal criterion have been categorised under what is

termed a “criteriological approach” based initially on work by Lincoln and Guba (1986). In more recent times, qualitative researchers have questioned the use of a universal list for judging rigour in qualitative research (including Lincoln & Guba themselves). This is due to differences in ontological and epistemological positions and researchers have called for alternative solutions (Burke, 2016; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Smith & Caddick, 2012; Sparks & Smith, 2014).

An alternative position is termed a “relativist approach”. Researchers still need to determine rigour using this approach, distinguishing ‘good’ from ‘bad’ research (Burke, 2016; Smith & Caddick, 2012). But, the way this is done is relative to each study and as such, more flexible by using a socially constructed list of characteristics that can be added to or modified depending on the research focus (Burke, 2016; Smith & Caddick, 2012; Sparkes & Smith, 2009). As the researcher is an integral part of the qualitative process (Polit & Beck, 2014), rigor is important. Rigor within research relates to the degree of confidence in the methods used, interpretation, and reporting (transparency) of the data to ensure quality of a study (Polit & Beck, 2014; Smith & McGannon, 2017). The following section will present a clear outline of my reflections regarding the rigor of this thesis.

Bias is recognised as any influence that produces a distortion or misrepresentation in the results (Polit & Beck, 2014). When conducting qualitative research, it is necessary to be able to reflect on and recognise potential biases arising from one’s own position or beliefs (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Patton, 2002; Mason, 2018). I have always had an interest in sport, and while I was never a “high-performance” athlete, sport has played a significant role in my personal and professional life. Soccer and athletics were the main sports I was involved in, and in particular, I played soccer with my college team during my time as an undergraduate student. In 2007 I gained a Masters in Sport and Exercise Psychology, and I began lecturing full time in 2008, with primary modules in sport and performance psychology, lifestyle

management, and sport pedagogy. I have gained experience working with athletes regarding performance life skills and sport and performance psychology from an applied perspective. Some of those experiences have been student-athletes at different levels (second and third-level).

In 2011 I attended a talk on retirement from sport where two Irish athletes recounted their personal retirement experiences. This talk ignited my interest in transition experiences, and I began researching the area. One aspect that stood out to me was proactive versus reactive approaches to retirement and the impact on coping (e.g. Stambulova, 2003). For example, gaining a third-level qualification and having a “retirement plan” has been associated with many benefits regarding athletic retirement (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007; Aquilina, 2013; European Commission, 2012; Fuchs et al., 2016; Price et al., 2010) and my attention turned to researching dual careers. Before beginning this PhD, I held previous “assumptions” about the landscape of dual career support in Ireland, based on my experience as a lecturer and applied practitioner. The main assumption was that there was no dual career support as within my own institute there was no formal guidelines or policy for dual career support. However, I had minimal prior knowledge regarding other institutes throughout Ireland or the research that had already been conducted. Personal experiences can potentially block a researcher from staying curious, and bias can occur at any stage of a project, such as sampling methods, design choices, questions asked during interviews, and what information is reported (Smith & Noble, 2014). To help manage the research process, I did several things: constant reflection (i.e. reflexivity), ensuring research transparency, and ensuring research credibility (Shenton, 2004; Smith & Caddick, 2012; Smith & Noble, 2014; Smith & McGannon, 2017).

Regarding constant reflection, this began with asking myself questions prior to beginning the research process: what do I “feel” I know about this area; is there a need for

this type and slant of research, and if so, would this research contribute to the understanding of the phenomenon being researched? I believe there was a need to research this topic area in Ireland as there is a significant lack of dual career research available within the Irish context (as highlighted in the literature review). Researchers should also reflect on the research process and make informed decisions and judgements throughout the process as it develops (Smith & Caddick, 2012; Smith & McGannon, 2017). I engaged in reflection throughout the research process regarding the methods used, the focus of each study, and my own experiences and learnings from each study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Shenton, 2004; Smith & Caddick, 2012). This reflection helped ensure I was “staying curious” about the topic. To provide an example of this reflection process and its influence, the theme of social support emerged as a strong theme from both Studies 1 and 2. From reflecting on memos and outcomes throughout these first two studies, the focus of Study 3 developed (exploring social support from a provider and receiver perspective).

In addition, my supervisory research team acted as a “critical friend” throughout the process (Smith & McGannon, 2017). Before, during, and at the end of each study, there were points of contact to review and reflect before continuing. This challenged me to reflect on my actions and processes undertaken throughout this journey (Smith & Caddick, 2012). The role of a critical friend is not to agree, disagree, or achieve consensus regarding analysis and interpretation. Rather, the role of a critical friend is to be a “theoretical sounding board”, encourage reflexivity, and challenge interpretation by exploring alternative explanations (Smith & McGannon, 2017). Regarding data analysis and reporting for all four Studies, my supervisory team acted as a critical friend. To provide an example of this process, during Studies 3 and 4, I coded a sample of five interviews and developed an initial framework analysis (using Gale et al., 2013 framework analysis). After this initial stage, a sample interview and the initial framework was sent to my supervisory team. We then met to discuss

the initial analysis. Through discussions, this framework was adapted several times before the final framework was developed. A similar process was employed for Studies 1 and 2, however as Braun and Clarkes (2006) thematic approach was used for these Studies, a coding and thematic table was sent to the supervisory team as opposed to the framework analysis. This table outlined initial codes and themes, along with definitions, interpretations and examples. Similar to the process highlighted above, through discussions, several adjustments were made until themes and sub-themes were finalised.

To enhance transparency, a rationale for the methods chosen has been provided in this Chapter. Each study also contains specific information of that study (e.g. number of participants, the criterion for inclusion, the step by step process of data collection), thus providing a clear indication and “audit trail” of the process undertaken. Concerning the results, analysis and interpretation, I have provided a clear outline of the choice (this chapter) and use of thematic analysis frameworks (each individual chapter) used. In the results section of all four studies, numerous direct quotations have been provided in order to provide evidence of participant views to highlight context within my interpretations of themes and sub-themes. Along with direct quotes are explanations of the context to show my interpretations of the quotes and results. In addition, a participant number, page number and line number were provided with every quote to show a trail of evidence and to demonstrate the width of each theme (i.e. to demonstrate that the quotes belong to many participants and not just the same person). Collectively, this provides an audit trail which is important for research transparency (Smith & Caddick, 2012).

Research credibility relates to how accurately the research reflects the topic being explored and how well the results answer the intended focus (Smith & Caddick, 2012). Credibility can be demonstrated through the data sources and the design methods chosen (i.e. external validity). Researchers have highlighted the importance of using well established

research methods (Robson, 2001; Shenton, 2014). As demonstrated in the “design choices” section, each methodology was chosen on the basis of: i) similar previous research (e.g. Aquilina, 2013; Brown et al., 2015), ii) established methods (e.g. semi-structured interviews and focus groups), and iii) was guided by a theoretical framework (i.e. Athletic Career Transition Model by Stambulova, 2003; Holistic Athlete Career Model by Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004; Wylleman & Rosier, 2016). I also used triangulation within the methods for Study 1. Triangulation can help compare and contrast findings from various sources which is outlined in Study 1. This can help ensure a greater depth and breadth to the topic and “strengthens” a study by combining methods (Patton, 2002; Shenton, 2004).

Triangulation also relates to data sources. Throughout the four studies, potential participants were connected to dual careers from a wide variety of backgrounds and matched to the aims of each study. This included student-athletes and key stakeholders from both education and sport. Including a wide variety of data sources can provide width to the data, helping to create a rich picture of the topic being explored (Shenton, 2004; Smith & Noble, 2014). By using various key informants, “viewpoints and experiences can be verified against others and, ultimately, a rich picture of the attitudes, needs or behaviour of those under scrutiny may be constructed based on the contributions of a range of people (Shenton, 2004, p.66). In addition, clear inclusion criteria are presented in each Study Chapter. Having clear inclusion criteria can help to decrease “selection bias” by having a pre-determined rationale.

Chapter Four

Study 1

Introduction

Previous research recommends conducting cultural-specific research to understand student-athlete challenges from a macro perspective (Ryan et al., 2017; Stambulova & Ryba, 2014; Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019; Stambulova et al., 2020). The limited available research relating to the dual career system in Ireland proposes that there is no structured formal policy or structured support (Aquilina & Henry, 2010; European Commission, 2012, 2016). This approach has been illustrated as restrictive and punishing for student-athletes (Aquilina, 2013; Aquilina & Henry, 2010; European Commission, 2012, 2016). At the time of conducting Study 1 (2013), to the researcher's knowledge, no other study had conducted a countrywide analysis of the types of dual career support and structures available in Irish third-level institutes. Since the completion of this study, the SASSI report (Murphy et al., 2016) was published which focused on support provision in third-level institutes in Ireland for sport and physical activity. While that study did reveal some statistics regarding sport facilities and support services, funding, and sport and physical activity participation, it did not have a specific dual career focus with high-performance sport being a minor section.

Study 1 was conducted between 2013 and 2014 at the beginning of the research process with two primary aims. First, to provide a comprehensive cross-sectional description of sport scholarship programmes and the types of support available for student-athletes in Irish third-level institutes. As identified in Chapter 2, support for student-athletes in Ireland provided by third-level institutes are broadly referred to as sport scholarships. Second, this comprehensive overview provided insight to inform the purpose and design of Studies 2, 3, and 4. The research questions for Study 1 were:

1. What sport scholarship programmes are available in third-level institutes in Ireland?
2. What types of support are provided within sport scholarship programmes?
3. How do sport scholarship programmes differ throughout third-level institutes?

Methodology

Study Design

Using charting to link Study 1 research questions to data sources and methods (Mason, 2002, 2018), a triangulation approach (Denzin & Lincon, 2011) was deemed most appropriate to achieve the study's aims. Triangulation can add richness and clarity (Heale & Forbes, 2013) while increasing credibility and validity to research findings (Cohen et al., 2002; Robson, 2011). Study 1 began with web-based analysis and concluded with semi-structured interviews.

Study Procedure

Data were collected between May 2013 and June 2014 and involved three sequential stages. In the first stage, a comprehensive investigation of each institute website was conducted using a compiled list of institutes located on the Department of Education and Skills website (Department of Education and Skills, n.d.). There were 43 institutes in the Republic of Ireland on this list (seven Universities, 14 Institutes of Technologies [IOT's], seven Colleges of Education [CofE], five National Universities of Ireland [NUofI], and 10 Other State-Aided Institutions [OSA]). This was the full list used for stage one. The search criteria involved locating the "sport" or "sport scholarship" section of each institute website, as supports for student-athletes in Ireland provided by institutes are broadly referred to as sport scholarships. Information regarding each sport scholarship programme and type of support were collected.

In the second stage, institutes were contacted directly via calls and emails to clarify any unclear information. Information was deemed unclear if: there was no sport scholarship section on the website, if the information was vague about what type of support was included in the sport scholarship programme, or if the researcher required any further information

about the sport scholarship programme. If there was a sport scholarship programme in place, scholarship officers and coordinators were contacted and asked for confirmation and examples of the support listed on their website. If no such information was available, administration offices were contacted and asked if a sport scholarship programme was in place.

In the third stage, semi-structured interviews were conducted. The researcher sought to include a representative sample from large and small institutes throughout Ireland and used maximum variation purposive sampling (Etikan et al., 2016; Palys, 2008; Patton, 2002) to recruit participants through the following process. Following information obtained in stages 1 and 2, Universities and IOT's were the two types of institutes included in the sampling pool as they were the main institutes identified with sport scholarship programmes (see Table 1). The researcher used the following inclusion criteria to identify suitable institutes: i) institutes identified as having a sport scholarship programme, and ii) institutes with more than one category of support available (see Table 1). To identify suitable participants, inclusion criteria for interviewees included: i) people working directly with student-athletes providing support in third levels, and ii) people providing dual career support in third-level institutes in Ireland. Using contact information publicly available from institute web pages, the researcher emailed potential participants who met the inclusion criteria. Before each interview, participants were made aware of the purpose of the study and were provided with an information sheet. Participants were asked to provide informed consent and completed a hard copy of a consent form. Each interview was recorded using a Dictaphone.

An interview schedule was structured using guidance from the study's aims, previous research outlined in the literature review (Aquilina & Henry, 2010; Caput-Jogunica et al., 2012; European Commission, 2012) and from findings during stage one and two. Before the interviews took place, the researcher conducted a pilot interview. The pilot study's purpose

was to trial the interview questions and gain feedback from the participant concerning the questions asked, their understanding of the content, the interviewers own personal style, and the environment (Patton, 2002; Robson, 2011). The only changes made to the final interview schedule (Appendix A) was the order of questions to enhance flow.

Participants

Ten participants (six male and four female) were interviewed. Participants' experience in their roles ranged from two years to 26 years with an average of 9.6 years. Four IOT's, four Universities, and one external supporting body were represented through the sample. Nine interviews were conducted face to face at each institute location, with the tenth interview completed over the phone due to time and location restrictions.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted on the web-based data first, followed by semi-structured interviews. Information gathered during the web-based analysis phase regarding the 43 third-level institutes was stored in Microsoft word files. A profile of each institute was collated regarding the type of scholarship(s) available in each institute, and the types of support reported to be available to sport scholarship athletes. Using the collated information, common types of support were identified and types of support were grouped into the following categories; i) financial support, ii) sport science support, iii) academic support, iv) other support. Two information Tables were then created (see Table 1 and Table 2 for detailed information). As can be noted from Table 1, for each category of support, an outcome of "Yes", "No", or "Limited" was provided. Limited was illustrated if only one or two elements were provided or if participants stated they had limited capacity to provide that type of support.

Semi-structured interviews were analysed using a thematic approach. Analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach to thematic analysis: familiarising yourself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for initial themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, producing the report. An inductive approach to data analysis was followed by a deductive approach to data analysis (Park et al., 2012; Patton, 2002).

To become familiar with the data, each interview was transcribed verbatim into Microsoft word. The total time of interviews was 496 minutes ranging from 30 minutes to 94 minutes, with an average length of 49 minutes. In total, transcriptions amounted to 73,761 words. Following transcription, each interview was read and re-read, and during this first phase, short notes (e.g. notes of patterns, differences or noting down points of interest) were hand-written in the left-hand margins. These notes were reviewed during later phases to support the development of themes.

Phase 2-4 were conducted inductively. To generate initial codes, short words, phrases and sentences were written in the right-hand margin of the page. Codes are "labels" that provide meaning or context to all segments of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For example, all participants reflected on how their support was provided and two codes that were identified at this stage included "proactive support" and "reactive support". Once completed, a list of all initial codes was drafted.

The next phase required searching for potential themes by comparing and contrasting the initial codes and context. Potential themes and sub-themes were then categorised. Using the examples of the two codes above (proactive and reactive support), these codes formed an overarching theme of "variance in programme delivery". For this process, hand-written mind maps (Braun & Clarke, 2006) were used to help organise data generated from phase 2 and 3.

During phase 4, a deductive approach was incorporated to assist in reviewing the themes. Participants' comments and contexts within the initial codes and tentative themes were reviewed to see what genuinely constituted a theme or not. It is not realistic to constitute every individual thought as a theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006), and emergent themes addressed and represented the aims of Study 1. For example, identifying similarities and differences in programmes was one aim of the study. Yet through analysis, the researcher identified contributing factors specific to each institute that influenced those differences, which was also important to consider and included as a sub-theme. In contrast, an example of a code identified during the initial coding phase that did not remain part of a final theme due to irrelevance to the aim of Study 1 was "conflict with a co-worker". During this phase, the researcher made continuous reference to the quotes to ensure the context was represented within potential themes.

To define and name themes, categories were grouped together guided by the aims of Study 1. Final modifications were made by making sure each theme and sub-theme could be recognised and clearly defined. Hand-written mind maps were used to chart the flow and connections of each theme and sub-theme.

The final stage involved producing a report of the results. Participant numbers (e.g. P1) page and line numbers (e.g. p.1, lines 1-2) are represented in each verbatim quote in order to provide a clear audit trail.

Results

The first section of results presents descriptive data from the analysis of 43 sport scholarship programmes. Data revealed 22 institutes were providing a sport scholarship programme at the time of data collection. For five institutes, clear and detailed information was obtained directly from their website. For 15 institutes, such information was made available via their website, telephone calls, and emails. For one institute, no clear information was available (represented in Table 1 as no information available). The remaining 21 institutes confirmed they did not have any sport scholarship programmes in place via email or telephone call. Of the 21 institutes, one highlighted that they would have a sport scholarship programme in place the following academic year; however, as they did not have a programme in place at the time of data collection, they were noted as not having a sport scholarship programme in the analysis.

Universities and IOT's were the main types of institutions providing sport scholarship programmes, with all seven Universities and 13 out of 14 IOT's with a sport scholarship programme. Outside of these institutes, only two other institutes had a sport scholarship programme. Presented below is a summary table (Table 1) of sport scholarship programmes provided by the 22 institutes identified.

Table 1*Summary of Irish Third-Level Sport Scholarship Programmes*

Universities																
Programme Features					Support Available											
HEI	NIA	> 1	Tiered	Financial			Sport Science			Academic			Academic		Other	
				Yes	No	NIA	Yes	Limited	No	NIA	Yes	Limited	No	NIA		Flexibility Policy
1		✓	✓	✓			✓					✓				✓
2			✓	✓			✓					✓				
3			✓	✓			✓					✓				
4			✓	✓			✓					✓				
5		✓	✓	✓			✓					✓			✓	✓
6		✓	✓	✓			✓					✓			✓	✓
7		✓	✓	✓			✓					✓				

Institute of Technologies																
HEI	Programme Features					Support Available										

		Academic															
		NIA	> 1	Tiered	Financial			Sport Science			Academic			Flexibility Policy	Other		
					Yes	No	NIA	Yes	Limited	No	NIA	Yes	Limited	No	NIA		
8	✓				✓						✓				✓		
9				✓	✓				✓				✓				✓
10	✓			✓	✓			✓				✓					✓
11				✓	✓			✓						✓			✓
12	✓			✓	✓			✓					✓				✓
13	✓			✓	✓				✓				✓				
14	✓			✓	✓			✓					✓				✓
15				✓	✓				✓				✓				✓
16					✓				✓				✓				✓
17	✓			✓	✓				✓				✓				✓
18					✓					✓				✓			
19	✓			✓	✓			✓					✓				✓
20	✓			✓	✓							✓					✓

College of Further Education

Programme Features				Support Available											
HEI	NIA	> 1	Tiered	Financial			Sport Science			Academic			Academic		Other
				Yes	No	NIA	Yes	Limited	No	NIA	Yes	Limited	No	NIA	
21				✓				✓				✓			
Other State Aided Institutions															
Programme Features				Support Available											
HEI	NIA	> 1	Tiered	Financial			Sport Science			Academic			Academic		Other
				Yes	No	NIA	Yes	Limited	No	NIA	Yes	Limited	No	NIA	
22				✓			✓					✓			

Note. HEI=institute; The heading “Programme Features” includes >1, and Tiered; The heading “Support Available” includes Financial, Sport Science, Academic, Academic Flexibility Policy, and Other; NIA=No information available; >1=More than 1 programme available in that institute; Limited=a limited amount of support available (this is be further explained in results).

Programme Features

Programme features represent the landscape of sport scholarship programmes and illustrates i) The Number of Sport Scholarship Programmes and ii) Tiered System of Support.

The number of Sport Scholarship Programmes

Half of the institutes had more than one type of sport scholarship programme in place ($n=12$). For example, some institutes had an “elite” level scholarship programme, a “developing” level scholarship programme and “focus sports” scholarships. Focus sports existed where institutes award higher level scholarships within specific sports. Not all institutes have focus sports, with the majority stating that they awarded equal scholarships to any sport recognised by Sport Ireland.

Tiered System of Support

Having a tiered system of support was present in 17 institutions. Tiered systems contained different levels of support (e.g. gold, silver, and bronze) under the one scholarship programme, which was dependant on the level of athletic achievement. Using a financial example, financial assistance in one institute ranged between €1,000 for a gold level scholarship, €750 for silver, and €500 for bronze.

In all cases, scholarships were awarded yearly, and student-athletes could progress each year according to their sporting development. Conversely, if student-athletes were not meeting the criteria of the system (sporting and or academically), they were not awarded the scholarship the following year. Participants suggested this as a relatively new and positive feature of sport scholarship programmes, as previously, student-athletes were awarded scholarships for their full three to four years of college, regardless of their sporting or academic performance.

Support Available

During all stages of data collection for Study 1, the researcher gathered information on the types of support available through sport scholarship programmes. Table 2 below provides an overview of the types of support associated with each category.

Table 2

Categories of support

Category	Example
Finance	Includes financial bursaries (money provided directly to the student-athlete) and financial contributions (e.g. reducing college fees, reducing accommodation costs, payment towards competition travel, and sports equipment).
Sport Science	Includes: 1) Strength and Conditioning, Physiotherapy and Coaching; 2) Fitness testing and analysis, 3) Nutrition, 4) Lifestyle Management and Performance Psychology.
Academic	Represents any form of academic assistance and includes: Reserved places/CAO points reductions, mentoring, tuition/grinds/academic specific assistance.
Other	Represents all other aspects not grouped in the above. Primary examples include access to gym facilities, food vouchers, photocopying, sports clothing.

Overall, there are very similar types of supports available throughout institutes. The main contrasting factors between institutes were the level and volume of support available,

varying between institutes and between the type of institute (e.g. Universities and IOT's).

Financial support was illustrated as the most common form of support available, with all 22 institutes providing it. This was followed by sport science support, with 19 institutes providing some form; closely followed by academic support, with 18 institutes having some form available.

Financial Support

All 22 institutes were providing some level of financial aid. As can be noted from Table 2, finance included bursaries (monetary payment directly to the student-athlete) and or financial contributions (e.g. towards equipment, accommodation, course fees). An important point to note in terms of the finance element was a reported change in the focus of sport scholarship programmes. Participants highlighted how their programmes had evolved since inception to include a variety of supports. When sport scholarship programmes were first introduced in Ireland (some being as early as the late 1980's), they consisted of bursaries only, whereas when the data were being collected in 2013-2014, most participants suggested a reduction in the amount of money directly given to student-athletes and putting more money into other supports. As such, values displayed by institutes can represent the value of the total package (including sport science elements) as opposed to the finance provided directly to student-athletes. The value of sports scholarship packages ranged from €500 to €5,000 per academic year depending on institute and level of sporting achievement, with larger institutes (i.e., universities) having the highest financial value packages.

Sport Science

A total of 19 institutes had sport science support available (all seven Universities, 11 IOT's, and one OSA institute). Two institutes reported not having any sport science available

(providing financial support only), and one IOT had no information available and could not be confirmed. As can be noted from Table 1, five institutes were providing “limited” sport science support. Limited was illustrated if there were only one or two sport science elements provided, or if participants stated they had limited capacity to provide this type of support and primarily offered financial assistance.

The most common form of sport science support differed between the type of institute. All seven Universities provided strength and conditioning/physiotherapy, fitness testing/analysis/coaching, and nutrition. This was followed by sport psychology/lifestyle management support ($n=6$). IOT’s emphasised access to gym facilities the most ($n=10$), followed by strength and conditioning/physiotherapy ($n=8$), fitness testing/analysis/coaching ($n=8$), and sport psychology/lifestyle support ($n=6$).

Academic

This type of support appeared to be the least formalised, with two out of 22 institutes having a formal academic flexibility policy in place, both of which were Universities. Examples of this type of flexibility include sitting exams at a different location if required due to competition, the ability to travel for international competitions without penalty, and reducing the number of modules taken within a given semester (i.e. stretching one year over two years). Two other institutes expressed that they hoped to develop a formal policy and were working with “leaders” of the institute to do so. Of note, even with a policy in place, participants emphasised that academic flexibility was granted on an individual basis and the type of accommodation received was at the discretion of individual academic staff and or department. In the institutes without a formal policy, some participants emphasised that flexibility could be granted; however, it was not guaranteed and was done so on a case by case basis.

Outside of a formal policy, 18 institutes had some other form of academic support. All seven Universities had some form of academic support in place (Table 2), with two noting it was limited. Ten IOT's and one OSA provided academic support, with nine stating this was limited and at times informal. Similar to sport science support, participants stated they had limited support in cases where they provided only one type of support, and or, it was not precedent. Participants described this type of support by emphasising it might be available "if needed". An example of limited support was illustrated by one institute describing their mentoring support was conducted on a voluntary basis, compared to another institute where it was formal, and each student was assigned a mentor and met a number of times throughout the year.

Tuition (e.g. subject grinds) and mentoring (e.g. having an academic of sport form of contact to help organise and assist with academic-related issues) were the most common forms of academic support amongst all types of institutes (Universities=4; IOT' s=9; OSA=1), followed by CAO points and reserved places (Universities=4, IOT' s=4). Academic flexibility was emphasised as not being precedent in most institutes but could be provided on a case by cases basis (Universities = 5; IOT' s = 8; SA = 1).

Other

"Other" support was any support not categorised above and included aspects such as sports clothing, photocopying and food vouchers. Thirteen institutes stated they had such supports, with no confirmation for the remaining nine. Of the 13, IOT's were the most likely to have this in place ($n=9$) and appeared most often in institutes that had limited sport science support.

Day to Day Practices

This final section of the results presents qualitative data from the ten interviews conducted. Thus far, similar features of programmes were evident in the results, albeit with a variety in the level provided. The interviews revealed additional information on day to day practices, variances, and perceptions of programmes. Presented below are the following aspects; Variance in Programme Delivery, Competitiveness of Programmes, External Relationships, and Most Valuable Support.

Variance in Programme Delivery

Through interviews, variation in the day to day delivery of programmes and supports between institutions emerged. In some institutes, elements of support were proactive and provided throughout the year. Using mentoring support as an example, one participant noted; “Basically, their job is to try and make sure problems are prompted and dealt with before it arises in relation to the balance between academic and sporting” (P8, p.2, lines 48-49). Whereas in other institutes, mentoring support was suggested as reactive and only provided if required;

They have their exams in January and we review their results and anyone who does not get a pass GPA must meet with the student services and academic affairs manager, and then she will go through with them how they are getting on academically as well...And that is just one thing and that needs to happen at an early time. That is a reaction to semester 1 results. (P6, p.4, lines 85-89)

Having a proactive or reactive approach to support appeared to be affected by contributing factors.

Contributing Factors

The first factor was the sport scholarship programme funding source. All interviewees stated their programmes were either partially or entirely funded through their individual institute. The larger institutes (Universities) tended to have more funding provided for their programmes. The variance of funding between institutes is emphasised in the following quote;

In certain colleges, there is massive amounts of money going into sport scholarships. There is two or three Universities that have more scholarships for their fresher's GAA that we have for our whole sports programme. There is teams here in Ireland where there is 30 fresher hurlers getting a bursary, or 30 fresher footballs, never mind the seniors; it's massive. (P6, p.14, lines 332-336)

Outside of institute funding, some participants suggested other sources of financing. One institute reported small funding sources from their local county council, while a small minority have sourced external sponsors in order to increase their funding and supports available. For institutes without external sponsors, some conduct fundraising events through the sports clubs. One institute explained that the clubs needed to fundraise to part-fund their own scholarships; "the funding for the scholarships does not necessarily come from the college, we have a very small pot for funding. So, it is actually the clubs themselves that are primarily fundraising for the scholarships" (P7, p.6, lines 142-144).

In most cases, the volume of funding could change year on year. Participants felt that this hindered their ability to develop programmes. Most participants felt sport scholarship programmes were used as a marketing tool and were dependant on the focus of institute "leadership";

In Ireland, it is a system that each of the Universities put in place themselves as a marketing tool essentially. The most powerful reason for giving me the money and

when I am writing reports and when we had this debate, is your funding going to be cut, well we have to talk to the marketing director and it is the reality of it, it is a tool for attracting students. (P5, p.15, lines 357-360)

Funding appeared to influence the amount and types of support available and also the people resource available.

The second contributing factor was the available human resource to coordinate support. In terms of coordinating the sport scholarship programmes, job titles varied from sports officers, sports and recreation officers, sports development officers/managers, sport scholarship coordinators and heads of sport. Although roles were similar in many cases, there were differences in how they were coordinated. This was primarily due to how many people were involved in managing the scholarships and whether there was central coordination. Some participants described central coordination where several sports development officers “fed” into one or two central people who managed the scholarship programme. In these cases, other people were employed to take care of and run the clubs and societies and recreation facilities, resulting in the sport scholarship programmes having a singular focus. In other situations, one or two people were employed to run the scholarship programme, clubs and recreation societies and the facilities all in one. In these cases, resources were highlighted as stretched due to the dichotomy of the job and was most common in smaller institutes (IOT’s). This also appeared to contribute to certain supports being reactive or proactive and can be noted in the following quote;

At the moment, we don’t have the time because we are probably 1.5 or 2 people down from the point of view of the amount of work that is coming through the sports office at the moment. It is a little haphazard, going from one day to the next. It is very hard to strategise because one minute you are dealing with a development officer and the

next facilities staff member, there is literally no connection between the two. (P10, p.7, lines 150-154)

Larger institutes with more funding available tended to have more people working within their programmes, whereas smaller institutes tended to have fewer people resources.

Internal relationships and understanding between scholarship programmes and academic staff in institutes was a final contributing factor. All participants reported varying experiences dealing with academic staff in relation to the scholarship programme, which contributed to the variance in informal academic flexibility provided to student-athletes. In most cases, participants emphasised positive experiences and support from academic staff. But, participants felt there was resistance when there was a lack of interest or awareness or understanding of student-athletes. An example of this is noted from the following quote;

And the only issue we have now is our (name of courses) is bursting the balls of our students, it doesn't make any sense. The people running them have no idea of sport or interest in it. But, we are literally only now starting to work, we have a few good academics involved with the various sports, but it is going to be a long hard road to break down the barriers that some of the academics think that sport is only used as an excuse. (P10, p.3-4, lines 72-77)

Participants echoed this point, suggesting that different departments can be diverse regarding their approach to student-athletes and staff within each department and course, emphasising a variation depending on personnel.

Many reasons were cited for this variation. For example, it was suggested that some courses required attendance (e.g. compulsory labs). Others indicated that some academics may not be aware of the institute's policies or procedures for student-athletes and may be afraid of granting leeway/academic flexibility. One interviewee commented on the notion that some academics are simply not aware of what it takes to become an elite; "So this notion

around the culture around supporting athletes, I think so much ignorance in society around what it takes to be a world class athlete, the challenges that they have to undertake, the support that they need.” (P9, p.4, lines 92-94). Similarly, another commented that;

There is a perception that they are jocks and may not be up to the mark academically, but in fact our students actually outperform the average across the Uni. You know, they are high performers in everything they do, they are highly organised and perform higher than average as well. (P8, p.6, lines 135-138)

Competitiveness of Programmes

Given the difference between levels of support and standardisation of sport scholarship programmes, participants discussed what information they were using to model their programmes. In all cases, participants suggested either modelling their programme on others within Ireland or in another country (primarily the UK or Australia). One participant indicated that they “carried out a comprehensive analysis on the other third-level institutions in Ireland and what they were offering and that was taken back and fed into your newly developed programme” (P3, p.2, lines 48-50).

Of note, a few participants suggested that they were not confident all institutes were delivering what they stated they would deliver (on the websites), with one participant suggesting; “there will be a lot written on the sites or brochures and it is either not delivered, delivered through workshops or not delivered through appropriate people” (P5, p.11, lines 260-261). Similarly, another participant felt they;

Need to know what others are doing so that we can know what is best for students at third-level. But it’s left, like I say, I think the information was coordinated by IIS (Institute of sport) of what colleges have scholarships and what they do just to give everybody a bit of a picture of it. But again, not all of that information was absolutely

accurate either. There is scholarship programmes going on behind the scenes that people won't give information. (P6, p.14, lines 324-328)

Competition between sport scholarship programmes was emphasised as an underlying factor for this. One participant indicated that; "because the scholarship programmes in most colleges are competitive, it is seen as a competition, in the sense that, who's going to get the best athlete" (P1, p.15, lines 355-356). As such, it was suggested that coordinating and standardising sport scholarship programmes across institutions would be difficult. Competition between institutes was also cited as a potential reason for introducing "focus sports" within sport scholarship programmes (as outlined in the first section of results). One participant suggested;

We would prioritise different sports and we are looking at the sports that we have a proven track record of being able to compete at the highest level of having the infrastructure to develop particular athletes to compete at the highest level. Where we have the physical resources where we have the training on site. Cause if you don't have them on site there is no point. (P7, p.9, lines 216-220)

Another difference between some institutes was that some required student-athletes to fully represent the institute in competitions in return for the sport scholarship. One participant noted that "unless they can play for (institute) 12 months of the year, they are not going to get a scholarship, because one of the key conditions is that you sign a contract and you are going to play and train for (institute) for 12 months." (P7, p.10, lines 233-235). Other institutes suggested not having this strong pre-requisite. In these cases, participants noted other "payback" for being provided supports such as building up/supporting the clubs and media attention. Institutes with focus sports, appeared to have higher expectations on student-athletes, featuring more frequently in universities than any other type of institute.

External Relationships

Many institutes had developed their own external relationships, both formally and informally. As noted in Chapter 2, third-level institutes can work with Sport Ireland Institute to provide combined support for elite student-athletes. However, at the time of the interviews, there was no contact between Sport Ireland Institute and third-level institutes at the time of data collection. Participants reported that the Sport Ireland Institute employee had left their position. There was confusion as to who was taking over, with participants suggesting that links needed to be rebuilt. Previous to that, the level of interaction varied. Some stated having a good relationship with them and gaining information and workshop ideas. In contrast, others mentioned being in contact only if there was an issue with a carded athlete attending their third level. For the institutes interviewed who did not have a partnership, they were unaware of the possibility.

External coaches/National Government Bodies was another external relationship discussed. Many participants felt they had good relationships built up and were able to communicate with the coaches for events and circumstances;

There is only a small bit of a crossover now if clubs are getting to the final stages, but then there is a lot of relationships built up between the management and of the various club teams and inter-county teams and (institute name). So, expectations are clearly played out from the outset and we won't play a player if they are involved in a county final but they would expect them to tog out and be there. (P3, p.4, lines 79-83)

A few expressed negative aspects, primarily emphasising a conflict between sport scholarship programmes and external coaches; "They just want their guys morning noon and night" (P10, p.10, lines 226). The main issue recounted was all "parties" working in their own silos with a disconnect between education and sport;

They are doing lip service to it and saying yes, we recognise that it is really important and they should be tied in more with the 3rd levels, but they are not putting the money where their mouth is, they are not changing their structures to accommodate the third-level whether it be the academia or the key events that are important for third-level.

(P7, p.12, lines 291-295)

It was suggested that more communication was required between external bodies and institutes in order to coordinate the athlete's needs effectively; "there has to be a partnership to it, and it may not be them giving money, it may be just a developing a working relationship with them where they recognise what the Uni's and HEI's need" (P7, p.13, lines 314-316).

Most Valuable Support

Participants were asked about their perception of the most valuable support within the sport scholarship programme to help student-athletes manage their dual careers. Although they acknowledged that this was student and situation-specific, the most discussed supports were academic support and a supportive environment.

Most interviewees felt that academic support was the most significant support to help balance sport and academics, and in many cases, was the most sought-after support by the student-athletes. The type of academic support discussed varied from academic flexibility to mentoring. The following participant noted;

And probably the most important aspect of the programme actually is the academic mentoring. That part of the process is to ensure that the athletes are fully equipped to manage their academic workloads as much as possible. It's again individualised, but depending on the needs of the student, it could be grinds tuition, or it could be assistance with proofreading, or it could be just time management and scheduling and academic workload for the student. (P1, p.3, lines 53-58)

Though emphasised as the most valuable and sought after type of support, Table 1 highlights academic support as the least available type of support and the least formalised.

The second most discussed support did not fit into any of the three “categories” of support and was referred to as a “supportive environment”;

We have found through the years in dealing with athletes that everything can be fine on those three. But something can happen in personal circumstances, a parent dies, a sibling is sick, there is trouble at home or whatever, and that can be much more detrimental to the athlete’s progression than anything else. Finance is a big issue but to honest with you, it’s funny saying it in these circumstances, but it is nearly not the money, it is about putting in the support structure behind the individual and knowing there is someone they can come to and talk to if a problem arises. (P7, p.7, lines 164-171)

This point was echoed in several interviews and included factors such as an open-door policy, someone to listen to them and understand what they may be going through;

The most important I feel, isn’t exactly something black and white, it is the fact that the students know that if they have some sort of issue they can come talk to us. Our door is always open. It is not an organised thing. The best thing I see they have is the students that come to us with issues, and they talk an hour before they get to the issue, and we can help. It could be a problem at home, accommodation, anything. Over the years, that is what I feel is the most benefit. You can throw money at them, but it isn’t personal and there is no follow up with that. (P10, p.5, lines 110-116)

This aspect of support relates to how support is provided as opposed to what type of support is available, emphasising a social support element. It is worth noting that this form of support cannot be categorised in a Table (such as Tables 1 and 2) but may be an important element within sport scholarship programmes.

Discussion

The aim of Study 1 was to examine sport scholarship programmes and the types of support available to student-athletes through third-level institutes. Results identified commonalities in terms of the types of support available in many third-level institutes but also identified variations in the structure and delivery of sport scholarship programmes.

At a national level, Ireland has been referenced as having a “Laissez-Faire” approach to dual career support (Aquilina & Henry, 2010; Caput-Jogunica et al., 2012; European Commission, 2012, 2016). There are no formal dual career structures in this approach, and any arrangements would primarily rely on individual negotiations (informal arrangements). The findings from Study 1 indicate that: a) at a national level, there was no formal dual career policy or coordination from a National Governing Body; b) there was no formal partnership between education and sport; and c) at an individual third-level institute level, there was a lack of formalised dual career policies or structures. Supporting previous literature (Aquilina & Henry, 2010; Caput-Jogunica et al., 2012; European Commission, 2012, 2016), data from Study 1 suggested that a Laissez-Faire approach to dual career support is prominent in Ireland.

A Laissez-Faire approach may not adequately support dual careers and can hinder student-athletes completing their third level education (European Commission, 2012, 2016). As a result, this type of system can also negatively influence athletes’ retirement career paths (Capranica et al., 2015; Kuettel et al., 2018). Addressing the implications of a Laissez-Faire system from a policy perspective, the European Commission (2012, 2016) recommended that countries without a formal dual career system should agree on a common statute or legislation in order to progress dual career support and governance at a national level.

Regarding the relationship between education and sport stakeholders, there was a lack of formal relationships reported in Study 1, albeit with some institutes reporting informal

relationships or agreements. In line with the Holistic Athletic Career Model (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004; Wylleman & Rosier, 2016), these two stakeholders are key support providers at a psychosocial level during the third-level athlete transition. An absence of relationships between sport and education stakeholders can be a source of stress for student-athletes (Aquilina, 2013; Condello et al., 2019; Engstrom et al., 1995; Ferrante et al., 1996; McKenna & Dustan-Lewis, 2004; Parsons, 2013; Potuto & O’Hanlon 2007; Puskas & Perenyi, 2015; Pummell et al., 2008). Several researchers have conveyed the importance of a “combined support” effort, particularly between sport and education providers (Adams et al., 2015; Burden et al., 2004; Giacobbi et al., 2004; Rosenfeld et al., 2000; Sheridan et al., 2014; Vujic, 2004). Many other countries have developed systems of combined support to varying degrees (e.g. TASS in the UK as an intermediary body between sport and education). Having clear dual career leadership and direction could also promote more formal and collaborative relationships between education and sport, which may be of benefit in an Irish context. Further research is required in order to gain a deeper understanding of student-athletes experiences in third-level education in Ireland (this is the primary aim of Study 2).

At an individual institute level, positive measures to support student-athletes were identified within sport scholarship programmes. This extends previous literature by reporting evidence relating to the Irish system (Amara et al., 2004; Aquilina & Henry, 2010; European Commission, 2012). Just over half (22 out of 43) of third-level institutes in Study 1 had a sport scholarship programme in place. Based on the current data, the 22 institutes with a sport scholarship in place were most closely associated with the “sport friendly universities” category (Morris et al., 2020; Storm et al., 2021). This type of environment has positive supports available for student-athletes but may not be coordinated, can differ between institutes, is unlikely to have any formal academic flexibility, and lacks coordination with sporting organisations, all of which was evident in Study 1.

Addressing research question two, the main 22 institutes with a sport scholarship programme in place had similar types of support available (as shown in Table 1). The types of support identified were grouped under finance, sport science, academic, and other. While no single ideal dual career programme exists (Giacobbi et al., 2004; Guidotti et al., 2015; Li & Sum, 2017), these categories are similar to “typology’s” identified in previous research relating to sport scholarships and dual career support (Aquilina, 2013; Aquilina & Henry, 2013; Brown et al., 2015; Condello et al., 2019).

It is necessary to consider the availability versus the need for these types of support. The most commonly cited resources by student-athletes for managing their dual career in previous studies include financial support, academic flexibility, mentoring, and an understanding support network (Aquilina, 2013; Brown et al., 2015; Burnett et al., 2010; Fuchs et al., 2016; GEES, 2016; Geranosova & Ronkainen, 2015; Pink et al., 2018; Ryan et al., 2017; Stambulova et al., 2015). Data from Study 1 indicated that financial support was the most frequently cited support, followed by sports science support, with academic support the least. In addition, participants in Study 1 reported that academic support (e.g. mentoring) and academic flexibility were the most requested types of support by student-athletes. Yet, evidence from Study 1 found that this type of support was the least available and was the least formalised. Only two institutes had a formal academic policy in place at the time of data collection. This suggests that there is little formal guidance for flexible academic practice in the majority of institutes, and according to participants, academic flexibility is commonly dependant on goodwill and relationships. Referring to the Athletic Career Transition Model (Stambulova, 2003), these results suggest that key resources required to meet or exceed transition dual career demands may be lacking in some third-level institutes.

This type of inconsistent practice has been previously demonstrated to have a negative impact on student-athletes, with many researchers suggesting it is rarely possible to combine

sport and education without structured academic flexibility (Aquilina, 2013; Brown et al., 2015; Caput-Jogunica et al., 2012; Condello et al., 2019; Ferrante et al., 1996; Lawrence et al., 2009; McKenna & Dustan-Lewis, 2004; Parsons, 2013; Ryan et al., 2017; Williams et al., 2010; Wylleman & Reints 2010). Research on dual career environment success factors and minimum dual career quality standards (ECO-DC Work Package 4, 2018; European Commission, 2016; Storm et al., 2021) recommends that student-athletes have access to formal flexible academic arrangements and that this is consistent and supported across the whole environment. Based on the evidence from Study 1, many third level institutes in Ireland do not meet these standards. Developing an academic flexibility policy that is recognised institute-wide could enable student-athletes to complete third-level education while reducing the probability of dropout or burnout from sport or education.

Dual career research (Aquilina, 2013; Brown et al., 2015; Burnett et al., 2010; Geraniosova & Ronkainen, 2015; McKenna & Dustan-Lewis, 2004; Stambulova et al., 2015), and in particular research based on the holistic ecological approach to dual career environments (ECO-DC, 2018; Henriksen & Stambulova, 2017; Storm et al., 2021), advocates a supportive and understanding environment (the people and system) as a dual career success factor. Providing support for this, participants in Study 1 reported that providing a supportive environment was perceived valuable to help student-athletes manage their dual commitments. Understanding student-athletes situations was viewed as significant in order to provide the support required. This type of support measurement could not be done through web-analysis and requires student-athlete perceptions and further research (conducted through Studies 2 and 3). However, it is essential to reference in this instance because how support is provided may be as important as the type of support is provided.

As most institutes had similar types of support in place, the main differences between institutes were evident in the volume of support, how the programmes were structured and

delivered, and requirements of student-athletes in receipt of scholarships. Variations in dual career programmes and practice within countries and between institutes are not uncommon and consistent with previous evidence (Aquilina, 2013; Brown et al., 2015; Li & Sum, 2017; Pink et al., 2015). Financial resource implications have been highlighted in previous studies as one of the leading limiting factors for sport scholarship programmes (Burnett et al., 2010; Morris et al., 2020; Nite, 2012). Results from Study 1 offers support for this as participants suggested that the funding they receive for the sport scholarship programmes impacts the type and volume of support they can provide student-athletes (e.g. large or small financial bursaries), and also the amount of human resource to operate the programmes (e.g one person managing the programme, or a number of people managing the programme).

The Higher Education Authority (HEA) is the statutory body responsible for advising, coordinating, and funding most third-level institutes in Ireland. However, third-level institutes in Ireland are governed individually and are generally autonomous (Citizens Information, n.d.; Higher Education Authority, n.d.) and sport scholarship programmes are primarily funded through their individual institutes (as communicated by participants from study 1). According to the SASSI report (Murphy et al., 2016), two-thirds of sport scholarships programmes are self-funded. As such, funding for sport scholarship programmes are dependent on each institute. This may impact on the sport scholarship programme funding (from Study 1 data, larger institutes appeared to have more extensive programmes and supports). This offers one explanation for variation in the structure of sport scholarship programmes.

Sport-scholarship programmes can facilitate student-athletes to train and study by providing several types of support (e.g. financial assistance to decrease the dependency on part-time work which helps maintain more time to train, study, and recover). However, sport scholarship programmes do not necessarily equate to sufficient dual career support (Ryan et

al., 2017), with requirements of sport scholarships potentially imposing further restrictions and demands on student-athletes (Amara et al., 2004; Ryan et al., 2017). Results from Study 1 revealed that some institutes stipulate requirements in return for the sport scholarship supports (e.g. athletes must represent/play for the institute). Many participants proposed that sport scholarship programmes can be driven by competitiveness and marketing. This raises important questions. For example, is there a difference between dual career support and sport scholarship support? Requirements to play and the associated implications (such as increased demands on student-athletes) has led some countries and programmes (such as New Zealand; see Ryan et al., 2017) to update their dual career policies and provide dual career support to all elite student-athletes (e.g. academic flexibility and mentoring), regardless of whether or not an individual receives a sport scholarship. Further investigation is required into student-athletes' perceptions and experiences to better understand the potential implications (if any) in an Irish context (this will be explored further in Study 2).

Macro environments (such as third-level institutes) are essential in helping student-athletes cope with demands and attain dual career success (Pummell et al., 2008; Stambulova et al., 2009; Stambulova et al., 2015; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004; Wylleman & Reints, 2010; Henriksen et al., 2020). However, macro environments are also complex due to multiple factors not being under direct control – internally and externally (Condello et al., 2019; European Commission, 2016; MacNamara & Collin, 2010; Ryan et al., 2017), and it is important to consider some potential contributing factors.

First, as noted in Chapter 2, the term “dual career” is a relatively new concept for sports and educational institutes with multiple disciplines involved, making it difficult to have strong leadership (European Commission, 2012, 2016). Through the results of Study 1, this can be seen in Ireland with no direct leadership or coordination nationally, and at times, minimal coordination within individual institutes. It must also be acknowledged that similar

to Ireland, many other nations currently operate separate education and sport sectors which make it more difficult to coordinate dual career support between sport and education environments (Aquilina & Henry, 2010; Ryan et al., 2017; Ryba et al., 2014).

Second, the European Commission is not a legislative body, and the minimum quality standards (European Commission, 2016) and the European guidelines (2012) are simply recommendations. It is difficult to produce a one size fits all model as every individual, sport, situation, and country are different (Giacobbi et al., 2004; Guidotti et al., 2015; Li & Sum, 2017). Each individual country must decide to adopt and drive their own dual career system. To do so requires knowledge, interest, and leadership. Similarly, at an individual institute level, there must be a willingness to accommodate dual career athletes (Aquilina, 2013; Brown et al., 2015; Guidotti et al., 2015; Li & Sum, 2017). According to a report by the European Commission (2017), many countries have expressed barriers to developing dual career support, such as a lack of awareness and understanding of dual career guidelines and implementation. Perhaps establishing a central governing body (State or Government facilitated such as in France or Belgium, or an independent body such as TASS in the UK) would be beneficial to help disseminate clear information directly to individual dual career providers such as at third-level institutes in Ireland. Further research is required to understand the potential challenges and barriers of dual career support in Ireland (this will be a primary focus in Study 4). Further investigation is required into student-athletes' perceptions and experiences dual career to better understand the potential implications (if any) in an Irish context (this will be explored further in Study 2).

Strengths and Limitations

It is important to understand and contextualise research from a culturally centred approach to assist the development of culturally specific frameworks (Lupo et al., 2015; Ryan

et al., 2017; Stambulova & Ryba, 2014; Stambulova et al., 2020). Dual career research in Europe is flourishing (Stambulova et al., 2020), yet Irish studies remain limited. Study 1 addressed a gap in the research by providing a comprehensive overview of the dual career landscape in Ireland. Previous researchers have also emphasised the importance of acknowledging and understanding the entire environment in which student-athletes are based (Guidotti et al., 2015; Henriksen et al., 2020; Stambulova et al., 2015). Analyzing dual career structures in Study 1 provided the researcher with a foundation to better understand student-athletes perspectives in Study 2.

A limitation identified was the interpretation of what constituted “support”, specifically “academic support”. For example, some forms of academic support were explicit and formalised (e.g. CAO concession points); however, in some instances, academic support can occur voluntarily (e.g. mentoring) and was not guaranteed. As a result, the researcher included a “limited” section in Table 1 to try and provide a better overview of the variation of support.

Ten participants were interviewed for stage 3, representing eight third-level institutes. The researcher acknowledges that other individual dual career practices may exist informally but may not have been captured through Study 1. However, the researcher is confident that Ireland’s primary dual career approach was evaluated by conducting the initial web-analysis.

Study 1 explored the type of support available to student-athletes through sport scholarship programmes. There is an opportunity to extend this to include all other support programmes available to this cohort through other means (such as lifestyle management programmes through National Governing Bodies).

Conclusion

There has been limited academic research on dual career support and policy from a national and third-level institute perspective in Ireland. Evidence from Study 1 provided a comprehensive overview of the third-level dual career landscape in Ireland and adds to the current literature suggesting that at a national level, Ireland falls within a *Laissez-Faire* dual career system (Aquilina & Henry, 2010; European Commission, 2012).

A key finding of Study 1 is that although many third-level institutes in Ireland have positive measures in place to support student-athletes, the majority do not meet previous European Commission guidelines or minimum quality standards for dual career support (European Commission, 2012, 2016). As a result, student-athletes can be negatively impacted and restricted from completing a dual career (Capranica et al., 2015; European Commission, 2012; Kuettel et al., 2018).

Many Irish third-level institutes have key dual career supports informally in place such as academic flexibility and mentoring (Aquilina, 2013; Brown et al., 2015; Fuchs et al., 2016; GEES, 2016; Geranosova & Ronkainen, 2015; Morris et al., 2020; Pink et al., 2018). However, research has found that structured support is best for dual career support and consistency (Capranica et al., 2015; Carodine et al., 2001; Fuchs et al., 2016; Guidotti et al., 2015). This is an important aspect for policymakers and practitioners to consider. There is an opportunity to develop these informal supports by adopting minimum European standards and guidelines to the already existing support. Based on the data from Study 1 and previous research recommendations (European Commission 2012; 2016; ECO-DC, 2018), the key aspects to consider are: national dual career leadership, combined support between sport and education, formal individual third level institute dual career policies (e.g. academic flexibility policies), and whole environment supports.

Chapter Five

Study 2

Introduction

From a macro perspective, results from Study 1 revealed that many third-level institutes in Ireland have positive measures in place to support student-athletes. However, much of this support appears informal and inconsistent, which may not be sufficient in supporting student-athletes (Aquilina, 2013; European Commission, 2012, 2016). This current study was conducted in 2015 when there were minimal Irish dual career studies. Since this time, a limited number of Irish dual career research has reported levels of stress in third-level student-athletes (Gomez et al., 2018; Drew & Matthews, 2018; Lane, 2015). These studies have created a valuable insight into dual career experiences in Ireland. However, even with the current studies, Irish literature has been limited to single third-level institute studies (Drew & Matthews, 2018; Gomez et al., 2018), single sport studies (Lane, 2015), and high-level athletes only serving part of the results (Murphy et al., 2016). A gap in the Irish literature exists regarding student-athlete experiences from a multi-sport and multi-institute perspective.

While Study 1 created an understanding of the dual career landscape in Irish third-level institutes, the aim of Study 2 was to build on this knowledge by exploring student-athletes experiences of combining education and sport. The research questions for Study 2 were;

1. What are student-athletes experiences of combining education and sport?
2. What are student-athletes perceptions of support in third-level institutes?

Methods

Study Design

Study 2 employed a qualitative approach using focus groups to explore student-athletes experiences.

Participants

Using data gathered from Study 1, the researcher sought to include a representative sample from large and small institutes throughout Ireland and used maximum variation purposive sampling (Etikan et al., 2016; Palys, 2008; Patton, 2002). Inclusion criteria for Study 2 required participants to be: i) full-time students in a third level course, ii) currently competing at a high national (representing and competing in top tier county level in team sports [i.e. GAA]) and international level (competing in International competitions and representing Ireland) in their sport, iii) in receipt of a sport-scholarship. Twenty participants (M=12; F=8) aged between 18-26, averaging 21.2 years (SD = 2.1) participated in one of five focus groups conducted in four third-level institutes in the Republic of Ireland. Eleven sports were represented, with 11 national level athletes and nine international level athletes. The variety in sports, athletics levels, and college year group ensured a variety of experiences. Table 3 presents the breakdown per focus group.

Table 3*Study 2 Participant Information*

Focus Group	Number of participants	College year	Sports represented	Participation level
1	4 (M=3, F=1)	Year 1 = 1 Year 2 = 2 Year 4 = 1	Cycling, Rugby, Ladies Football	International = 1 National = 3
2	4 (M=1, F=3)	Year 1 = 2 Year 2 = 2	Kick boxing, Soccer, Rowing	International = 2 National = 2
3	4 (M=2, F=2)	Year 3 = 2 Year 4 = 1 Postgraduate = 1	Athletics, Rugby, Racquetball, Rowing	International = 2 National = 2
4	3 (M=2, F=1)	Year 2 = 2 Year 3 = 1	Canoe Slalom, Rhythmic gymnastics, Wrestling	International = 3
5	5 (M=4, F=1)	Year 1 = 2 Year 2 = 1 Year 3 = 1 Year 4 = 1	Soccer, Hurling, Football	International = 1 National = 4
Totals	M=12 F=8	Year 1=5 Year 2=7 Year 3=4 Year 4=3 Postgrad=1		National=11 International=9

Study Procedures

The interview schedule was structured using guidance from the aims of the study and previous research outlined in the literature review (Aquilina, 2013; European Commission, 2012; McKenna & Dustan-Lewis, 2004; Stambulova, 2003; Wyllemann & Lavallee, 2004). A copy of the interview schedule is located in Appendix B.

Before testing took place, the researcher conducted a pilot focus group with former student-athletes. As outlined in Chapters 3 and 4, the purpose of the pilot study was to trial the interview questions and to gain feedback from participants about the questions asked, their understanding of the content, the interviewers own personal style and environment (Mason, 2002; Patton, 2002; Robson, 2011). After the pilot study, minor changes were made to the interview schedule, specifically, the order of the questions to eliminate repetitiveness and the researcher's language used to help probe deeper into subject areas.

Following the pilot study, the main testing followed a semi-structured focus group outline using the pre-tested interview schedule. Using contact information gained through Study 1, the researcher contacted sport scholarship coordinators via email and provided them with detailed information about Study 2. Sport scholarship coordinators were then sent an information sheet for student-athletes who contacted all their scholarship-athletes on behalf of the researcher. Interested student-athletes either contacted the researcher directly or through their scholarship coordinator, and focus groups were arranged. All five focus groups were conducted in each institute, face-to-face, between February and March 2015. Each focus group was recorded using a Dictaphone.

Before the beginning of each focus group, the researcher introduced herself, provided an overview of the aim of the study, and attained written consent. Participants were informed that the information they provided was confidential and information used would be anonymised. As noted previously in the Main Methodology Chapter, focus groups can empower participants to discuss their experiences by being stimulated by the experiences of others, helping them compare or contrast their own experiences (Patton, 2002; Robson, 2011). In order to achieve this, group interaction is key (Smith & Caddick, 2012). Participants in each focus group were from various sports, courses, and year groups. As such, some participants knew each other, while others did not. In order to enhance confidence and comfort among the group to share experiences honestly, the researcher did three things. Firstly, the room was set up in a circle format so all participants could see one another. Secondly, confidentiality from participants relating to what would be discussed during the focus group was requested. Finally, Krueger and Casey (2001) suggest using purposeful small talk to create a sense of a warm environment. Although participants were from a variety of backgrounds, all participants had the shared experience of being a student-athlete in their

third-level institute. The researcher asked each participant to introduce themselves by providing an overview of their sport and educational background.

Data Analysis

Similar to the data analysis process outlined in Study 1, focus groups were analysed using a thematic approach using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach to thematic analysis: familiarising yourself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for initial themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, producing the report. An inductive approach to data analysis was followed by a deductive approach to data analysis (Park et al., 2012; Patton, 2002).

The total audio time of focus groups was 235 minutes, with focus groups ranging from 42 to 51 minutes, with an average length of 47 minutes. Each interview was transcribed verbatim into Microsoft word. The total transcriptions amounted to 37,013 words. Transcriptions were then read and re-read, and short notes (e.g. notes of patterns and differences within and between each focus group) were hand-written in the left-hand margins. An example of the types of notes written during this phase included; "different experience expressed from different scholarship levels", "understanding appears to be important", and "noting a difference between first and fourth-year perspectives". These notes were reviewed throughout the analysis process and were helpful in later stages for the development of themes.

Phase 2-4 were conducted inductively. To generate initial codes, short words, phrases and sentences were written in the right-hand margin of the page. Examples of codes produced during this phase included; timing, gradual demands, decrease in social aspects. After this phase was fully complete, a list of all initial codes was drafted.

The researcher then searched for potential themes by comparing and contrasting the initial codes and context between each focus group and within each focus group. Hand-written mind maps (Braun & Clarke, 2006) were generated to help organise data from phase 2 and 3. Possible themes and sub-themes were then categorised.

During phase four, a deductive approach was incorporated to assist in reviewing tentative themes. Participants' comments and contexts within the initial codes and themes were reviewed to see what constituted a theme. In line with Study 1 analysis, emergent themes addressed and represented the aims of Study 2. During this phase, the researcher referred back to the quotes to ensure the context was represented within potential themes.

Categories were then grouped together, guided by the aims of Study 2. Final modifications were made by making sure each theme and sub-theme could be recognised and clearly defined. Hand-written mind maps were used to chart the flow and connections of each theme and sub-theme.

The final stage involved producing a report of the results. Focus group number (e.g. FG1), participant number (e.g. P1), page and line numbers (e.g. p.1, line 6) are represented in each verbatim quote in order to provide a clear audit trail.

Results

Data from Study 2 resulted in two higher-order themes: 1) Experiences influenced by Transitions and Context, and 2) The Need for Support Resources for Student-Athletes.

Experiences Influenced by Transitions and Context

Participants discussed their experiences of combining education and sport. Several aspects were discussed, with three predominant themes emerging: i) Changes Experienced, ii) Positive Impacts, and iii) Demands and Stressors.

Changes Experienced

Participants recounted two main changes that were shared across all focus groups: transition from secondary school to third-level, and transition from first-year to final-year.

Transitioning from Secondary School to Third-Level Education. This transition resulted in changes in social networks and schedules. Firstly, participants noted a social difference when moving to college, which related to changes to social experiences:

So when you get to college, everyone goes out Tuesdays and Thursdays. But I can't cause I have training the next day at 6 or 7am. So you miss those nights out, and you miss the conversations that next day about how the night went so you are kind of out of the loop almost you know. So like that's why most of your friends are the people who are training with you full time. Like most of my friends are rowers and stuff and you are all on the same schedule, and the conversations are all the same. And that is one of the biggest differences I have come through since 6th year. (FG2. P4, pg.6, lines 186-193)

This quote expresses a transitional impact on social networks and potentially a narrowing of identity.

Changes in schedules between secondary and third-level was also discussed: “The way the timetable is you kinda have more time off, and at school, you didn’t have time to think about it you were just into another class and like here you have just more time off” (FG1. P1, pg.6, line 164-166). For some, this was a welcomed sense of freedom and independence:

More freedom, like in secondary school you are always afraid of your mother (said in jest), but here she doesn’t know what the hell I am doing now. So you have the ability to put training first, but it’s kinda, like the capacity to say right this has to be done, so I will train after as opposed to before it. So you have the freedom to do it whichever way you want to do it. (FG1. P2, pg.11, lines 350-353)

These changes required increased responsibility for education and training, and participants emphasised that these changes take time to adjust.

Transition from First-Year to Final-Year. Participants emphasised the difference between first-year to final year in third-level education. Through discussions, participants in their first two years of third-level felt they had not experienced as much pressure in terms of demands versus resources as the final year students. Within the same focus group, a first-year student suggested that: “first-year isn’t that hectic so it’s manageable...but I am sure as the years go on it will get trickier” (FG5. P5, pg.3, lines 65-69). Whereas a participant in their final year discussed the difference in perceived pressure and expectation between first-year and their final-year:

This is my fourth year in college, and I have been on the county panel for the four years I have been here, and it has gradually got harder and harder to manage the both. Especially playing at senior level as well, the criteria for training and your own work has kinda gone up in the last number of years, and it is hard to manage the level, to get

to the level of commitment along with the level of commitment that goes with going up in the years in college as well. (FG5. P2, pg.3, lines 70-75)

These two quotes demonstrate differing perceptions due to situational experiences, highlighting a gradual increase in demand from both a sporting and academic side.

Positive Impacts

Two primary positive impacts of being a student-athlete were having a separate identity and having a structure and routine.

Having a separate identity was discussed in all focus groups. Participants suggested that having other things to focus on was positive and a reason to attend third-level education. Participants felt that “you need a life outside of sport”. The following quote helps capture these thoughts:

Yeah, and I think it's just the fact that you need to be able to switch off sometimes. You can't train 12 hours a day and if you have nothing else to do but train, then that is all you are going to think about. So being able to just switch off and get the training done and say right, I am done for the day and go study. (FG1, P2, pg.15, lines 478-481)

This quote suggests a desire to have a separate outlet, with one participant describing it as: “very healthy, and I don't just mean that for your body, but for your mind” (FG3, P1, pg.8, line 230).

Participants proposed that being a student-athlete provides a structured routine to the day: “You are more focused and aware of how to plan things than other students” (FG2, P4, pg.5, line 147). It was suggested that it also helped them form habits to be more productive: “how much more organised like I found that I became just after the first few weeks in college” (FG1, P1, pg.5, lines 161-162). Similarly, another emphasised that “my time

management is very good, it is probably one of the benefits of being a student-athlete” (FG2, P2, pg.5, lines 146-147).

Demands and Stressors

Along with the changes and positives, participants expressed demands that being a student-athlete had on their sport and education:

It is hard to focus on study if you have a big competition coming up, or it’s hard to focus on competition and training when you have exams coming up. It is hard to distinguish between the two to balance it all like. (FG3, P3, pg.6, lines 161-163)

Participants also emphasised demands from a personal and social perspective, suggesting that being a student-athlete impacted the whole person and not solely on sport and or education:

“It is just hard to balance your work your study your everything, your sport and your friends as well and trying to keep in contact with them.” (FG3, P3, pg.5, lines 151-153). Timing, recovery, and conflict were three factors that appeared to contribute to participants demands.

Timing of events was a demand if there was a clash between exams or assignments and a sporting event. For some, this impacted how they perceived and coped with the pressure. This aspect was more prominent for participants who competed in sports that clashed with particular times of the semester:

At the minute, we have loads of projects due, and we are kinda stuck in the middle of the league campaign as well for the county team you know. So trying to train three or four times a week and trying to get three or four deadlines met as well. It gets tougher and tougher, you know. (FG5. P2, pg.3, lines 75-78)

Another participant shared similar feelings:

Well, I was in the All Ireland there in September and for the first two weeks I wasn’t in college. You weren’t thinking about college at all, but those two weeks were gone,

and then we had the All Ireland and then that was another week gone cause we were out celebrating and then I came back and then you are like, Oh God, I was a bit behind and you were under a lot of pressure so, well that was just timing of that whole thing.

(FG1, P4, pg.12, lines 374-378)

Although participants suggested time-management skills as a positive, they also felt pressure from making daily choices that could impact sporting and educational performance.

One participant expressed:

You always have that voice in your head, is what I am doing right now going to affect my training in three hours' time. That is the way I would think of it. Is running up these steps instead of walking up these steps going to take more energy. (FG1, P2, pg.9, lines 281-283)

Other students echoed similar feelings when faced with choices, with one student missing a world championship event due to timing and course demands.

Tiredness and lack of time to recover were major stressors expressed by all.

Participants felt that they had a limited timeframe to recover compared to full-time athletes, impacting both their sport and academics. One participant noted that "it's not just the time you spend in training, you are tired after training too. When I come home from training, I usually can't do any work; I just sit there looking at the book" (FG3, P1, pg.5, lines 154-155); emphasising an impact on academics. Other participants highlighted the impact of recovery on sporting performance:

I think its recovery for me, I don't, like say I train in the mornings and all of the girls who I compete with and they don't do college like they just train full time. Rather I am like rushing back for a lecture, so I don't recover as much as they do, and I think that is definitely the thing that catches me the most is that I don't have time for that. (FG3, P4, pg.6, lines 170-173)

Travel added to the impact of recovery time for those who either commuted to training or college. Some participants (primarily team sport athletes) were required to commute several times per week, which was emphasised as a burden on energy and time. One participant noted: “I would enjoy training like, but it’s like if you’re travelling its more the journey travelling up like, you just think, ah, two hours on the road, sitting on my arse, gona have a sore back and sore legs” (FG5, P3, pg.4, lines 115-117). Similarly, another suggested: “we train here on Thursday on the course and then I would go home to train and I would find myself really tired and my club session would suffer” (FG5, P1, pg.4, lines 118-119). Travel also resulted in time taken from the day:

I commute up and down every day so that I can train at home, so I would only be available for set times during the week cause I would have to match it up with train times to get back home you know that kind of way, so it is just trying to juggle. (FG4, P2, pg.3, lines 92-95)

A final stressor to emerge was conflict with others. This related to the perceived pressure of dealing with various people involved in their sport and or education. One participant gave the following account of their experience:

Sometimes, that is tough. The fact that I play like college, club and international. It’s kind of like everyone wants the best from you. And it’s hard to give everyone the best and like when I got injured it happened on international, and then I am reporting back to my club and to (my college), and it’s kind of three different feedbacks you are getting then, and it’s hard to kind of balance them, it’s tough enough. (FG5, P1, pg.14, lines 469-473)

In the same focus group, the discussion relating to this conflict was emphasised by: “just write down nightmare in capital letters and that will do ya” (FG5, P2, pg.15, line 495), when referring to dealing with various stakeholders. Some participants expressed they felt coaches

may not understand the demands experienced: “your club isn’t really happy with it either like that you are doing this extra training and playing matches and it has an effect on them. It is kinda getting a happy medium between the two of them” (FG5, P1, pg.4, lines 128-130).

Similar to Study 1, these quotes also reflect a requirement to represent a number of organisations, and in some cases, participants were representing up to three different teams, with limited to no link between them.

The Need for Support Resources for Student-Athletes

In line with Study 1 results, participants were asked about the type of support available to them through their sport scholarship programme. Throughout the focus groups, all types of support that were presented in Table 2 in Study 1 were stated to be available (e.g. financial, sport science, academic, other). Similar to Study 1, not all participants received the same type and volume of support, which was dependant on their athletic level or the type of structures in place within the institute. Differences were also evident in terms of sport scholarship delivery and academic staff support.

One of the primary differences was the level of contact participants had with sport scholarship programme coordinators. For example, some focus groups reported formal and continuous contact throughout the year:

It is great I think. Like I have to go up later on for a catch up talk with the (people) in the (scholarship) office like. And we did the same last year, went in two or three times like. And same with the lecturers, there is no, you wouldn’t really be afraid to talk, you can go have a chat with them if you wanted like. (FG1, P4, pg.5, lines 129-132)

Others emphasised a contrasting view, reporting that: “they don’t reach out, you have to reach out to them if you need help” (FG3, P3, pg.12, line 356). This variance led to different perceptions about the support available and how the sport scholarship programme operated.

Participants expressed uncertainty in three focus groups as to what other support may be available to them outside of what they were currently receiving: “I don’t really know what they would offer. I don’t really go down there and just poke my head in and ask” (FG3 P1, pg.12, lines 358-359).

Discussions also highlighted different experiences regarding support from academic staff. Two factors were associated with this aspect: understanding student-athletes situations and differences between large and small course numbers. Several participants suggested that having academic staff understand their situation helped; “Like I just think I am lucky with the department like, cause a lot of the lecturers are sporty and understand” (FG1, P4, pg.12, lines 392-393). In contrast, another participant commented that the academic staff in their situation: “wouldn’t have a clue” (FG2, P4, pg.13, line 437), suggesting a perceived lack of understanding of dual career commitments.

Another potential factor contributing to perceptions of academic staff support was the class sizes. Using an example from one focus group, participants shared contrasting experiences with one participant stating, “I would be in classes with 300 or 400 students. You are just a number”, whereas another person in the same institute felt differently: “there was only 50 in mine the whole way up; it was easier to talk” (FG3, P3&4, pg.15, lines 450-451). These variations were noted between departments and courses within the same institute. Many participants emphasised that they felt that the educational system was rigid, leading one participant to suggest that “it doesn’t support athletes in my opinion” (FG4, P2, pg.15, line 498).

Most Valuable Support

Albeit the differences in the level and type of sport scholarship programme that participants were on, all participants acknowledged that support was invaluable in helping

them manage the challenges of being a student-athlete. Participants felt strongly that support was person and situation dependant and could mean different things to different people:

There is different aids like and it depends on the person. Like you might have a person who needs support or care financially or someone who needs support in biomechanics or someone who needs support with academics and help and all that. You know it is a broad thing, it fits every person differently. (FG2, P4, pg.7, lines 226-229)

Likewise, another participant noted that support was most valuable when built around the person;

The stuff that is not written on paper. You know you get your contract or whatever, and this is all the stuff that you are going to get. But the thing I really benefit from is the stuff they give you after that, the stuff that isn't written down, the kinda stuff that YOU say you want and they provide for you. (FG1, P2, pg.13-14, lines 440-443)

Each focus group discussed the most important type of support that helped them combine their education and sport. Finance, Academic Flexibility, and Mentors and Supportive Environment were the primary aspects discussed.

Finance. Firstly, finance was noted in all focus groups. Many participants felt they would not be able to afford to come to college without the fees: “well mine would be the fees being paid, like I wouldn't have been able to afford to come to college” (FG5. P1, pg.7, lines 228-229); while others suggested that it was difficult to have a part-time job on top of travelling, training and studying: and the financial support received helped them to be able to focus on study and sport.

Academic Flexibility. Academic flexibility was also highlighted as an important support in terms of being able to travel to international competitions and training camps:

If we have exams and things and we have to travel abroad or have nationals on or something, it is much easier to go to the department of whatever subject it is and say

look, I am representing Ireland and (the college) here and I have this letter from (the scholarship office) saying I am going and a letter from the Irish team and they will more than likely. Like they have moved so much exams for me last year and this year that I wouldn't have been able to go abroad if they hadn't been moved. So it's more kind of recognition behind it instead of you just saying oh I am going away like. So you have the college staff and all. (FG2. P1, pg.3-4, lines 94-100)

Participants emphasised an increased sense of comfort with academic flexibility as it reduced “unknowns” and uncertainty.

Mentors and Supportive Environment. The final support discussed related to mentors and a supportive environment. The participants with a formal and individual mentoring system in place emphasised that having a mentor provided valuable support. Specifically, having someone that understands either the sport or course demands:

Cause she understands my timetables and knows where to fit in study and rowing and am, she knows how important each is so she understands how much time I have to give to each to college and to rowing. So she comes from a sporting background as well. She knows a lot about my lifestyle, she is really helpful with experience so that is why I would probably put her as number one support for balancing my academics and sport. (FG2, P4, pg.10-11, lines 342-346)

Individual mentoring support was not available to all participants and was institute and athletic level dependant. For example, some institutes did not have a formal and individual mentoring system in place (in one focus group [in the same institute] two participants had a mentor, and three did not). For those who did not have a specific mentoring system in place, a supportive environment was a strong theme and appeared to provide a similar output as having a mentor: comfort and a feeling of security. Being able to feel you can approach someone for help through the sport scholarship programme and have someone to turn to was

expressed as important: “And there was always someone to turn to if you were under pressure. I suppose that was a real positive”. (FG2, P2, pg.2, lines 51-51). Like the mentoring aspect, participants emphasised that knowing that you are not on your own was significant: “Just knowing there is someone there in any circumstance, to communicate with, to help you out of the situation. It might be anything to do with college or sport but knowing that someone is there” (FG5, P2, pg.8, lines 250-252).

A noteworthy point was that the participants who had the formal and individual mentoring system in place (and rated it as an important support) were the participants who reported less contact with the sport scholarship coordinators (as illustrated at the beginning of this theme). The participants who suggested having more regular contact with the sport scholarship coordinators did not have a formal mentoring system. Perhaps this suggests that the sport scholarship coordinators fill this mentoring role themselves in the absence of this support being formally available.

The Impact of the Person on Support and Environment. Mentoring and a supportive environment represented a functional type of support. The impact of “people” was further discussed in all focus groups as an influence on those types of supports. In one particular focus group, it was emphasised that when it comes to support, it is the people who make the difference: “a lot has got to do with the person” (FG3, P3, pg.17, line 512). Participants felt that having a genuine interest in what they were doing was an important aspect of providing support.

As opposed to the functional component (finance or academic flexibility), the person component was someone to talk to, whether formal or informal:

It is getting 1 to 1 like. It is not like, you know, the financial support that they throw money in your card and they just send you an email, right you have money on your

card as part of your scholarship, that's it. But you can kinda go in and talk to them and I find that just more socially, just talking away. (FG1, P1, pg.4, lines 106-109)

Outside of the sport scholarship programme and institute support, participants discussed various people who provide them with support, which varied: "I suppose it is different for every person you know. It could be your coach, it could be some mentor you know, it depends" (FG2, P4, pg.8, lines 260-261). A point to note was the difference of opinion between participants who live at home and people who live away from home and participants in team or individual sports. Those who lived at home mentioned parents more frequently: "I would say parents are big part of it. Cause they really give you a leg up at the start. I am still living at home and stuff like that" (FG4, P1, pg.9, lines 281-282). Similarly, there was a difference between participants who were involved in team sports versus participants who were involved in individual sports. One team sport participant noted:

I suppose I am on a team sport so it's ah, I suppose everyone is a social support. All the lads would be able to talk to each other and kind of give stick about it but it is probably different to an individual sport. (FG3, P2, pg.10, lines 288-290)

Whereas one individual sport participant noted;

I have like 13 sessions, but they are all with a coach kinda, but none of them, like it is a team sport in a certain sense that there is like crew boats but like everyone is competing against each other to get in so really the environment you are in is like you are on your own kinda, your against everyone so it's a horrible environment really in one extent. (FG3, P4, pg.11, lines 327-330).

Some participants recounted challenges associated with support from others. Similar to the transitions subtheme, social aspects were noted as being challenging at times and were discussed on many occasions:

Like you know some of your friends would get very annoyed and why are you not meeting up with us or making time for us or whatever. So you know, some people don't really seem to understand to know how serious you have to take it. (FG2, P1, pg.10, lines 314-317)

The concepts of "people" and "understanding" were rippling subthemes throughout the focus groups and were discussed in many different contexts: demand and a resource.

Discussion

The aim of Study 2 was to explore Irish student-athletes experiences of combining education and sport, and their perceptions of support available in third-level institutes. Results from this study suggest that Irish student-athletes experience transitional demands and require resources to cope. Several results confirm and extend data from Study 1.

All participants experienced some form of transitional changes associated with moving from second to third-level education. Participants experienced these transitions in sport, education, and in their personal life. Experiencing changes in multiple areas of one's life is associated with elements of the Holistic Athletic Career Model (Wylleman & Lavalée, 2004; Wylleman et al., 2013; Wylleman & Rosier, 2016) and is in line with previous dual career research (Burnett et al., 2010; Brown et al., 2015; Ferrante et al., 1996; Miller & Kerr, 2002; Ryba et al., 2014; Stambulova et al., 2015; Wylleman & Reints, 2016). The main transitions discussed in Study 2 were associated with the psychosocial and psychological levels of the Holistic Athletic Career Model. In general, people experience social changes as part of maturing (e.g. moving away from home, new experiences). The results of Study 2 confirm this with notable changes in support networks described by participants. Participants living at home discussed family as a form of support more so than participants who had moved away. This is consistent with previous research relating to transitional changes in social networks (Adams et al., 2015; Holt & Hoar, 2006; Wylleman & Lavalée, 2004).

However, a key finding related to changes in developing new friendships and maintaining existing ones. Although participants acknowledged meeting new people, there also appeared to be a narrowing of the type of friendships. Many participants felt a lack of connection to some non-athletes due to unshared experiences. This theme adds to current literature highlighting that student-athletes may experience isolation from their peers (Hassell et al., 2010; Marx et al., 2008; Miller & Kerr, 2002; Wylleman & Lavalée, 2004; Wylleman

& Reints, 2010). Narrowing of personal identity and social identity can lead to identity foreclosure and trouble adjusting to retirement from sport for some athletes (Erpič et al., 2004; Petitpas et al., 2013; O'Halloran & Haslem, 2020; Pummell et al., 2008). Belonging to multiple social groups is a protective factor during transition and retirement from sport (Jetten et al., 2009; O'Halloran & Haslem, 2020). Although participants in Study 2 felt that being a student-athlete provided a positive distraction (identity), research suggests that social identity may be just as important to consider (Jetten et al., 2009; O'Halloran & Haslam, 2020). In contrast, participants in Study 2 expressed that many of their friendships were associated with their sport, highlighting a potential impact on social identity.

However, although participants in Study 2 noted a narrowing of the types of friendships they experienced, all participants identified with being a student-athlete, suggesting it was a positive distraction from sport and an additional connection outside of their sport. Agreeing with previous research findings, having a separate identity has many associated benefits, including intellectual stimulation and a distraction (Anderson, 2012; Aquilina, 2013; MacNamara & Collins, 2010; Price et al., 2010; Stambulova et al., 2015; Torregrosa et al., 2015).

Another change experienced by participants related to personal independence. Notably, younger participants (first and second years) welcomed the freedom associated with moving away from home, increased autonomy, and the ability to make choices. While acknowledging an adjustment period, participants did not emphasise a negative transition experience related to the demands of entering first year. This contrasts with some previous findings (Gayles, 2009; Giacobbi et al., 2004; Miller & Kerr, 2002). It is possible to propose that these first year experiences may have been influenced by exciting new experiences (freedom) of the initial transition. Older participants (third and primarily fourth years) expressed a gradual increase in both sport and education demands from first to fourth year,

suggesting it was harder to manage at the later stages. A gradual increase in student-athletes sporting and educational demands has also been found in previous studies (Fuchs et al., 2016; MacNamara & Collins 2010; Ryba et al., 2014; Stambulova et al., 2015). In addition, the gradual increase of demands in sport and education demonstrates transitions as a process rather than isolated events, adding to previous literature (Schlossberg, 1981; Stambulova, 2003; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). Simultaneous demands can cause added pressure and stress for student-athletes (Burden et al., 2004; Condello et al., 2019; Li & Sum, 2017; Pummell et al., 2008; Stambulova, 2003; Stambulova et al., 2015) which can lead to burnout (Adams et al., 2015; Caput-Jogunica, 2012; Rees, 2007).

Relatedly, it is important to recognise that some experiences were influenced by context and timing. Certain times of the year were noted as more demanding than others, reflecting an undulating process. Participants felt that at times education demands (e.g. heavy exam or assignment load) affected their sporting performance. Yet, at other times their sporting demands (e.g. heavy competition demand) affected their education performance. This theme extends previous research that proposes that timing is an influencing factor of transition and coping (Danish et al., 1992; Schlossberg, 1981; Stambulova, 2003; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). Practitioners working with student-athletes in sport and education should consider and understand student-athletes changing demands at different times of the year (Debois et al., 2015; Stambulova et al., 2015).

Regardless of timing, two primary stressors shared by all participants were conflict and tiredness. Conflict between sport and education was discussed in all focus groups as a significant source of stress. The primary sources of conflict included receiving mixed messages from others and a perceived lack of understanding from others, which in certain instances appeared interrelated. These findings can be connected to data in Study 1 in terms of third-level requirements relating to sport scholarships. While requirements to play in return

for a sport scholarship is not unique to this study (Amara et al., 2004; Ryan et al., 2017), experiences are dependent on the sport and can add to demands. In America, the NCAA called for changes to student-athletes requirements with a maximum of 20 hours per week sport involvement (Ayers et al., 2012). In Ireland, no such organisation exists to regulate dual career aspects nationwide. Nevertheless, individual National Governing Bodies and Players Associations govern each sport and player welfare. However, each is done so on an individual basis which means that regulations differ among sports. For example, through discussion during Study 2 focus groups, it was noted that in certain sports (e.g. athletics), while there are requirements to represent at third-level in return for a sport-scholarship, a student-athlete can only represent one organisation, requiring them to change club. Other sports (e.g. GAA) “permit” athletes to play for more than one team (e.g. college, club and intercounty). It is not uncommon for team sport athletes to play for three different teams. This unknowingly may place additional demands (physically, mentally and emotionally) on student-athletes. Noteworthy in the current study, discussions relating to conflict did not reflect a physical demand and primarily related to the emotional demand due to lack of communication and conflicting messages that participants experienced.

In the context of lack of understanding, participants felt that some coaches did not understand their education commitments, with this lack of understanding adding to their demands. Adding to previous research, similar stakeholder conflict has been reported in previous literature (Adams et al., 2015; Burden et al., 2004; Christensen & Sorensen, 2009; Condello et al., 2019; Morris et al., 2016). A lack of coach empathy has been reported to contribute to student-athlete burnout (Adams et al., 2015; Caput-Jogunica, 2012; Rees, 2007). A successful dual career involves being able to shift priorities between sport and education at certain times (Stambulova et al., 2015). To achieve this requires sport and educational communication and support. An important recommendation in dual career research is to

develop clear and transparent communication between all stakeholders in order to reduce and prevent conflict experienced by student-athletes (Burden et al., 2004; Douglas & Carless, 2006; European Commission, 2012, 2016; Guidotti et al., 2015; Henriksen et al., 2020; Henry, 2013; Morris et al., 2020). Based on the findings in Studies 1 and 2, this communication level does not appear to exist for all participants.

Tiredness was also identified as a stressor for all participants and impacted both sport and education, extending previous literature (Brown et al., 2015; Burnett et al., 2010; Condello et al., 2019). Participants reported demands of travelling varying distances to and from training and a perceived lack of recovery time compared to full-time athletes due to attending classes or study demands. These results add to existing literature suggesting that having a training environment near the living/study environment is less demanding and may facilitate a successful dual career experience (Christensen & Sorensen, 2009; Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; Morris et al., 2020). To the researcher's knowledge (including data from Study 1), academic flexibility in third-level institutes in Ireland is primarily granted for international travel and competitions and does not cover alternative arrangements for everyday training and recovery (e.g. distance learning options, recorded classes etc.). However, the researcher acknowledges that individual bespoke arrangements may be made to which the researcher is not aware.

Some of the demands identified, such as travel, tiredness, conflict and pressure from others, are not new to dual career research and have been found in much earlier studies (Adler & Adler, 1985; Danish et al., 1992). An important point to consider from a research and practitioner perspective is why similar aspects are reoccurring in the present context given the existing dual career research, recommendations, and guidelines that have been established to help develop dual career practice (European Commission, 2012, 2016; GEES, 2016). Considering Study 1 and 2 results, this raises some further questions; are third-level

stakeholders aware of dual career demands and guidelines? Are there challenges or barriers to implementing dual career support within third-level institutes in Ireland? Consideration and further research is required into the potential influences and barriers from a systemic and applied perspective. These questions are considered in Studies 3 and 4.

Relating to support available for student-athletes, the results confirm and extend results of Study 1. Participants reported the same types of supports identified in Study 1 (e.g. finance, sport science, academic support), with differences in the volume and delivery of the support's participants received. Correspondingly, differences were identified between institutes but also within institutes depending on the sport scholarship level. Relevant here is not just what support was available, but also participants' perceptions of the benefit of such support. Although similar support was available to all participants, in line with Study 1, participants noted proactive and reactive practices relating to contact levels with the sport scholarship programme providers. This resulted in varying perceptions about the support available and how the sport scholarship programme operated. For example, some participants with less contact with programme providers felt they did not know what other supports "might be available". In contrast, some participants with more regular contact stated they felt comfortable knowing that "support" was there if needed. This is a potential challenge for policymakers and support providers as consideration may also be required relating to "how" support is provided and not just "what" support is provided. Previous research suggests that perceived support is just as important as received support (Bianco & Eklund, 2001; Freeman et al., 2009; Holt & Hoar, 2006; Uchino, 2009), with higher perceived support contributing to a greater feeling of control, enabling a sense of coping in stressful situations (Freeman & Rees, 2009). This emphasis on how support is provided has been found in both Studies 1 and 2 and will be explored in more detail in Study 3.

Regardless of sport-scholarship level, three key types of support were identified by participants as being most valued; finance, academic flexibility, and mentor/supportive environment. Of note, these three aspects were also identified in Study 1, supporting those results. Financial support was commonly discussed throughout all focus groups. Financial assistance is a widely cited essential support by student-athletes who may struggle to finance their dual career without it (Burnett et al., 2010; Geranosova & Ronkainen, 2015; Papanikolaou et al., 2003; Wylleman & Rosier, 2016). This could be associated with the developmental transition and increased responsibility accompanying the third-level transition. Many athletes are required to pay their college fees, accommodation, sporting, and personal expenses. Financial assistance from the third-level institute (e.g. through the sport scholarship) is necessary for many student-athletes as not all receive national carding from their NGB. Linking this to Study 1, financial support was the most common support available within sport scholarship programmes, demonstrating a positive connection.

Participants also discussed academic flexibility as an important support. Academic flexibility has been emphasised as necessary with some researchers suggesting that a dual career is rarely possible without some degree of flexibility (Aquilina, 2013; Brown et al., 2015; Burnett et al., 2010; Caput-Jogunica et al., 2012; Condello et al., 2019; Wylleman & Reints 2010). Within study 1, this type of support was found to be the least available and the least formalised, and participants in Study 2 confirmed this. While some participants had positive experiences and noted receiving some form of flexibility if required, this support was vastly dependant on the provider of support (in this case, an individual academic). Confirming Study 1 results, it appears that academic flexibility, although reported as a valuable support, was mostly informal and inconsistent. There may be several reasons as to why such inconsistency happens (e.g. lack of awareness, lack of understanding, fear), and not having an academic flexibility policy may be just one influencing factor. According to Ryan et al.

(2017), it is also important for institutes to develop an implementation policy to help all relevant stakeholders have awareness, understanding, and clear guidance in order to provide consistent support.

Another support student-athletes discussed was a mentor and supportive environment. Participants commonly used the word “understanding” to describe the benefit of having these in place. Participants felt that a mentor and supportive environment provided them with security from “knowing someone is there”. This can be a valuable support when student-athletes are faced with many unknown challenges. This theme is interesting for several reasons. Firstly, participants in Study 1 also discussed this as a key type of support, extending these findings. Secondly, having a mentor in place falls under the academic support category, which was the least available and least formal category of support as outlined previously. Thirdly, a supportive environment is not a tangible support that is provided directly (such as finance, a mentor, academic flexibility) or easily evaluated. Yet mentoring and supportive environments are important as they can provide emotional and health support due to awareness of situations, understanding and interest (Howard-Hamilton & Sina, 2001). Creating this environment requires a “cultural” element of caring and knowledge and requires skilled personnel. Environmental support has been echoed in previous literature (Bianco & Eklund, 2001; Freeman & Rees, 2009; Howard-Hamilton & Sina, 2001), and more recently has been emphasised as a key success factor from a “holistic ecological perspective” (Henriksen et al., 2010; Henriksen & Stambulova, 2017; Henriksen et al., 2020; Morris et al., 2020; Storm et al., 2021). According to Freeman and Rees (2009), support providers need to be able to recognise the need for support, but also have the ability and willingness to provide appropriate support. These results suggest that having the right people who are qualified to provide dual career support may just be as important as the tangible support provided.

A final point to note is that outside of support provided by sport scholarship programmes, all participants felt they required personal management skills to cope with student-athlete demands. Participants widely discussed skills such as time management and forward planning. Some participants discussed needing to use these skills to help cope and manage, while others felt that being a student-athlete helped them develop these skills to cope effectively. The benefit of developing personal competencies and lifeskills to sufficiently manage a dual career has been highlighted by many researchers (Danish et al., 1992; De Brant, 2017; GEES, 2016; McKnight et al., 2009; MacNamara & Collins, 2010; MacNamara et al., 2010). Study 1 identified lifestyle management and sport psychology elements (see Tables 1 & 2) within the sport science support category. Study 2 participants also discussed aspects such as semester planning and time management either through workshops or directly with support providers. However, it was beyond the scope of Study 2 to further explore how participants felt they developed their personal competencies as outlined by researchers such as MacNamara and Collins (2010). A tailored programme or service may be valuable for student-athletes in third-level to help develop healthy, rounded identities and personal skills necessary to navigate the dual career transition. Further research into the availability and experience of student-athlete life skills programmes in Ireland could be beneficial.

Strengths and Limitations

Research exploring dual career experiences of third-level student-athletes in Ireland is limited, and the results of Study 2 adds to this. Within the Irish literature, research has focused on student-athlete experiences in one sport (Lane, 2015), student-athlete experiences in a single case University (Gomez et al., 2018), or forming a small part of a wider project on sport and physical activity of student-athletes (Murphy et al., 2016). In addition, previous researchers using single case universities have recommended future research to include a

range of institutes (e.g. Brown et al., 2015). Study 2 explored experiences of student-athletes from a variety of sports and institutes, ensuring to capture experiences from diverse backgrounds (e.g., sport, type of institute, level of support, gender), adding to and extending existing Irish literature.

One of the limitations of conducting focus groups is the dynamics between participants. In each of the five focus groups, some participants knew each other, while others did not. Although steps were taken to ensure a “comfortable” environment, this could have created an unequal dynamic between the groups, impacting the contribution and information provided by some participants.

Recruitment was conducted through sport scholarship coordinators in participating institutes. As such, the researcher is not aware of the number or reasons for non-participation and cannot be certain if all sport scholarship athletes had the opportunity to volunteer.

Conclusion

The aim of Study 2 was to explore student-athletes experiences of combining third-level education and high-level sport and their perceptions of the support available to them through their third-level institute. These results contribute to previous dual career research and also provide new insights into the limited Irish dual career research. Similar to previous dual career research, evidence from Study 2 suggest that Irish student-athletes acknowledge benefits of engaging in a dual career such as a positive distraction and routine, but also experience various demands such as tiredness and pressure from stakeholders (Aquilina, 2013; Brown et al., 2015; Burden et al., 2004; Condello et al., 2019; Fuchs et al., 2016). A key aspect of participants' experiences was the timing of the events, which is in line with previous transition research (Schlossberg, 1981; Stambulova, 2003; Wyllemann & Lavallee,

2004). It is important that sport and education stakeholders understand and acknowledge that support is bespoke and dependant on the person, situation, and sport.

Participants stressed the importance of support in helping to manage their dual careers. In particular, academic support, financial support, mentoring/supportive environment, and their own personal competencies were highlighted as important. There are three important implications with these key supports. Firstly, it highlights the benefit of support and resources from a combination of micro, meso, and macro dimensions, indicating that collective support is required. Secondly, it emphasises the need to strengthen and formalise communication between sport and education as this was stressed as a significant source of stress. Finally, adding to Study 1 results, academic support and mentoring are not consistently provided. Formal support in third-level institutes is required to meet minimum dual career standards and enhance student-athlete support.

A key finding from Studies 1 and 2 has been that while the tangible aspects (e.g. financial support) of the typical sport scholarship programmes were important to participants, a central reoccurring theme has been “understanding” and a supportive environment, with an emphasis on the person(s) providing the support. This theme raises considerations for practitioners relating to the benefit of this type of support and how this type of support can be best provided. Further investigation is required to understand the process of this type of support, which will be the primary focus of Study 3.

Chapter Six

Study 3

Introduction

Results from Studies 1 and 2 demonstrated social support as a significant theme within the data. It is important to identify factors that may influence the effectiveness of support (Moll et al., 2017). As noted at the conclusion of Study 2, further consideration is required relating to the benefit of social support for student-athletes, why social support is an important resource, and just as important, how this type of support can be best provided?

Within the meso dimension section in the literature review, the concept of social support as a resource was introduced, presenting context concerning the functional and structural components of social support as they relate to student-athletes. As social support is the primary focus of Study 3, an overview of the underlying mechanisms of social support will be presented. A brief review of key concepts will be outlined before expanding on key mechanisms related to social support.

Social support is a key external resource within the Athletic Career Transition Model (Stambulova, 2003). Specific to this thesis, there is an abundance of evidence highlighting social support as an essential resource for student-athletes in managing a dual career (Aquilina, 2013; Brown et al., 2015; Giacobbi et al., 2004; McKenna & Dustan-Lewis, 2004; Knight et al., 2018; Pummel et al., 2008; Stambulova et al., 2015). Relating to the psychosocial element of the Holistic Athletic Career Model (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004, Wylleman et al., 2013; Wylleman & Rosier, 2016), structural support refers to one's social support network (Holt & Hoar, 2006) who are the providers of support. Supportive behaviours from one's support network are connected with better transitional experiences (Brown et al., 2015; Douglas & Carless, 2006; Pummell et al., 2008), making the structural component of social support important for providers to appreciate. Parents, coaches, and university sport staff have been identified as key support providers during the third-level transition phase (Bell, 2009; Condello et al., 2019; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004).

The functional component of social support refers to the type of support provided or received. As outlined in Chapter 2, functional support is further categorised into received and perceived support. Received support refers to specific resources provided by significant others (e.g. information, emotional, esteem, or tangible support). In comparison, perceived support refers to the potential availability of social support if required (Freeman et al., 2011; Uchino, 2009).

Two key models developed to help explain the conditions under which perceived and received support are beneficial are the Main Effects Model and the Stress-Buffering Model. The Main Effects Model (Cohen & Wills, 1985) suggests that the more social support available, the better the positive outcome, irrespective of whether stress is present or not. Structural elements of social support such as social integration, network size, and frequency of social support contact are most associated with this model (Rees, 2007).

The Stress-Buffering Model (Cassel, 1976; Cobb, 1976; Cohen & Wills, 1985) suggests that if a person is suffering from high levels of stress, then high levels of social support can help protect them from such harmful effects. However, it is suggested that the level of social support is not as important if the person in question is not going through a stressful situation. As opposed to the Main Effects Model and structural elements, the Stress-Buffering Model is more commonly associated with received support (Rees, 2007). The Main Effects Model has been proposed to have a more proactive view of social support and relates to the environment around a person, whereas the Stress-Buffering Model is associated with a more reactive view (Bianco & Eklund, 2001; Holt & Hoar, 2006).

In general, sports research has provided support for the Main Effects Model and perceived support (Freeman & Rees, 2009; Rees & Hardy, 2004; Rees et al., 2007; Rhind et al., 2011). Perceived support is proposed to impact an individuals' perceived availability of resources and perceived ability to cope with stressors (Hartley & Coffee, 2019; Freeman &

Rees, 2009). For example, individuals with high levels of perceived support may evaluate situations as less stressful, have a higher sense of situational control, and experience more positive outcomes (Bianco & Eklund, 2001; Fletcher & Sarkar, 2010; Holt & Hoar, 2006; Freeman & Rees, 2009). Relating specifically to student-athlete research, Rhind et al. (2011) found that social support appeared to have a positive relationship with student-athletes' satisfaction with their dual career. The more people the student-athletes felt were available to provide support when necessary, the more satisfied they were with their support network. In general, evidence for received support has been more ambivalent (Coussens et al., 2015; Jackman et al., 2020). Within sport, received support has been shown to assist individuals by facilitating effective coping and protecting against stress (Coussens et al., 2015; Eklund & Defreese, 2015; Gustafsson et al., 2017; Lakey & Drew, 1997).

Studies have found a weak association between perceived and received support measurements (Haber et al., 2007; Freeman & Rees, 2008; Rees & Freeman, 2007; Uchino, 2009), and some researchers have made suggestions as to why this may be. Received support tends to be more specific and based on support exchanges. In comparison, perceived support reflects individuals' perceptions. Appraisals of available support are more dependent on a "judgment process" and potentially personality, which may result in individuals perceiving the same supportive acts differently (Jackman et al., 2020; Uchino, 2009). Although there appears to be a complex relationship between perceived and received support, there is also an acknowledgement that these two constructs also influence each other and may be connected in certain situations (Bianco & Eklund, 2001; Freeman & Rees, 2009; Hartley & Coffee, 2019; Jackman et al., 2020; Rees & Freeman, 2007; Uchino, 2009). For example, Bianco and Eklund (2001, p. 93) suggest that they should be viewed as complementary and not opposing as "through social support activities (received support), individuals come to develop a sense

of the availability of support (perceived)". This suggests a combined approach with both perceived and received working in tandem and that both are important.

In dual career research, qualitative studies have primarily explored social support as a demand or a resource and have found positive and demanding associations relating to social support providers (Aquilina, 2013; Brown et al., 2015; Giacobbi et al., 2004; McKenna & Dustan-Lewis, 2004; Stambulova et al., 2015). Essentially, support received can come from the same providers who put them under pressure (Aquilina, 2013; Giacobbi et al., 2004; McKenna & Dustan-Lewis, 2004; Morris et al., 2016). As outlined in Chapter 2, support, whether available or provided, is not always helpful (for example, unskilled providers, lack of understanding of needs, conflicting goals from various support providers, relationships between support providers), and certain aspects can help to optimise and enable effective social support practice. Two particular helpful aspects that emerged from Studies 1 and 2 were understanding and stakeholder relationships.

For social support to be effective, it is important that providers understand needs and have contextual awareness (Brown et al., 2015; Burnett et al., 2010; Debois et al., 2015; Geranosova & Ronkainen, 2015; Knight et al., 2018; Stambulova et al., 2015). Providers with a lack of understanding can contribute to student-athlete demands. Similarly, conflict caused through provider relationships was found to be a key stressor in Studies 1 and 2. This is of interest as an absence of relationships between sport and education stakeholders can be a primary source of stress for student-athletes (Aquilina, 2013; Condello et al., 2019; Engstrom et al., 1995; Ferrante et al., 1996; McKenna & Dustan-Lewis, 2004; Parsons, 2013; Potuto & O'Hanlon, 2007; Puskas & Perenyi, 2015; Pummell et al., 2008). Several researchers have conveyed the importance of a "combined support" effort, with the congruence of the same message being very important (Adams et al., 2015; Burden et al., 2004; Giacobbi et al., 2004; Knight et al., 2018; Rosenfeld et al., 2000; Sheridan et al., 2014; Vujic, 2004).

Although Studies 1 and 2 revealed social support as a strong theme, social support is not easily prescribed (Burns et al., 2018; Burns et al., 2019). It is important to identify and understand factors that impact social support effectiveness (Coussens et al., 2015; Knight et al., 2018; Moll et al., 2017; Rhind et al., 2011). Qualitative research can help to develop a depth of understanding of social support interactions and functions (Knight et al., 2018; Holt & Haor 2006; Rees & Hardy 2000).

Study three adopted a qualitative approach, using semi-structured interviews to explore the concept of social support from a provider and receiver perspective by exploring;

1. What forms of support do support providers intend to deliver over an academic year to their student-athletes?
2. What support did student-athletes receive over the academic year, and how did it impact them?

Methodology

Participants

Participants ($N = 24$; 17 male, 7 female) were student-athletes in third-level education and their support providers. Participants comprised of eight student-athletes aged between 19-22 averaging 20.1 years ($SD=1.1$), from inter-county team sports ($N=4$) and individual international level sports ($N=4$), and 16 support providers (two support providers per athlete), from both their third-level institute ($N=8$) and their sport ($N=8$). Support provider-athlete relationships ranged from 2-10 years; averaging 1.9 years ($SD=1$) for third-level institute providers, and 4.8 years ($SD=2.8$) for sport providers. Table 4 below provides an overview of the participants.

Table 4

Study 4 Participant Information

Athlete	Sport	Support Provider A (institute)	Support Provider B (sport)
1 Female	Inter-county Team	1a: Head of GAA Working with athlete: two years	1b: Inter-county manager Working with athlete: two years Previous relationship: 7 years
2 Female	Inter-county Team	2a: GAA development officer Working with athlete: one year	2b: Inter-county manager Working with athlete: two years
3 Female	International Individual	3a: Scholarship coordinator Working with athlete: 1 year	3b: Coach Working with athlete: five years
4 Female	International Individual	4a: Scholarship coordinator Working with athlete: four years	4b: Coach Working with athlete: five years
5 Male	International Individual	5a: HEI project manager Working with athlete: two years	5b: Assistant coach Working with athlete: three years Previous relationship: 10 years
6 Male	Inter-county Team	6a: Elite sport programme coordinator Working with athlete: two years	6b: Club coach Working with athlete: five years
7 Male	International Individual	7a: Elite sports scholarship coordinator Working with athlete: two years	7b: Coach Working with athlete: two years
8 Female	Inter-county Team	8a: GAA Games development officer Working with athlete: one year	8b: Role – Team trainer Working with athlete: two years

Note: Working with the athlete refers to current role. Previous relationship refers to a relationship prior to current role.

Procedures

Participant Recruitment

Participants were recruited in two phases. In the first phase, eight student-athletes were invited to participate in the study, and in the second phase, their support providers were invited to participate.

To recruit student-athletes, the researcher used purposive sampling (Palys, 2008). Inclusion criteria were similar to Study 2 where the target inclusion was current third-level student-athletes from both national level (i.e. inter-county teams) and international level athletes. The researcher contacted sporting organisations representing various sports (e.g. Sport Ireland Institute, Women's Gaelic Players Association, Gaelic Players Association) and third-level institutes using previously known contacts and information located on host websites.

Once a key person was contacted, the researcher explained the study and inclusion criteria and provided them with an information sheet outlining the study aims and methods. Each contact agreed to send the study information to athletes they worked with to invite them to participate. Contact details and permission of any interested student-athlete were provided to the researcher who contacted each interested person individually over email and phone to explain the study further. A total of eight athletes were recruited from this process.

For phase two, each student-athlete was asked to nominate two people (support providers) they felt supported them; one who worked with them within their third-level institute and one from their sport. The researcher included support providers from these two environments as these have been at the centre of this research since the beginning and were also identified in Study 2 by participants as potentially causing conflict. The eight student-athletes contacted their two support providers themselves to explain the study and ask permission for the researcher to make contact. Upon confirmation, the researcher contacted

each of the 16 nominees via email or phone to explain the study and provide them with an information sheet. Each agreed to take part, bringing the number of participants to 24.

Data Collection

Data collection was conducted in three different stages using semi-structured interviews.

Stage 1. Stage 1 consisted of a pilot interview with a support provider who was not involved in the primary study. The purpose of the pilot study was to trial the interview questions and to gain feedback from the participant concerning the questions asked, their understanding of the content, the interviewers own personal style, and the environment. As a result of the pilot study, minor changes were made to the interview schedule, which included changing the order of questions and clarifying the term support before the beginning of the interviews.

Stage 2. Stage 2 included 16 semi-structured interviews with support providers (Appendix C) within the first semester of the academic year between October and December 2017. The interview schedule was structured using specific guidance from research question 1: What forms of support do support providers intend to deliver over an academic year to support their student-athletes? Participants were asked about support made available and support provided, the perceived benefits of this support, barriers or facilitators in providing support and their perceived role in providing support.

Before each interview, participants were guided through an introductory section outlining the concepts to be explored and asked for their consent. Due to location and timing, eight interviews were conducted over the phone and eight were in person. All interviews were recorded using a Dictaphone. With all interviews taking place over the phone, the research was in a quiet space (home or work office) with no other presence. The phone was

put on loudspeaker so the Dictaphone could pick up both voices. During each interview, the researcher took notes on the topic points discussed, and during the final question, the researcher used this to summarise. The participants were then asked to clarify and confirm that the researcher had a correct understanding of the points covered.

Before Stage 3 began, primary inductive analysis was conducted on Stage 2 interviews resulting in several common themes and examples. The researcher input this initial analysis into a coding framework using Gale et al's, (2013) framework method (explained in full in the analysis section). This framework informed certain aspects of Stage 3 interviews.

Stage 3. Stage 3 consisted of eight semi-structured interviews with student-athletes (receivers) and took place towards the end of the academic year (semester two) between April and June 2018. The interview schedule (Appendix D) was structured using questions based around research question 2 and questions stemming from the initial coding framework from stage 2: What support did student-athletes receive over the academic year, and how did it impact them? Participants were asked about support made available and received, benefits of this support, influencing factors of support and recommendations to enhance support.

In line with Stage 2, all participants were guided through an introductory section outlining the concepts to be explored, asked if they had any questions and for their consent before beginning. Due to location and timing, six interviews were conducted over the phone and two were in person. All interviews were recorded using a Dictaphone. The interviews took the same format as outlined in stage 2 above.

Data Analysis

Stage 2 and Stage 3 were analysed in chronological order. Due to the volume of interviews and data (24 interviews in total), the researcher conducted thematic analysis using Gale et al, (2013) seven-step framework method for the management and analysis of the data;

transcription, familiarisation with data, coding, developing an analytical framework, applying the analytical framework, charting data into the framework matrix, interpreting the data. The main difference between these steps and those outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) is the management of the data through a matrix system once coding has been completed.

Developing a matrix helps manage large volumes of data (Gale et al., 2013).

The first stage was transcription, where each interview was transcribed verbatim into Microsoft word. The total time of all 24 interviews was 1,044 minutes with interviews ranging from 35 minutes to 73 minutes, with an average length of 46 minutes. The complete transcriptions amounted to 174,243 words. Following the transcription was familiarisation of each interview from stage 2. Each interview was read and re-read before coding took place. In line with the previous two studies, short notes were made in the left-hand margin during this stage, making a note of context, similarities, and differences.

The third stage used open coding, which is an inductive method of assigning codes to sections and sentences. This open coding took place on a sample of five interviews. Examples of initial coding from this stage included “situation and context changed required support”, “broad role”. After this initial coding, the researcher grouped codes resulting in a sample analytical framework with clear categories. This process took several adjustments until the researcher was happy with the categories and definitions. Examples of the codes within this framework included “nature of contact”, “benefit of support”.

Next, the researcher applied this finalised framework to the rest of the interviews using the existing codes and categories while also noting any new codes. Once all interviews were analysed, the researcher entered the data into a matrix in a Microsoft excel spreadsheet where data relating to each code and interview was stored (one row for each participant, one column for each code). All the data (quotes and short context notes) relating to each code for all 24 interviews were entered into the matrix.

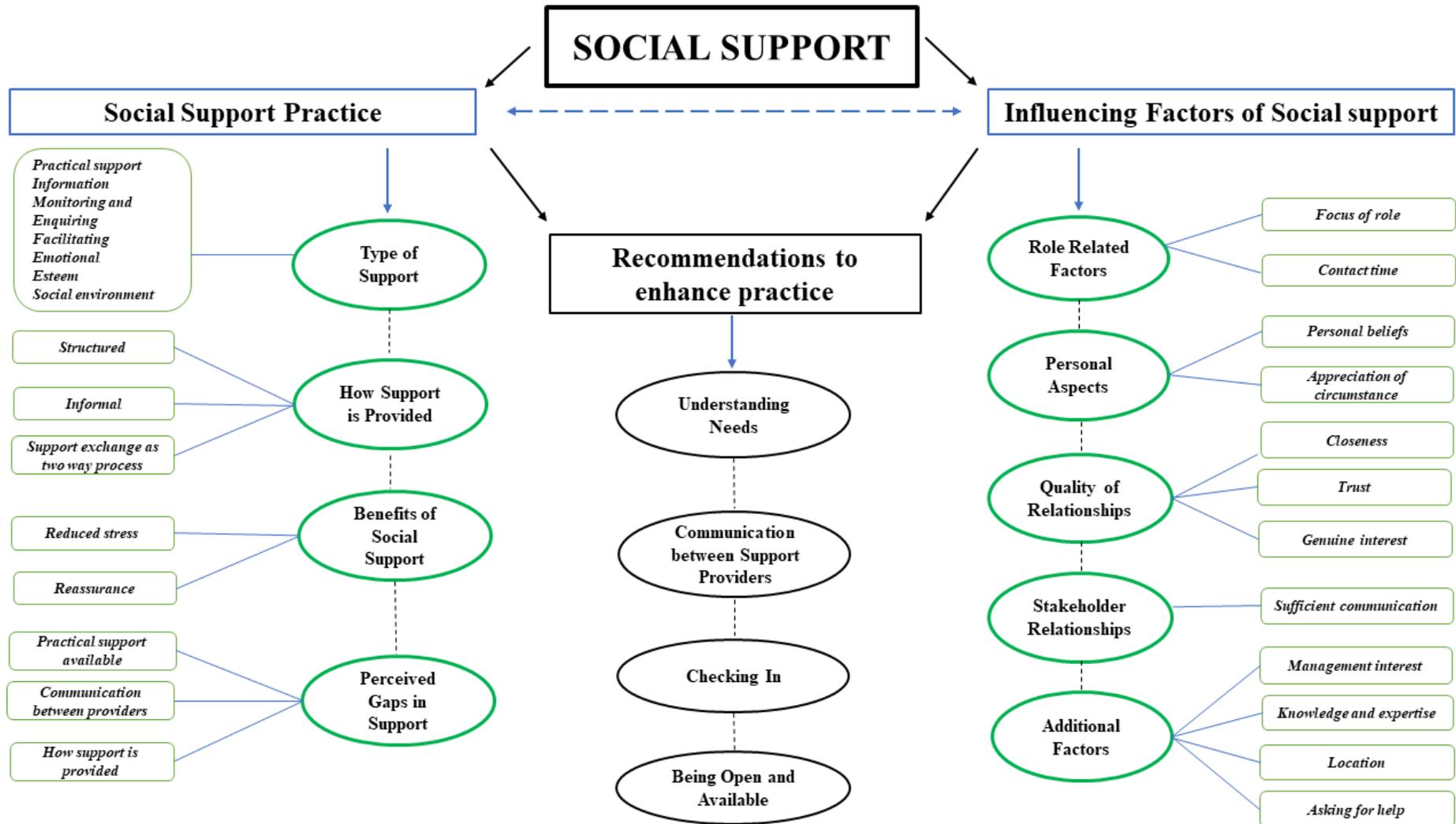
The final stage was interpreting the data to define and finalise themes. This was conducted by reviewing and re-analysing memos, codes, and categories for each participant. Similar to Studies 1 and 2, not all codes were input into themes, and emergent themes were consistent with the aims of Study 3. To provide an example, a code identified during stage 2 was “unequal funding in women’s sport”. This topic arose in the final stage of two interviews where the participants discussed their perceptions of unequal funding in their particular sport. Although important and topical, this did not relate to the context of social support and as the context was connected to the specific sporting body (e.g. access to pitches, food post games etc). The same analysis process was conducted on stage 3 interviews.

Two higher-order themes emerged from Study 3 analysis (Social Support Practice, and Influencing Factors of Social Support). To provide a clear audit trail, participant numbers (e.g. Pa = institute provider; Pb = sport provider; R = receiver [student-athlete quote]), page (e.g. p.5), and line numbers (line(s)) are represented in each verbatim quote.

Results

For the remainder of this chapter, student-athletes will be referred to as “receivers”. Figure 3 below outlines the themes and sub-themes of the chapter. The results are presented under the following two higher-order themes: 1) Social Support Practice, 2) Influencing Factors of Social Support. The four outlined “Recommendations to Enhance Practice” represent common elements that receivers perceived were important regarding support practice and are represented throughout both higher-order themes.

Figure 3.
Study 3 Results Diagram



Social Support Practice

The first section represents accounts and perceptions of social support exchanges between providers and receivers and includes: i) type of support; ii) how support is provided; benefits of social support; and iv) perceived gaps in support, from both provider and receiver perspectives.

Type of Support

Providers were asked what type of support they felt they made available and provided, while receivers were asked what support they felt was made available and received. Throughout the interviews, different examples of support exchanges were recounted, relating to various types of support. The researcher noted several common themes through analysis and grouped them under the following headings: practical support, information, monitoring and enquiring, facilitating, emotional, esteem, and social environment. Table 5 below provides an overview and examples of each.

Table 5

Type of Support

Type of support examples	Provider	Receiver
<p>Practical support:</p> <p>Practical support includes any support services that are applied or hands-on in nature. Examples of such supports include academic mentors and tuition, financial assistance, strength and conditioning, physiotherapy, nutrition, sport psychology, on-site coaching.</p>	<p><i>“So those supports will range from strength and conditioning from a physical point of view and testing. We have nutrition support and psychology if necessary. Academic support so one-to-one grinds or help with proofreading or presentations come into play.” (P4a, p.1, lines 16-17)</i></p> <p><i>“They are often stuck for lifts or anything. Genuinely, if they are not driving, they are looking for lifts or looking for lifts back. Just little things to support them, if we can help them, try get them a lift back or a lift down or whatever.” (P2b, p.5, lines 109-111)</i></p>	<p><i>“I suppose one of the main supports, the money would be kind of a big one with the scholarship. This year my fees were paid for, so that was kind of big.” (R8, p.4, lines 86-87)</i></p> <p><i>Obviously, he plans out my training sessions and he knows what we’re going to do.” (R4, p.7, lines 154-155)</i></p>
<p>Information:</p> <p>This form of support represents advice and specific information provided and includes both sport and non-sport.</p>	<p><i>“We would be in touch all the time regards her training and what she is doing in college and how she can improve herself for the team and individually, cause we weren’t doing collective training during the week (P1b, p.2, lines 37-39)</i></p> <p><i>“But you know I always let her know that those services are available to her. She mightn’t always avail of them, but they’re there if she needs.” (P3a, p.3, lines 53-55)</i></p>	<p><i>“There’s always an email every week or every few days from the (scholarship name) set-up itself just to inform you of different things that you can get involved in and all that kind of stuff.” (R6, p.2, lines 46-48)</i></p> <p><i>“I’d often go to him for advice on what I need to improve on. He’d always tell me honestly how I need to improve my game and stuff like that.” (R1, pp.9-10, lines 222-224)</i></p> <p><i>“It would be made known. You kind of know that they’re kind of there if you need to I suppose.” (R8, p.6, lines 141-142)</i></p>
<p>Monitoring and enquiring:</p>	<p><i>“I would be in contact with her a good bit about, just about college, making sure she is ok with college stuff, has she time to come training, is she managing her</i></p>	<p><i>“If he sees that something’s going on he would come and talk to me and ask me what’s going on and make sure that I’m okay.” (R7, p.15, lines 349-350)</i></p>

Includes any form of checking in with athletes and monitoring of wellbeing.

work with college and with regards intercounty training.” (P1b, p.1, lines 20-23)

“Making the contact to see how she’s getting on more regularly and can we give her those services” (P3a, p.6, lines 145-146)

“I would always ask them how college is going. And I would always be listening out from the other swimmers and hearing what their perception of the other swimmers in college.” (P5b, p.2, lines 42-44)

“Yeah, it’s just a general chat about your college, your sport, how everything’s going, what you have coming up, how you’re set for exams, if they need to do anything for you before your exams or arrange academic help.” (R6, p.5, lines 120-122)

“See, I was doing a lot at the time as well, so he’d be kind of making sure I wasn’t doing too much, which was good. And then making sure that if I needed to see the physio it would be there.” (R2, p.13, lines 306-308)

Facilitating:

Any form of coordinating and arranging of support services, including communicating with other support providers and problem-solving.

“I have set up the links and the structure with qualified people in those different areas.” (P2a, p.5, line 109).

“we’ve identified a number of issues with her in terms of her athletic ability, and we’ve put very very good people in place to help her and assist her with her development as an athlete.” (P1a, p.6, lines 134-136)

“I would instigate the conversation with them to try and make sure that (athlete name) didn’t have to deal with that kind of thing. So he wouldn’t be getting caught in the middle of us trying to pull one way, them trying to pull another way, and him trying to please everybody.” (P6b, p.2, lines 38-41)

“I would say she’s kind of brought all of the services together for me, and she has relayed all of the information that I would have liked to know and needed to know for my funding and the different services like strength and conditioning and nutrition and all the other services we have for funding.” (R7, p.3, lines 72-75)

“He guided me to know that was there. I didn’t realise it was there and he guided me and gave me advice on it and gave me a contact to contact within (institute name).to go talk. He made an arrangement and I had to meet her to chat about it.” (R1, p.17, lines 399-401)

Emotional:

Includes any form of listening and discussing with the objective of being caring and understanding the whole person.

“I have to be willing to listen to them. Because that might be the most important conversation I’d have for a long time if there’s something bothering them or if there’s some issue they have.” (P8a, p.4, lines 96-98)

“There’s a coach/athlete relationship. There’s day to day supports. There’s a lot of emotional support in there.” (P3b, p.10, lines 247-248)

“Something could happen at home and they come in and they’re not in good form. So you try to solve it if

“He does provide personal support and I suppose you could say emotional support again. He knew what was going on at home and stuff like that.” (R1, p.16, lines 390-391)

“He was the one I turned to the whole time and discussed absolutely everything.” (R3, p.19, lines 461-462)

“I suppose just him asking you’re kind of going okay he’s listening to me, he cares about what I’m doing.

<p>Esteem:</p> <p>Includes any action or conversation with the objective to provide motivation, reassurance, encouragement and bolster confidence.</p>	<p><i>you could. But you then try to pick them up again.” (P4b, p.9, lines 223-225)</i></p> <p><i>“We’re trying to re-empower them with all of the supports that we can provide.” (P1a, p.4, lines 86-87)</i></p> <p><i>“A very difficult but important thing to do is eh, try to slow him down when he feels powerful. And to try to keep him up when he feeling a little bit down.” (P7b, p7, 152-153)</i></p> <p><i>“And that is why meeting is important and it has to be early enough in the season to you know, talk it through with him and say listen, don’t put yourself under pressure.” (P7a, p.8, lines 181-182)</i></p> <p><i>“Well I have to motivate her for the start. You know you have to be a motivator. That’s very important isn’t it. And the technique and stuff. But you have to be able to motivate her.” (P4b, p.4, lines 82-83)</i></p>	<p><i>And that kind of gives you a kind of a boost.” (R4, p.19, lines 448-450)</i></p> <p><i>“Even before games and stuff she’ll always text and just say best of luck because she is very interested in GAA and stuff.” (R6, p.4, lines 90-91)</i></p> <p><i>“Guidance like a boost of confidence to say don’t panic, you’ll get there, don’t stress.” (R4, p.9, line 218)</i></p> <p><i>“I was stressed about competition, and because my coach was telling me don’t worry, your education is first, I was kind of going okay he’s the coach, he knows obviously I can do it.” (R4, p.9, lines 209-210)</i></p> <p><i>“I suppose he encouraged me as much as he could to keep me playing.” (R1, p.9, lines 212-213)</i></p>
<p>Social environment:</p> <p>Represents any form of behaviour directed towards building a supportive or social environment and a feeling of belonging/identity.</p>	<p><i>“Create an environment where a student finds a purpose and meaning on top of just going to lectures. Where they can build friendships, make connections and feel safe. The charism (if I was to use that word) that we try to live out is to create a home away from home” (P 2a, p.1, lines 12-15)</i></p> <p><i>“You have to try to create an environment that they’re happy in training in. And then you inspire them.” (P 4b, p.5, lines 101-102);</i></p> <p><i>“So that we hope to have created, and I think we succeeded in creating a community of (scholarship name) scholars of which currently on campus.” (P 6a, p.8, lines 183-185)... “Well I think for the sports guys it definitely, there is a bit of a band of brothers mentality in that they kind of all know what it feels like. You</i></p>	<p><i>“But we have our chats on our breaks and we have our laughs and we have our music playing and you know its all different things like that. And I suppose that does count as support for me because I know he’s willing to have the bit of a laugh. And I think that’s the whole part of training.” (R4, p.6, lines 131-135)</i></p> <p><i>“But it just gives you a chance to meet and talk to the rugby players (for example) about their training and that kind of stuff. Players come up then from other counties on the sports scholarship. I played against one of the (scholarship name) footballers for years with the school. He’s over in Australia now playing football over there. But the first year we got it, we both got it at the same time and I just had a great chat with him because I had played him in Munster finals and stuff. Usually I’d hate him like but he was actually</i></p>

know there's empathy when people have lost high profile games. There's definitely an understanding of the euphoria when you've won, because they've all been there." (P 6a, p.8, lines 195-197)

sound. You know that kind of way." (R6, p.8, lines 173-179)

Providers and receivers recounted various examples across all types of support presented in Table 5, with the context of these supports relating to sport and personal (i.e. outside of sport) aspects. In line with this, providers and receivers examples of the type of support available and received corresponded overall. However, there were some aspects of received support that some receivers did not feel met their needs which will be covered in the next section (how support is provided).

While the types of support were common throughout all interviews, there was a distinction between institute and sport providers in terms of the “focus” of some types of support. For example, information support was a shared type of support among all providers; however, this support appeared more sport/performance-related for sport providers and more academic/balancing sport and education-related for institute providers.

The most common type of support among institute providers was practical (e.g. finance), facilitating (e.g. coordinating of support services) and information (e.g. how to access services): “So a lot of times it’s pointing them in the direction of supports that are actually here. But we almost act as both an advocate and an information point for those students” (P6a, p.10, lines 238-239). The most common among sport providers was practical (e.g. coaching during training), information (e.g. advice outside of training), esteem (e.g. encouragement, feedback) and emotional (e.g. listening and being there to talk to).

Receivers also made the distinction between type of support and different providers. One athlete suggested that: “It’s more so advice and information that he gives me more so than stuff to do with football. It’s all kind of financial support and advice kind of thing” (R1, p.18, lines 433-434) when explaining the difference between support provided by institute and sport.

Creating a sense of social environment was reported by providers and receivers, albeit to a lesser extent. As can be seen from Table 5, this aspect not only related to a

provider/receiver environment, but also included a sense of community and peer relatedness that was facilitated by the providers' support.

Of note, it was hard for many support providers to express what type of support they specifically provide. There appeared to be two different reasons for this. The first reason was due to most providers expressing that support can be mostly bespoke (dependant on receivers' needs). It was suggested that "typical" supports are available (e.g. coaching advice for sports or financial support for institutes); however, it is dependent on the situation and individual, with an institute provider noting:

Well there is a blanket you know very very clear supports you know across all the teams from a group perspective. But the system where I suppose what we use now, and we've found that to be more beneficial, is individual supports, where everybody has a different requirement and different needs. And we've found that to be extremely beneficial when we get to actually know the person. (P1a, pp.6-7, lines 149-153)

Receivers also echoed this bespoke aspect with one participant suggesting: "And even then with the sports stuff like he'd ring me up and say what do you need, we can sort it out; we'll look into it" (R3, p.7, lines 159-160).

Due to the uncertainty of needs, outside of the regular role-related support (e.g. coaching or facilitating), "letting them know what is available" emerged as a key part of information support: "but you know I always let her know that those services are available to her. She mightn't always avail of them, but they're there if she needs" (P4a, p.3, lines 53-55).

The second reason was that some providers might not notice certain regular exchanges as a form of support:

And see, I wouldn't even list the technical stuff because that's just default. That's like, well, that's what a coach does. So it doesn't even. Yeah, I do that, but I suppose I

don't even think about it, because you're just there, you're doing it six or seven days a week like. (P3b, p.11, lines 269-271)

Another provider cited a quote by Michel Foucault: "People know what they do; frequently they know why they do what they do; but what they don't know is what they do does." They were highlighting that not all support exchanges are direct, and at times, we may not recognise the impact they have. In a similar vein, a receiver demonstrated this process below:

It doesn't sound like a support probably to anyone, but it's the support of just being able to have a conversation. It's not one of these training sessions where you go in and you know you're doing strict things. We sit down and take our breaks in training. But we have our chats on our breaks and we have our laughs and we have our music playing and you know its all different things like that. And I suppose that does count as support for me because I know he's willing to have the bit of a laugh. And I think that's the whole part of training. (R4, p.6, lines 129-135)

How Support is Provided

This section illustrates how social support practices were exchanged. A variety of social support exchanges were reported, including: structured (e.g. weekly scheduled training, arranged meetings), informal (e.g. day to day chat/check-ins), and support exchanges as a two-way process.

Structured. Some providers had clear structures in place for providing certain aspects of support. For example, arranging formal meetings for the start of the year where receivers were given information as to what type of support is available and where to access this:

What we do at the start of the year is we have a networking event, so I will bring in and invite all our newbies in and all of the service providers, so they then obviously

introduce them, so there is a face behind the service, it is not just me sending an email saying these are the slots and everything else. (P7a, p.9, lines 205-208)

This formal structure continued throughout the year:

I'll just meet them in the office for probably twenty minutes and go through those different areas with them. And I have a little template page and a little box with each of those subheadings on it. How are you getting on here, and how are you getting on here, and that's it you know. (P2a, p.7, lines 158-161)

Informal. Many social support practices happen on an informal basis, occurring on a day to day basis through practice rather than procedure. Outside of the structured face to face contact, all providers and athletes emphasised “checking in” as the most common practice which relates to “enquiring and monitoring” presented in types of support. This was most commonly done by phone, text or email. A high volume of “strategic presence” was noted, particularly within the institute setting: “As I said that I’m a presence. I don’t have to be at every training and every match, but I’m a presence. I’m around” (P8a, p.7, lines 167-168). Receivers noted that checking in could be done informally or formally enquiring regularly: “So it wouldn’t have to be very formal. It could just be email a bit, and then you know it could lead into a more formal if needs be. But that’s the way I feel about what would be the best form of social support” (R5, p.11, lines 243-245).

Receivers overwhelmingly reported these informal check-ins as a positive, resulting in feeling more supported, with most receivers expressing that they knew their support providers were there if needed:

I kind of feel on a personal level with him then when he keeps in contact with you in terms of matches and stuff like that saying, look you know he cares about you. I suppose the more he keeps in touch with you the more you feel that you can go and approach him about something. (R1, p.20, lines 487-490)

This enquiring helped facilitate conversation and provided a feeling of interest which helped enable the perception of support availability: “I would say checking in with people and understanding their goals and staying up-to-date with progress would be a big one” (R7, p.16, lines 389-390). This also made the receiver feel more comfortable in approaching for support: “It just makes you more comfortable. You wouldn’t think twice about contacting a person. There’s no hesitation. If you need it, you just go ahead and do it” (R6, p.16, lines 376-377).

Yet, as noted within “types of support”, in some cases these exchanges were not meeting needs, and three receivers suggested that they would prefer more regular and formal meetings with their institute providers:

In the past year probably not as much as I’d like. I think it would be nice or a good idea, maybe unrealistic with the amount of time that they have to actually sit down and have a set meeting with the athletes every month or six weeks or something to discuss what’s going on and what you’re doing to move forward and just have a review and to touch base. (R7, p.8, lines 177-180)

The nature of contact was slightly different for some sport providers due to proximity. All team sport athletes reported less face to face contact during the week with their sports in comparison to individual sports athletes who reported a minimum of four to six face to face contacts per week. Tracking/lifestyle apps were described by several of the team sport athletes and one individual athlete, enabling support if required:

You’d log your feelings every morning. You would give a reading of 1-5 how much sleep you got, how your energy levels, your muscle fatigue. And if they see a trend in issues they more than likely contact you. So if there was any periods where stress was high any days there would have been situations where they would check-in and ask if things were okay. (R2, p.15, lines 348-353)

Support Exchanges as a Two-Way Process. A final noteworthy theme to emerge by receivers was support exchanges as a two-way process. Many receivers conveyed a belief that social support was not merely a one-way process, and there was a perception of “giving back” to their provider. This process appeared more “goal orientated” within the institutional context: “(they are) able to pass around kind of jobs, and he gives us the opportunity to give back then as well, which is kind of valuable for us as well” (R2, p.7, lines 165-166). Another athlete described this as: “(they) share my goals and I’m passionate about promoting the sport and promoting (institute name) and the program as well” (R7, p.9, lines 200-201). In comparison, it appeared more “relationship orientated” within the sporting context. For example, one receiver expressed her feelings about the coach in the following quote:

I feel like I can talk to him about personal things as well that I have going on in my life. And he’ll often share that with me as well about his life as well. So there’s kind of a coming back and forth there. (R1, p.3, lines 54-56)

In a similar vein, another participant explained: “And I’m there to listen to him as much as he’s there to listen to me. You know so it just works that way” (R3, p.24, lines 578-579).

Benefits of Social Support

Receivers were asked what they perceived to be the benefits and impact of social support. Two primary aspects discussed by all participants were reduced stress and reassurance.

Reduced Stress. In relation to practical support, this had a specific effect on reducing sources of stress by being able to focus on other elements. One receiver suggested that:

It took the financial stress off, just not having to worry about working to pay for your accommodation or anything like that. You know the money could be put somewhere else like towards, let’s say, training or food or something. (R5, p.10, lines 224-226)

Reassurance. In relation to social support in general, all receivers expressed that the main benefit was the reassurance of knowing someone was there, which was viewed as important. One receiver emphasised that it was not necessarily about meeting needs; for her, it was about knowing someone was there to support her:

Yeah, it's really important in ways. I know I'm saying it a lot, but you just know that if anything does go wrong, it's important to me that I can fall back on something.

That's probably the most important thing about the relationship. (R2, p.10, lines 244-246)

Similarly, another athlete emphasised the importance of being listened to:

There's kind of a weight off your shoulders the fact you're going okay, someone is actually listening to me and knows what's going on. Whereas often it's the case where people are not listening and you're kind of fighting your own battle. If that makes sense. (R4, p.18, lines 427-429)

One receiver described the benefit as a security blanket, with others describing it as a weight lifted. However, no matter the wording used, the main emphasis was that knowing someone was there produced feelings such as reduced stress and reassurance, resulting in better focus on sport, education, which the student-athletes felt benefiting providers also:

I could focus fully on my college during the week, fully on my county at the weekend and each coach got the best of both worlds. I wasn't burnt out going to their training session. Each coach benefitted from it. (R1, p.5, lines 118-121)

Perceived Gaps in Support

Providers and receivers discussed their perceptions of gaps in support provided or received. Perceived gaps acknowledged among providers related to practical support

available and communication between support providers. Whereas receivers primarily emphasised gaps related to how support was provided.

Practical Support Available. Providers primarily emphasised gaps in practical support available, with most suggesting that they would like to be able to provide more of these types of supports. Examples include; finance for further supports (e.g. accommodation, nutrition, and physiotherapy services) and a formal academic policy. One provider suggested that: “Ultimately I’d love to be in a position that we could offer students accommodation and have a student village, sports village that would keep them together” (P3&4a, p.15, lines 352-353).

Communication between Support Providers. Both providers and receivers stressed communication between support providers was important, with the majority of sport providers noting this element as insufficient:

But some college managers would have rang me about things and others have not.

Maybe I need to make that move too and it is something that we would put down on the book to be looking at this year to have a lot of communication with the colleges that we are managing all their workloads. (P1b, p.11, lines 262-265)

Similarly, most receivers emphasised communication between various support providers as a large gap:

I think they’d actually have a chance to probably talk to each other on it and have a conversation about what they want, because at the end of the day they’re kind of both looking for the same thing. They’re both looking to do well with kind of the same set of players. So I suppose if they kind of talked it through, they’d probably actually find that it might even benefit them (R8, p.17, lines 398-402)

Likewise, another receiver expressed this by asserting:

The communication side of it. Because if these people talk to each other there wouldn't be these issues and there would be less work really for them because the student-athletes or whoever, they won't actually have problems because everyone is feeding together...So I think a well-rounded approach to better communication might solve most of it. (R2, p.25, lines 597-602)

How Support is Delivered. In most cases, receivers voiced perceived gaps in support relating to how the support is delivered. An example of this can be seen in the following quote in terms of when financial support is received:

You don't get the money till the end of May of that year. So I didn't get my scholarship money till May, which wasn't beneficial to me because I needed it during the college year to stop me from part-time working and stuff like that. So I do think that could be better. (R1, p.18, lines 439-442)

Similarly, another receiver recounted a workshop element where:

You could have 50 athletes at a workshop but it's not gonna be beneficial to one person that needs it. You know like (name) could run a workshop and she could tell general stuff but there's individual stuff that I need working on. You know so they need to look at the individual side. (R3, pp.32-33, lines 784-787)

These quotes illustrate that at times it is not just what was provided, but how it was provided may just be as important, again highlighting a bespoke element of support.

Influencing Factors of Social Support

Throughout the interviews, several factors emerged that have an impact on support available and received. These influencing factors consisted of both facilitators and barriers to social support and are represented under the following themes: i) role related factors, ii)

personal factors, iii) relationships and environment, iv) stakeholder relationships, and v) additional factors.

Role Related Factors

Role was described as both a facilitator and a barrier in terms of social support. Specifically, the focus of one's role and the amount of contact time with the receivers are aspects that appeared to affect these exchanges.

Focus of Role. Many providers (primarily institute) described having a specific focus within their role:

Our key objective is to get to know the person and for them to get to know us that they can trust us and they can tell us things that they may not want to tell somebody else. And if we can get to the core of their difficulties, we have a very very clear pathway to sort them. (P1a, p.7, lines 153-156)

This quote demonstrates that getting to know the receiver as a person is a facilitator. Another institute provider illustrated this distinction by suggesting that they: "get to see them through a different lens. And I think that allows us to kind of see them as you know as much as the complete person as they're willing to show us" (P6a, p.13, lines 298-300).

Most sport providers also highlighted a personal element to their coaching:

I feel like it is a very important part of the role of a coach and manager to make sure that you are touching base with them all as much as possible and keeping up the lines of communication with them. (P1b, p.8, lines 194-196)

However, they also emphasised a specific performance element to their role, which many felt consumes much of the focus:

But I suppose as such that's not my job. My job is to make them swim as fast as they can. So obviously, I can't get carried away with that side of things. But it is a part of my role. (P5b, p.9, lines 214-216)

Likewise, receivers suggested focus to be an influencer of support. Even though in most cases it was felt sport providers were there if needed, three of the four team athletes felt they would prefer to speak to someone neutral about personal aspects: "He's there if I'm worried about anything or if I ever want to talk. He's always there with an open hand. But if I had a choice, I would prefer to talk to someone who is neutral like" (R1, p.6, lines 142-144). More specifically, it was suggested that a coach's role had an impact on what they would share: "whereas you see (institute name), he has no involvement in the sports team, so it doesn't influence his decisions" (R1, p.23, lines 562-564). These quotes suggest that the focus of the role (performance or neutral assistance) may influence what aspects student-athletes share with their support providers.

Contact Time. Many providers reported a lack of time within their role to provide certain types of support. In particular, institute providers reported having several different focuses within their role while also having a high volume of student-athletes to support. One provider recounted:

Because we have such vast numbers and only the one person, it's really letting people know. It's hard to be constantly on top of people. But it's really letting them know what we have available, and hopefully that my personality allows them to come, and if they're feeling under pressure they can come and say they need it. (P3&4a, p.4, lines 85-88)

This provider later followed up on the above statement, suggesting that it "in a way it dilutes what we're trying to do". Due to location reasons, another provider echoed similar feelings due to not seeing the receiver as regularly: "Then you know I think I wouldn't be as

supportive to him, just because I wouldn't have as many interactions with him" (P6b, p.25, lines 602-603). Similarly, receivers also noted location as a potential barrier to accessing support. Receivers suggested that having to travel to other counties to access support services, at times, was not feasible and a drain on time.

Due to the nature of the sport, individual coaches and receivers noted a higher volume of contact time with athletes could act as a facilitator as it can lead to being more aware of issues and needs:

Obviously, if there's something going on in their life, you're there for them. But you wouldn't be maybe as aware of the ones that are maybe using it two times a week as the ones that are six to seven times a week. (P3b, p.2, lines 40-42)

Receivers also felt a closer bond due to the single focus and time dedication to them. One individual athlete suggested that the coach was the main person in their career and compared the time and focus to team athletes:

Whereas an individual athlete because they're on their own, the coach and the athlete have to have that communication where they're going yeah we'll do inside or we'll do outside, you know that kind of way. So I think individual athletes, not just athletics but an individual athlete has more communication with their coach than a team athlete. (R4, p.13, lines 296-299)

Personal Aspects

This theme follows on from role, with personal aspects representing more intrinsic elements and includes personal beliefs and appreciation of circumstance.

Personal Beliefs. Almost all providers believed they had a personal "holistic" approach which they felt was beneficial in helping understand what receivers were going through:

I don't use it as a tool, but I suppose that is that type of coach I am. I want to make sure that they are ok and I am interested in what is going on in their lives. Not in a nosy way but just that we know what is going on, if there is breakups in relationships or someone sick in the family, we just like to know, so we can get to know them so if they are in a spot of bother or not feeling the best that we know why. I think it is very important like. (P1b, p.7, lines 152-157)

On the other hand, another coach felt quite differently and noted:

I think that this depends on the kind of coach you are. I mean, it depends on, cause many many coaches are focused on the technical aspect, and they don't really care about other things and also they don't want to care about other kinds of support. (P7b, p.10, lines 226-229)

These quotes suggest two different personal beliefs that can impact the type of supports available.

Receivers also emphasised personal factors when discussing a provider's support:

"Well (institute contact name) is kind of a friendly guy. He's not frightening. I suppose a lot of students would know that the door is always open to help them" (R1, p.19, lines 468-469).

Likewise, another receiver proposed:

I suppose you kind of know I suppose from someone's kind of personality. As well some people are very open and you can kind of talk to them about anything. I suppose someone that you know will sit down and listen to you about anything that's going on in your life. Someone that is willing to listen and that can offer advice as well in different aspects. (R8, p.19, lines 456-459)

These quotes suggest that personal beliefs have the potential to impact the focus of conversations and thus support available.

On the other hand, receivers' own personal beliefs and personality emerged as a facilitator or barrier to perceived support: "Well, I'd say others would use it a lot more than I would because if I had a problem, I would just try to sort it out myself. I wouldn't go contacting him. I would just sort it out myself" (R6, p.6, lines 132-133). As such, even with people feeling they have a "holistic" approach, it may not equate to received support no matter what was made available.

Appreciation of Circumstance. This was reported as an essential aspect in facilitating support. Notably, most providers had previous experience as either a student-athlete or an athlete. This brought a level of understanding emphasised by the following quote:

I remember as a fresher how disorganised I was and how difficult I may have found some things. So I have a good deal of empathy for anyone in the college. So you know I do my best to help people where I can if it's a reasonable request. (P8a, pp.6-7, lines 149-152)

All receivers emphasised appreciating this level of understanding, suggesting it may facilitate feeling supported: "So to feel supported then you need all these people to understand you as a person. If that makes sense" (R2, p.21, lines 511-512). It was felt that no matter the focus of the provider (i.e. role), understanding their situation was viewed as essential to provide necessary support:

I suppose the main one would be to understand both the needs of the individual as an athlete and the individual as a student and then combining them two needs and seeing what the athlete student needs as a whole. (R4, p.29, lines 690-692)

A similar sentiment was echoed in the following quote:

Oh, massive because I suppose they know exactly what you're going through and what you probably need. You know the best way probably to know what someone

needs is if you went through it yourself or if you're actually genuinely interested in what that person is doing and what they're at I suppose. So I think it does make a big difference. (R8, p.8, lines 188-191)

Quality of Relationship

While personal aspects focused on how beliefs and previous experience may impact the type of support available and received, the quality of the relationship highlights the value of relationships in enabling support. Closeness, trust, and genuine interest were three themes associated.

Closeness. In terms of closeness, both providers and receivers described how knowing a person and feeling comfortable with them enabled them to seek support and feel supported. A receiver described this using a contrasting example of two coaches:

I was playing with (county) again and we had another coach and he distanced himself from the team. No one felt that they could go talk to him. So I suppose even I know personally as well from speaking to the girls that they all feel that they can go and tell him something. They aren't afraid to go and talk to him if they need to talk to him about something again on a personal level and in terms of how they're playing and stuff like that, their own personal ability and stuff. (R1, p.11, lines 260-265)

In contrast, not being close to someone can hamper asking for support:

It's just that I'd probably be a lot more open to talk to him. You know it could be different for other athletes. But yeah, if I knew him better, it probably would have helped it a bit more. (R5, p.6, lines 124-126)

Trust. Trust was a common word used by both providers and receivers. A closer relationship seemed to foster an environment of trust and security on both sides. One provider noted this through the following statement: "It's a kind of a trust thing too like, do you know

what I mean. They can trust you too that they can say something to you and that you're not gonna go off to someone else and say" (P8b, p.15, lines 356-358).

Genuine Interest. Similarly, most receivers suggested that a provider having genuine interest changes a relationship focus:

Having that reassurance that someone is interested and not just out for the performance or the business side of things, you know, with the promotion, it's just massive. It's like someone is a fan. You know like just a supportive fan and they have a genuine interest in the whole thing. (R3, pp.15-16, lines 371-373)

Several receivers proposed that having this personal connection not only can facilitate a better relationship to enable support but also lead to better performance:

I do feel players play more confidently when they have not so much a personal level with the manager but once the manager knows some bit about their background or even shows some interest in what they're doing in their job. It doesn't have to be so personal in their job and stuff. And maybe relate to that every so often. Maybe in training how you got on at work or something. I feel that players then actually excel when they're in that type of environment. (R8, pp.11-12, lines 265-273)

Although these three relationship aspects were noted as facilitators, notably some receivers suggested that asking for help can be hard, with one participant stressing: "that can be very hard at times. Yeah. That probably is the problem nowadays. Like I made it sound easy there, but asking for support can be very difficult for people at times" (R8, p.20, lines 490-491). This sentiment suggests that although support may be available, asking for assistance may be a barrier for some.

Stakeholder Relationships

Within any sporting career, there will be numerous support providers involved at a given time. All providers and receivers of this study emphasised communication between providers. It was felt that having sufficient communication with other support providers was important. This context was not necessarily a facilitator or barrier for support as in the previous sections; instead, it was a common theme discussed by all participants as a factor acting as a potential demand or a resource. A coach summarised this through the following quote:

I find that very important. The whole set-up has to be. There has to be a harmony to it like; you know what I mean. Because at the end of the day it's me and (athlete name) seven days a week. We dip in and out of these people. But if they're upsetting that vibe for the hour or two that they're involved, I don't want you. (P3b, p.24, lines 574-577)

As a resource, some receivers mentioned the ease of having people connected, which allows them to focus on their sport and education:

Because it's the convenience to go to (institute contact name) if there is an issue or I'm not so sure about something and ask. Whereas if there was no central person I'd be chasing five or six people down at the same time, and I'd probably lose track and lose patience and not give up the time to go for it because it's not worth it in the end. Racing is important. I'd prefer that over chasing six people down for whatever it is, nutrition, strength and conditioning. (R7, p.5, lines 113-117)

In comparison, the lack of such relationships and clear communication can impact the receiver and add to their demands. Many highlighted this throughout the interviews, with some alluding to being pulled from various angles: "College wise you know the lecturers want you to do your best in college, and the coaches want you to do your best in the pool, and

one wants you to sacrifice one for the other type of thing” (R5, p.13, lines 294-296).

Particularity for team sports athletes who play for a few teams, due to low communication levels between those teams at times, some athletes are given a “choice” if and when there are clashes:

I suppose a lot of managers do leave it up to the players to make up their own decisions. I’ve had a few coaches that turn around and said you’re adults now, it’s up to you to make up your own mind. But yet if you go and play the match they give out to you for going playing the match. (R1, p.6, lines 124-127)

It was emphasised that these “choices” could increase stress:

I suppose, in a way, you’re trying to keep everyone happy. You don’t really want to upset anyone. Sometimes you’d much prefer if they just told you where to go and what to do, which is probably not the right way either because I am grown up now. (R8, p.16, lines 388-390)

Providers also echoed these points with one suggesting an unnecessary overlap of resources when providers do not communicate: “Again I think one of the real problems with (college institute) is ten different people are doing exactly the same thing and never communicating to each other” (P5a, p.5, lines 104-105). A receiver summed up the ideal scenario for many as: “if everything was kind of together and everyone kind of not got on but communicated it would make life easier, not life easier but it would make the system work better” (R4, p.31, lines 758-760).

Additional Factors

Additional factors included aspects that do not fit into any specific influencing factor category previously presented, yet have the potential to impact support available or received and includes the following themes: management interest and knowledge and expertise.

Management Interest. For third-level institutes, limited finance, resource and lack of policy can hinder consistency, as was noted within gaps in support previously. As an influencing factor, management interest was suggested to impact what type of support is available for providers to work with. Providers noted how management control many aspects which can limit what they feel they can provide student-athletes. One provider indicated that: “the president doesn’t really have an interest in sport. He’s an academic and doesn’t really see the value of it” (P2a, p.10, lines 245-246). This aspect was associated with what finance was available for tangible support such as accommodation and paying for fees, but also related to academic flexibility policies being passed and employing more people to support student-athletes.

Knowledge and Expertise. Some coaches felt there was no support or specific training for coaches dealing with certain issues. This followed through to an influencing factor of knowledge and expertise, with some providers not feeling fully equipped at times to deal with certain things that athletes may require:

You know if you end up that close to somebody like that who’s that you know high performance like they’re strong characters, they’re strong personalities, and you have to be able to manage that as well. And that’s what this country’s not good at like.

They don’t equip coaches. (P3b, p.11, lines 253-256)

This same coach suggested: “Who coaches the coach? Yeah exactly. Who’s there?” (P3b, p.28, line 675), suggesting a gap in coach support leaves a gap within coach-athlete support in terms of how to deal with specific situations. Another coach also echoed this sentiment by suggesting:

There’s definitely need for an intervention somewhere along the line. Whether we go down it’s a CBT course that all the coaches need to go to, or whether it’s through the

coaching courses, I'm not 100% sure, but something needs to be done for sure. (P5b, p.20, lines 481-483)

Discussion

The aim of Study 3 was to explore social support from both provider and receiver perspectives. According to the Holistic Athletic Career Model (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004; Wylleman et al., 2013; Wylleman & Rosier, 2016), the psychosocial network plays a vital role in supporting student-athletes (Wylleman, 2019). However, a lack of support from the network regarding pursuing a dual career can put student-athletes at risk of not engaging/disengaging in a dual career due to lack of support in pursuing a dual career (Kuettel et al., 2017; Wylleman, 2019). Overall, Study 3 found that providers and receivers felt the same types of support were provided and received. However, just as important was understanding the role providers had in providing support and the benefit of that support to receivers in managing their dual career. Several influencing factors of social support were identified, along with potential gaps in practice. Extending results from Studies 1 and 2, how support is provided appears just as significant to meet student-athletes needs.

A key finding within Study 3 results related to perceived support. Previous research has found that perceived support is as important as received support (Bianco & Eklund, 2001; Freeman et al., 2009; Holt & Hoar, 2006; Lakey & Cohen, 2000; Rhind et al., 2011; Uchino, 2009). Higher perceived social support can lead to a greater feeling of control, enabling a sense of coping in stressful situations (Freeman & Rees, 2009). Adding to previous literature, data from Study 3 suggests that perceived support played an important role in dual career support. Knowing that someone was there if needed was highlighted as a valued aspect for receivers who felt that this provided them with reassurance and security. This type of support was enacted by providers checking in regularly (i.e. monitoring and enquiring). This regular and informal contact was suggested to facilitate a sense of support. These findings are in line with the Main Effects Model (Cohen & Wills, 1985) which suggests that the more social support available, the better the positive outcome, irrespective of whether stress is present or

not. Notably, the Main Effects Model is associated with structural components of social support, such as the frequency of social support contact (Rees, 2007). Providing support to this, the act of providers checking in regularly with receivers in Study 3 (i.e. monitoring and enquiring) appeared to support the perception of the availability of support, relating to the frequency of contact.

Social support received may not always be sufficient or helpful (Brown et al., 2015; Freeman et al., 2014; Moll et al., 2017; Rees, 2007; Rees & Hardy, 2000; Stambulova et al., 2015). Providers and receivers in Study 3 discussed similar types of support (Table 5), suggesting agreement when it comes to received support. However, gaps were identified between providers' and receivers' perceptions of received support, particularly regarding how support was provided. The contrasting perceptions presented in Study 3 results may illustrate a disconnect between providers and receivers' perceptions of adequate support. One possible suggestion for these results may be due to a skills gap. As outlined in Chapter 2, providers may understand the need for particular support but may lack the skills in providing that support effectively, highlighting a potential skills gap in some aspects of support provision (Banwell & Kerr, 2016; Ronkainen et al., 2018). For example, some researchers suggest that many coaches have limited training in terms of providing support on issues outside of technical aspects and often rely on their own experiences (Banwell & Kerr, 2016; Ronkainen et al., 2018). Adding to this literature, it is possible to suggest from Study 3 results that a "skills gap" may exist among the support providers in this study. Many providers noted being former student-athletes and expressed an understanding of their experiences and needs. However, a key aspect to emerge from this was that some providers suggested they did not feel fully equipped to deal with certain aspects that student-athletes may require and highlighted a lack of provider support and/or training.

These findings are important to consider as unskilled people may provide unsuitable support, which can add to demands rather than resources (Jowett & Lavallee, 2007; Rees, 2007; Rees & Hardy, 2000; Vangelisti, 2009). In line with the Athletic Career Transition Model (Stambulova, 2003), a negative imbalance between demands and resources can lead to ineffective coping and transition experience. It is essential for support providers to have “contextual awareness” (Brown et al., 2015; Knight et al., 2018; Debois et al., 2015; Stambulova et al., 2015) and understand the needs of receivers, but also have the required skills to provide suitable support. Competency tools have been created to help dual career providers assess and develop their competencies when working with dual career athletes (for example, GEES, 2016). In addition, some training courses have been developed for coaches and support staff to provide an understanding of transitions experienced by dual career athletes and their role in providing support. For example, the Talented Athlete Scholarship Scheme in the UK (TASS) has developed several training programmes for different dual career support providers such as coaches, sport scholarship coordinators, parents (e.g. Introduction to Lifestyle Support; Understanding Lifestyle Support; Talented Athlete Lifestyle Support; Talented Athlete Support in Transitions and Education). To the researcher’s knowledge, no equivalent is available in Ireland. In agreement with previous dual career recommendations (European Commission, 2012, 2016; GEES, 2016), perhaps more specific training and guidance is required to help support providers (in sport and third-level) transfer their dual career knowledge to practice.

Adding to Study 1 and 2 results, Study 3 participants also reported a lack of communication between key stakeholders. Providers in Study 3 appeared unsure as to how to develop better stakeholder communication or whose responsibility this was to develop it. It is possible to propose that a lack of communication exists between different providers due to a gap in responsibility and not merely a lack of interest or unwillingness. The benefit of support

provider relationships and congruence messages for student-athletes has been illustrated in previous research (Knight et al., 2018). This extends the findings in Studies 1 and 2, promoting the requirement and benefit of “combined support” between significant support providers, specifically between sport and education providers (Adams et al., 2015; Burden et al., 2004; European Commission, 2016; Giacobbi et al., 2004; Knight et al., 2018; Rosenfeld et al., 2000; Sheridan et al., 2014), and highlighting a gap in dual career leadership and coordination between sport and education sectors in Ireland.

It is important to identify factors that may influence the effectiveness of support in order to optimise social support provision (Knight et al., 2018; Moll et al., 2017), and three particular influencing factors were observed through Study 3. First, adding to previous research findings (Adams et al., 2015; Brown et al., 2015; Caput-Jogunic et al., 2012; Giacobbi et al., 2004; Puskas & Perenyi, 2015; Rees, 2007; Rothberg, 2011), participants (providers and receivers) felt that close, trusting relationships help facilitate social support interactions. Receivers felt more comfortable approaching someone they knew and were comfortable with. This point emphasises the need to actively develop a supportive environment. As Giacobbi et al. (2004) proposed, social support is a progressive and developmental process. As such, providers should consider how this might be achieved, particularly if barriers such as contact time exist.

Second, a potential barrier was that receivers noted their own personalities may influence enabling support. A small number of receivers reported that even though they know support was available, they sometimes prefer to “work away” themselves as that is the “type of person” they are. This raises an important question; how can support providers provide sufficient support if they are not aware of potential issues or requirements if an athlete does not communicate? If a student-athlete is unwilling to state their needs clearly or feel unable to communicate their needs, this can result in conflicting opinions and insufficient support

(Shumaker & Brownell, 1984; Vangelisti, 2009). In line with findings in Study 2, this theme adds to the recommendation that student-athletes may benefit from personal life skills education (Condello et al., 2019; De Brant, 2017; GEES, 2016; MacNamara & Collins, 2010) or what Marx et al. (2008) called “psycho-educational sessions”. Helping student-athletes understand potential transitions, what support is available to them, and how they can communicate effectively with their support providers may help them access support proactively.

Finally, from a structural dimension, data demonstrated that similar dimensions of support were received across providers (both sport and third-level providers), albeit with a different role and focus. It is most likely that the different focus was a result of the divergent roles of providers. These findings add to previous literature that recognises the impact of roles on support provided (Douglas & Carless, 2006; Ronkainen et al., 2018). Athletes receive different types of support from a variety of people throughout their athletic development (Adams et al., 2015; Bianco & Eklund, 2001; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). Receivers in this study appeared to be clear on the distinction between the support they received from each provider. This highlights the importance of recognising individual roles in providing support. In addition, a provider’s role appeared to impact the type of support receivers may actively seek, specifically among team sport athletes. For example, some team sport athletes felt that they would not want to speak to coaches about certain personal aspects due to perceived potential implications in terms of being chosen to play. These findings add to previous literature that has found similar influencing factors such as athletes being embarrassed to share certain aspects with coaches, or a fear of showing signs of weakness (Hassell et al., 2010; Pensgaard & Roberts, 2003). As an implication of this, team sport athletes in Study 3 all expressed an absence of a neutral sports-related person to confide in within their sport setting. This point may be of interest to applied practitioners in terms of

considering the potential benefit of accessing a sport psychologist, performance life skills provider, welfare personnel, or another neutral person to provide confidential support to student-athletes.

Strengths and Limitations

While there is a volume of extant dual career research highlighting social support as a key resource for student-athletes, it is important to identify the factors that may influence the effectiveness of support (Moll et al., 2017) and to explore the nature and role of social support within a dual career context (Rhind et al., 2011). Qualitative studies help to provide more depth in understanding of the effectiveness of social support practice (Hassell et al., 2010; Holt & Hoar, 2006). Results from Study 3 add to and extend existing research by giving voice to participants relating to the role of social support. Study 3 took a novel approach by gaining provider and receiver perspectives, providing an understanding from both perspectives. The data revealed important aspects of social support practice from a receiver perspective (e.g. monitoring and enquiring) and revealed critical influencing factors from a provider perspective (e.g. perceived lack of dual career knowledge and training).

Careful consideration was taken when choosing a target provider population. Sport and education-related providers were chosen due to the dominant role they play with the student-athlete population. Including providers from both sport and education provided depth and width to the data. However, it was also important to limit the volume of providers. According to Dehele et al. (2001), it is better to ask receivers about a small number of specific providers rather than multiple. Having a narrow focus on two particular providers was deemed specific and relevant.

A limitation of Study 3 relates to the timing of interviews. Interviews took place at one time of the year for both providers and receivers. Perceptions of support can be

dependant on timing and context, and student-athlete interviews took place between April and June, which were before and after the exam period for the student-athletes and were at different competitive points in the sporting calendar. Future research could consider a more longitudinal approach with varying points of interview throughout a year.

Conclusion

As illustrated through the Holistic Athletic Career Model (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004; Wylleman & Rosier, 2016; Wylleman, 2019), student-athletes psychosocial network (providers of support) can be an essential resource and play a vital role in supporting the dual career process. Results from Study 3 adds to previous research relating to the benefit of interpersonal support as a resource (Adams et al., 2015; Brown et al., 2015; Gabana et al., 2017; Knight et al., 2018; McKenna & Dustan-Lewis, 2004; Pummell et al., 2008; Rhind et al., 2011; Stambulova et al., 2009) and suggest that social support is valuable for student-athletes to manage their dual careers, but requires a personalised approach to cater for individual needs.

Three key findings emerged from Study 3. First, perceived support played an important role for receivers who felt that knowing someone was there provided reassurance. Monitoring and enquiring through informal check-ins were valued by receivers and appeared to enable a sense of support by facilitating communication between provider and receiver. The benefit of these simple day to day interactions have also been found in other research studies (Burns et al., 2018). This point is relevant to providers in terms of developing their appreciation for “softer skills” and the benefit they can have in providing a supportive environment.

Second, each support provider has a role to play in providing dual career support, with more attention required on how support is provided. Providing adequate social support

requires knowledge but also the skills to implement (Banwell et al., 2016; Freeman & Rees, 2009; Ronkainen et al., 2018). Many providers felt they may lack the necessary skills or training to provide certain elements of dual career support, suggesting that more specific training and support may be required to dual career support providers in various sectors.

Finally, extending results from Studies 1 and 2, more effective provider relationships are required in order to gain consistent and clear messages and decrease stress amongst student-athletes. Considering themes from Studies 1, 2, and 3, this raises some final considerations; are there challenges or barriers to implementing dual career support? Consideration and further research is required into the potential influences and barriers from a systemic and applied perspective, which will be addressed in Study 4.

Chapter Seven

Study 4

Introduction

From a systemic and policy perspective, Ireland has been referenced as having a Laissez-Faire approach to dual career support (Aquilina & Henry, 2010; Caput-Jogunica et al., 2012; European Commission, 2012, 2016) and data from Study 1 provided support for this. Study 2 extended this knowledge and provided evidence to suggest that this type of dual career approach impacted student-athletes experiences. For example, inconsistent messages from support providers due to lack of communication caused additional stressors, and informal and divergent dual career support practice influenced the type and volume of support provided. In addition, Study 3 also highlighted a number of impacts regarding this type of dual career approach. In particular, support providers expressed perceived gaps in their role, responsibility, and training regarding dual career support.

Dual career guidelines (European Commission, 2012) were designed to provide inspiration to policy makers and help countries formulate their own policy and structures (e.g. Swedish National Guidelines for Elite Athletes' Dual Careers, 2018). However, challenges and barriers to implementing dual career structures have also been identified (European Commission, 2017; Ryan et al., 2017). Considering results from Studies 1, 2, and 3, a consideration remains; what challenges or barriers to implementing dual career support exist within third-level institutes in Ireland? Further research regarding the potential influences and barriers from a systemic and applied perspective may be of benefit. The aim of this final Study was to explore support provider's experiences of, and recommendations for, dual career practice in Ireland. Study 4 research questions were;

1. What are the experiences of third-level support providers regarding the current provision and dual career structures in third-level institutions in Ireland?
2. What are the recommendations for dual career support in Ireland?

Methodology

Study Design

Study 4 employed a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews to generate data.

Participants

Study 4 consisted of 13 participants (eight male and five female) with detailed knowledge of dual career support for third-level student-athletes. Key informants help to understand the environmental context (Kuettel et al., 2018). Eleven participants worked in third-level institutes, and two worked in organisations in roles relating to student-athlete policy and development. Participants' experience in their roles ranged from one year to 25 years, with an average of 10.8 years (SD=8).

Procedures

Participant Recruitment

To meet the aims of Study 4, stakeholders with knowledge of current third-level dual career systems and structures in an Irish setting were essential. Purposive sampling (Palys, 2008) and snowball sampling (Johnson, 2014; Patton, 2003) were employed. Inclusion criteria comprised of people who were involved in developing policy and standards for dual career support for third-level student-athletes.

Using contacts gained through the first three studies and from researching dual career support in Ireland, participants identified as meeting the inclusion criteria were contacted directly via email or phone by the researcher who invited them to volunteer. An information sheet outlining the study aims and methods was provided. Snowball sampling was also used throughout the process as a method of recruiting further participants.

Data Collection

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews conducted between November and December 2018. One interview was conducted face-to-face, and 12 were conducted via telephone. The interview schedule (Appendix E) was developed using guidance from results of Studies 1-3 and previous research on dual career support and practices (Aquilina, 2013; Aquilina & Henry, 2010; European Commission, 2012, 2016, 2017; Ryan et al., 2017). Before each interview, participants were guided through an introductory section outlining the concepts to be explored and asked for their consent. All interviews were recorded using a Dictaphone.

Data Analysis

Using the same process outlined in Study 3, the researcher used thematic analysis guided by Gale et al. (2013) seven-step framework method for the management and analysis of the data. The total time of all 13 interviews was 818 minutes, with interviews ranging from 41 minutes to 81 minutes with an average length of 63 minutes. The total transcriptions amounted to 128,170 words. Data familiarisation of each interview consisted of each interview being read and re-read. During this phase, short notes were written in the left-hand margin regarding observations (e.g. comparisons, contrasting elements).

The third stage used open coding to assign codes to sections and sentences. This open coding took place on a sample of four interviews. Examples of coding at this stage included “new role”, “external reviewing of sports system”, “experiencing challenges within the system”. After initial coding was completed, codes were grouped, and a sample analytical framework was developed using distinct categories. This process took several adjustments until the researcher was happy with the categories and definitions. Examples of categories for the analytical framework included “changes in dual career practice”, “barriers to

implementation". This framework was then applied to the rest of the interviews using the existing codes and categories while also allowing for any new codes to emerge.

Once completed, codes and categories were entered into a matrix in a Microsoft excel spreadsheet, where data relating to each code and interview was stored. Interpreting the data was conducted throughout the process by reviewing notes relating to potential themes, general and specific thoughts, differences and similarities between participants.

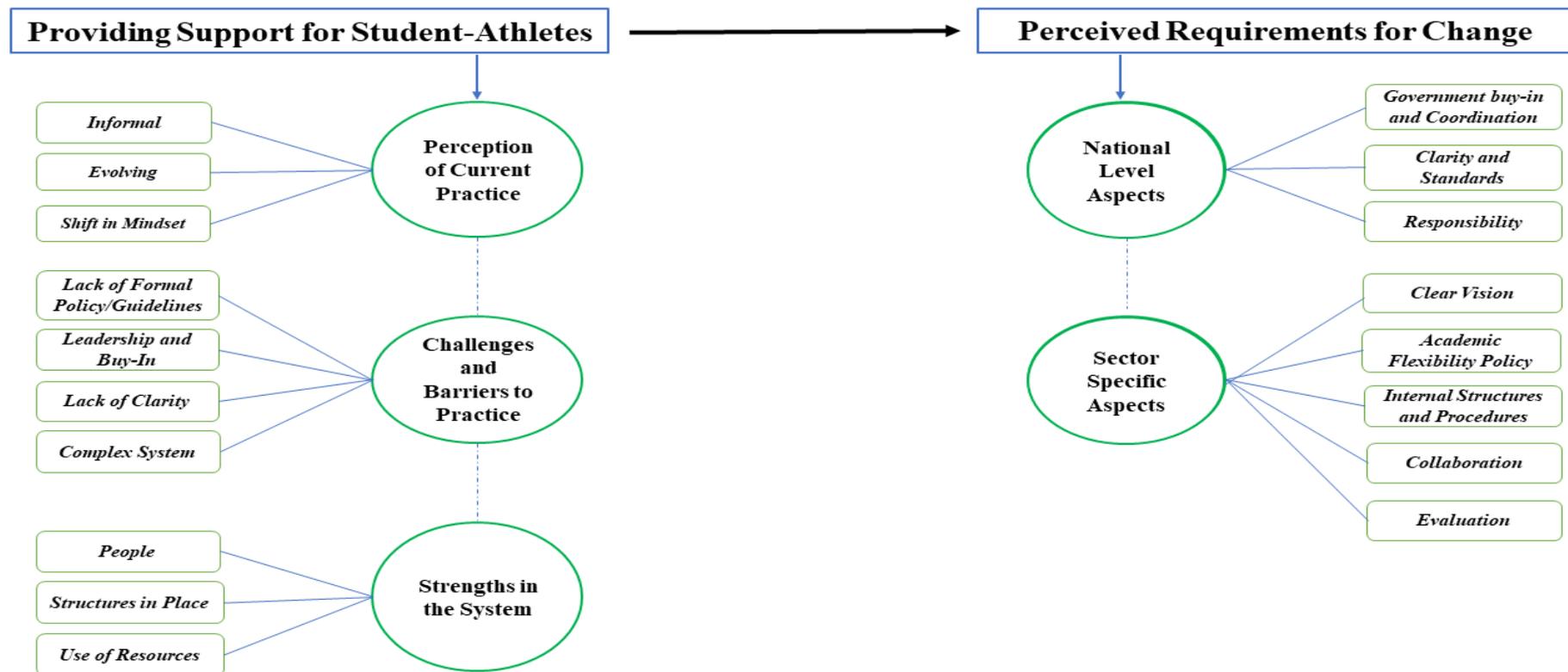
Two higher-order themes were noted, 1) Providing Support for Student-Athletes, 2) Perceived requirements for Change. To provide a clear audit trail, participant numbers (P), page number (p.), and line numbers (line(s)) are represented in each verbatim quote.

Results

The analysis identified two higher-order themes: 1) Providing Support for Student-Athletes, 2) Perceived Requirements for Change.

Figure 4

Study 4 Results Diagram



Providing Support for Student-Athletes

The first section is based on practitioners' experiences of dual career structures within the third-level system. Participants described their experiences within their settings and perceptions of the overall dual career landscape in Ireland. Experiences are structured under the following four headings: i) Perceptions of Current Practice; ii) Challenges and Barriers, iii) Strengths in the System, iv) Opportunities.

Perceptions of Current Practice

Participants provided examples of current structures and practices from their environments. Three common themes from this included; informal, evolving, and a shift in mind-set.

Informal. In line with Study 1, participants described dual career support as ad hoc and informal with minimal to no policy behind practices in most cases. One participant emphasised that in their institution: "it's mostly based on volunteer input and inspiration rather than actually systemic organised support and structures" (P8, p.5, lines 104-105). This experience was echoed in many other interviews in which some participants questioned the effect of the support:

So if we were to take, for example, the piece around the academic flexibility. So there is no formal process in place. And whilst there would have been local arrangements over the years they were done on a very ad hoc basis. They were not well thought out, and it was questionable as to whether or not they were of any real benefit to athletes.
(P1, p.1, lines 23-26)

Relatedly, several participants stressed that they were not confident that all colleagues were aware of dual career "practices" within their institute, which may lead to inconsistencies in

practice: “So in one way we’re relying on the existing structures and processes to communicate information. Can I confirm to you that that happened effectively, I can’t, being honest, I can’t tell you if every single lecturer knows” (P13, p.12, lines 297-302).

Evolving. Although most participants felt the current practice was informal, many did stress areas of practice that were evolving and moving toward more formal structures. Several institutes were in the process of conducting reviews of current practices, drafting academic flexibility policies to submit to academic councils, and shifting “fragmented structures” into more centralised coordinated programmes. One participant noted:

We got a support policy fully approved by the institute this year. Yeah so that’s important for going forward. It’s a policy that is aligned with the institute guidance and recommendations, and it also works within (HEI) policy. It gives actions. (P13, p.6, lines 141-143)

An aspect suggested as an emerging good practice trend within third-level dual career support was appointing academic mentors: “But for the most part that’s where it’s worked well, where there’s a direct linkup which we would have established for the student with the student with an academic in their program area” (P5, p.6, lines 131-133). This ranged from formally appointed mentors to informally appointed (voluntary) mentors. These mentors act as a link between the sports coordinator and the academic department/programme.

Shift in Mind-Set. Several participants suggested these changes were occurring as a result of a shift in mind-set and values in their institutions in terms of dual career support.

One participant indicated that:

Over the last few years, there has been a change in mind-set, some of which is to do with the university strategy, some of which is to do with sporting success and

individual academics taking pride in the achievements of their students. (P5, p.6, lines 123-126)

It was proposed that this was not just within third-level institutes, but also on a national scale:

But actually, now I see a much more joint up approach beginning. And that's with us as a university and the institute of sport, the NGBs but also other colleges because we can learn a lot from each other. So I suppose in the past, any collaboration we had, we would have instigated that through the training with (name). So I think it's good. I think there's a joint up approach that's been lacking has been a challenge, but I think that's now changing, which is really positive. (P7, p.18, lines 428-433)

These were notable changes since data collection for Study 1.

Challenges and Barriers to Practice

Participants were asked to reflect on perceived challenges or barriers they experienced while providing dual career support. The primary reoccurring themes from these discussions were: lack of formal policy/guidelines, leadership and buy-in, lack of clarity, and complex system.

Lack of Formal Policy/Guidance. Discussions relating to lack of formal policy/guidelines focused on individual third-level institutes and on a national level. On an institute level, not having formal guidelines caused inconsistencies in practice due to being person dependant. One participant remarked: "it's informal at the moment and it's based on discussion between say the program manager of (name) and the school head. And different school heads in different courses may have different attitudes" (P6, p.3, lines 58-60).

Participants also expressed that it could act as a barrier by causing a fear element for staff dealing with student-athletes:

But they just need to have surety from the university that they are allowed to do these things. And they can, under academic regulations, they can. But a lot of those academics, particularly junior academics, are afraid to make the alternative arrangement in case they get in trouble. (P5, p.11, lines 269-272)

In the same context, but on a national level, another participant commented that:

There is absolutely no blueprint for colleges. We're all just trying to put out fires you know for want of a better word. You know this person has been called up, we'll try and sort this for them. Then we'll sort this for this person. There's no actual structure in third-level for dealing with high profile athletes. (P11, p.6, lines 139-143)

All three quotes highlight a challenge for consistency in dual career support and a barrier to provider engagement.

Leadership and Buy-In. The next challenge discussed was leadership and buy-in. The primary context that this arose related to buy-in and interest from leadership and also sustaining that interest. Participants reported a lack of interest from top-down impacted negatively on dual career support within an institute. One participant suggested:

Like we can come up with fantastic ideas in that we can say this is the way we see it working, this is brilliant, this is that. But if it doesn't get the seal of approval and the support in order to keep it sustainable from the highest level within our institution, then we're fighting a losing battle. It has to be recognised from the top down. (P9, p.21, lines 518-521)

All participants felt that leadership interest was key, but also expressed concerns in the sustainability of the support in the event of a change in leadership:

We were streets ahead of (institute) in terms of our whole sports offering ten years ago. Now they're ahead of us. And we've never got that buy-in from the top that you

see in (institute). But here's the question. When (name) retires as he will do, what will happen in (institute)? (P8, p.16, lines 387-389)

This participant was emphasising the changeable nature of leadership and the potential knock-on effect if they leave and formal arrangements are not in place.

Lack of Clarity. Another challenge expressed by participants was a lack of clarity. Specifically, role clarity and a definition of who was being supported were the most discussed. Some participants suggested that as their role had various layers, certain elements of practice were coincidence rather than formal: "When I came into this job there was absolutely no scholarship. It's something that we've just developed. And there's nothing in my job spec that says that I'm in charge of scholarships" (P11, p.15, lines 358-359). Some of these duties were being performed automatically and as an addition to their current role.

Related to clarity was the definition of "who" the support is for? One participant suggested that people have different definitions and perceptions of dual career support, which they felt is a challenge for providers:

What is the criteria first for high performance? Define what a high performance or dual career person looks like. That's kind of a clouded area. And we would all have a different definition in our institutions across the board for what we would consider high performance. (P10, p.12, lines 280-283)

This participant went on to suggest that "there's a kind of a muddied waters. And those words like dual career, the student-athlete, the high performance, elite, there's all these different words that are thrown out there." (P10, p.12, lines 284-285). In both these instances, lack of clarity was perceived to have an impact on how support is provided, what type of support is available, and who it is provided for.

Complex System. The final factor to emerge as a challenge and at times a barrier was the dual career support being a complex system involving many “stakeholders”, with each (i.e. third-level institutes and National Governing Bodies) governed differently. One participant noted that within any third level, you have a degree of freedom which poses a challenge in achieving college-wide consistency:

I mean if you think about the whole aspect of academic freedom and of the different delivery mechanisms of lectures, the different aspects of academic support. So quite varied. That’s core business, and that varies. So, therefore, even if you have an agreed policy, you’re never gonna get 100% support mechanisms coming through until you have years of practice of years of implementation. (P8, p.20, lines 490-495)

In a similar context, other participants expressed how hard it is to control or engage outside of the third levels:

Well, externally is the hardest in the sense that there’s no control over anything. At least within a college environment, you have some sort of control. There’s a system in place in organisations. There’s a structure and that so you have something. (P4, p.21, lines 519-521)

In both these instances, participants expressed how the complex nature of stakeholders internally and externally to third-levels is a challenge.

Strengths in the System

Strengths in the system relate to features that participants felt contributed to good practice and helped foster productive day to day practices. Notably, some of these factors relate to the challenges and barriers to practice presented previously. What was evident from

these discussions was that strengths and barriers were context specific. The primary themes included: people, structures in place, and use of resources.

People. The impact of people was discussed in all interviews. Some participants felt they were lucky to have a leader who bought into the concept of dual career support, which contrasts with the challenges above. Leadership provided support behind ideas and practice, which was recognised as an asset:

We've had, you know, three or four different presidents. I've had three or four different registrars because the registrar would be let's say, my direct manager. And it's amazing this year to be able to work with somebody who actually understands it.

(P11, p.21, lines 500-502)

Another focus of people was the goodwill of colleagues in helping to make things happen. Although expressed as a challenge and barrier in the previous theme, it was also highlighted as a strength, particularly in the absence of formal policy and is noted in the following quote: "The main strength I see in the system as it stands, without the architecture to support it, is the genuine goodwill of key people" (P1, p.7, lines148-149). Even in institutes with a formal policy in place, people were still acknowledged as a strength. Taking the time to build up relationships was deemed an essential factor: "I mean the policy exists, but you know policies exist all over the place. They bring them to life. They go talk. They build up the relationships. They advocate you know" (P6, p.24, lines 575-577).

Structures in Place. Another strength reported on numerous occasions related to any regular structures in place. Participants discussed systematic practices in place which they felt provided "structure behind the support". Some participants noted conducting reviews to make sure support was fit for purpose and felt this practice was a strength in their system. However, the most cited positive structures in place were having specific mentors for student-athletes

and working in a centralised unit. One participant highlighted that: “the one point of contact, which is me, is a good thing as well because I know what’s going on across the board and I’m able to contact the lecturers and the heads of department” (P11, p.5, lines103-105).

Participants suggested that it was easier to coordinate dual career support centrally than having several individual representatives (as was the case in certain circumstances in Study 1).

Use of Resources. A final strength was being creative with the use of resources to sustain and develop practice. Some participants recounted examples of using their own resources in the absence of high levels of finance and people resource. One example of this was building relationships with external bodies such as NGB’s in order to share the cost of mutual supports and to become more aligned to eliminate conflict for student-athletes. One participant stated: “something that works well and it has evolved, (it wasn’t like this at the start) is (NGB) because (NGB) now include world university games on their competitive pathway for their athletes” (P13, p.20, lines 488-490). Other examples include using qualified academic staff to provide support: “many members of staff who are experts in sports psychology, in nutrition and strength and conditioning, and I thought why don’t we tap into that and try and use their expertise to develop our program” (P11, p.2, lines 29-31). Another participant suggested using staff to overcome a barrier of potential exam and competition clashes:

We also spoke to the exams service, and we got a number of the staff here in support trained up as invigilators in case we had to travel with a team to actually invigilate exams over in the UK when they were competing. (P5, p.10, lines 242-244)

Due to these strengths, many participants suggested that the strengths in theirs’ or other programmes could act as opportunities for other institutes. As noted in the current

practice theme, several participants expressed a growing appetite for developing dual career in Ireland. As such, many felt that due to this appetite, there is a “great opportunity to create a new culture.” (P13, p.34, line 824), nationally and individually. Of note, participants felt that as dual career support exists informally in most institutions, and thus simply requires a formal setting to develop:

I’d say some of it was already in place, you know, in an informal way. It was just putting it on a formal footing, you know. I’d say a lot of the stuff was happening you know in colleges where they would have support systems in place you know. (P4, p.10, lines 227-230).

Participants suggested there was also an opportunity to share resources between third-levels and NGB’s resulting in a mutual benefit (which relates to the strengths theme above). One participant highlighted this by saying: “You know, even for example with our (sport) development programme, I mean our high-performance unit for (NGB) is based here. We share the cost of the high-performance coach here between ourselves and (NGB)”. (P10, p.7, lines 173-175). This participant also went onto explain that there is an opportunity to share resources and work together to help student-athletes:

And knowing what the NGB support is there for that athlete and what support we can provide here for that athlete while studying. Do they have to necessarily go back up to (county) every weekend? Can we provide a coaching structure for them here? (P10, p.13, lines 315-317)

Perceived Requirements for Change

Participants discussed developing dual career support locally and nationally based on their applied experiences and their understanding of dual career recommendations. Several

reoccurring themes were noted: i) National Level Aspects, ii) Sector Specific Aspects. Many of the themes presented below are participant’s solutions to the challenges and barriers that they had identified in the previous section. Table 6 provides an overview of the main themes identified.

Table 6

Enhancing Dual Career Practice in Ireland

Nationally
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Government acknowledgement and leadership regarding dual career practice in Ireland. • A specific organisation to lead and coordinate dual career practice in Ireland. • The development of a national “Kite Mark” providing specific Irish standards and guidelines to help third-level institutes develop their dual practice. • Role clarity for third-level institutes providing or developing dual career support.
Sector Specific
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a clear vision of dual career support from concept to implementation. This relates to defining “who” is supporting, “why” they are being supported, and “how” this support will be implemented. • A dedicated dual career liaison person in each sector (e.g. within each sport and third-level institute) with a clear focus on providing dual career support to student-athletes and collaborating with other sport and education dual career personnel nationally. • Institute wide academic flexibility policy. • Provision of training/upskilling for dual career support providers. • Conduct regular internal evaluations practice.

National Level Aspects

This section represents several themes that were identified as common across all sectors (third-level institutes and sport). The main themes to emerge were: Government buy-in and coordination, clarity and standards, and responsibility. These aspects were resonated strongly across all interviews.

Government Buy-In and Coordination. Government buy-in and coordination of dual career support in Ireland was discussed in all interviews, with two primary contexts:

having direction from Government to secure national buy-in, and coordination of a representing “body”.

Firstly, participants felt strongly that to progress dual career support in Ireland, it would require government “buy-in” with strong leadership. Participants stressed that ownership and direction were needed to help gain consistency across all stakeholder sectors:

I think it goes then back to the top level. If you want to get this consistent across the country, it comes back to a clear statement in the national sports policy. Sport Ireland, the department of education joined up and saying listen, this is a government policy. (P6, p.17, lines 402-404)

Secondly, several participants felt that it was not enough to have government buy-in, it would also require consistent coordination, given the number of stakeholders involved.

You’ve gotta have this kind of a national policy first and foremost, which then the institutions will buy into. I think that’s the key piece. But you’ve gotta have a champion at the top if you like to encourage the buy-in that’s required to do this effectively. (P12, p.19, lines 462-465)

Coordination was discussed on a number of occasions and emphasised as a link between sport and third-level: “But I think what would be helpful would be somebody whose role and responsibility it is to link an athlete with an institution based on the requirements of the athlete and what the institution can provide” (P9, p.22, lines 540-542). In line with this, it was voiced that each sector (third-levels, NGB’s, and Players Associations) should have a specific dual career person driving it from within who could communicate with the person(s) coordinating nationally.

Clarity and Standards. Clarity and standards were presented in the challenges and the strengths themes. Participants voiced recommendations based on these, and this theme

represents two related aspects. Firstly, participants emphasised what they perceived was the need for role clarity, specifically within the third-level sector of dual career support. One participant noted:

We have to figure out, Irish Institute of Sport have to figure out what is the strategic role of the third-level sector in relation to an integrated support for high-performance athletes. Okay, so that's the nub of it. It's not enough, in my opinion, to say you know third-level colleges are part of the system of developing athletes. Let's kind of explain what that means, you know. (P8, p.24, lines 590-594)

Some participants felt that they were unclear about where third-level support fitted in and stressed that clarity on this would benefit.

Secondly, all suggested having specific common standards suitable for Ireland. Guidelines from other countries were perceived as a benefit to see what best practice looks like. However, many saw Ireland as having a different landscape and thus may require different guidelines:

I think it would be fantastic to have clear guidelines. I think the EU guidelines, they're a great starting point. But I think the context in Ireland is different to a lot of other European countries, especially around the funding in sport. Like the key challenge in Ireland would be well not every institution has a designated person for sports scholarships. And how would that look? How does it look in each institution? It's very different. I think Irish guidelines would be very beneficial. (P9, p.23, lines 559-565)

A small number of participants were cautionary in terms of having a highly structured dual career national policy that would dictate what they were required to do:

The one thing that just scared me at the dual careers day that we had was this idea of a national policy and that Sport Ireland would basically dictate to a university you have to do X and Y. That won't wash in our institution. That has to be negotiated on an individual basis with each institution. (P5, p.9, lines 206-210).

This point was stressed on a number of occasions, with participants noting that each third-level institute and NGB vary in terms of structures and practice. As such, participants felt that having a national policy to highlight roles and responsibilities was necessary. However, many believed that having "guiding standards" that could be interpreted individually might work better than strict governing rules. Having the security and reassurance of being guided by standards but the freedom of being able to interpret and apply them individually was important to those participants.

Given this concern, most participants recommended having a "Kite-mark" for institutes to achieve. One participant expressed this in the following quote:

Maybe there could be an athlete charter or something from the institute you know that we all sign up to. Athlete friendly institutions, and you know we could put together some type of charter that says the athlete will and we will, and that the NGB's and the colleges could sign up to so we have principals to guide us. (P7, p.23, lines 565-568)

One participant suggested that having these set guidelines could help create a "generic common understanding, language, whatever you want to call it. That there's something there that is tangible and is an understanding and you know people know well okay this is where Ireland is at, this is good" (P11, p.26, lines 620-622). Similarly, another participant suggested that "the idea of an athlete-friendly institute, I think that really works because it gives us a shopping list of things that we need to do" (P13, p.29, lines 712-714).

Albeit with slight differences in how it should happen, participants felt that having some sort of national standards or guidelines was positive and necessary: “But I think it would be great to think that irrespective of which institution you went to there was a fairly unified approach to that” (P12, p.6, lines 147-149).

Responsibility. Participants felt it was important to have both individual and collective responsibility. All participants felt there was a gap in responsibility and that it was necessary to develop a joined-up approach where support providers across various sectors were working together more formally and consistently. One participant commented that: “while we’re engaging with the NGB’s, it needs to be a very strong two-way process” (P10, p.11, lines 270-271), suggesting that all parties must have the same level of interest and investment. Along similar lines, another participant illustrated this by stating that: “anybody that has a vested interest in the athlete, including themselves, should be conversing with the people that are involved in that particular individual” (P3, p.13, lines 316-318), suggesting a collaborative approach and responsibility when working with student-athletes in third-level.

There were various ways proposed as to how this might happen. Some suggestions were informal, such as getting a list of names and contact details of third-levels and NGB dual career coordinators so people would know who was the point of contact was. Others suggested yearly informal meetings of NGB’s and third-levels to share stories and best practice. More formal ideas included regular meetings between athletes, NGB’s and third-levels: “And the whole idea then maybe quarterly meetings in relation to if you wanted to pull all the stakeholders in place to go along and improve. But certainly far better coordination” (P4, p.23, lines 563-565). One participant highlighted the benefit of this, suggesting that at times, many stakeholders were doing the same work due to a lack of communication and noted that working together for a mutual benefit: “so rather than you

know it's kind of about making maximum and optimum use of resources and that we're not unnecessarily duplicating stuff. But that the message that we're delivering to students is an agreed message between everyone" (P1, p.24, lines 574-576).

Sector Specific Aspects

This section represents third-level specific recommendations from participants based on experiences, strengths and challenges of providing dual career support within their own institute. The following recommendations were strong themes across all participants: clear vision, academic flexibility policy, internal structure and procedures, collaboration, and evaluations.

Clear Vision. As illustrated in general recommendations, many participants proposed having clear national guidelines to follow. It was advised that each institute should have its own clear vision or strategy to guide dual career practice. This included a clear understanding of *who* will be supported, *what* the support will be and *how* it will be delivered. The following quote expresses this concept:

Well, I suppose so. I think what we need to do is to move from the current model, which is ad hoc unprofessional, almost a scatter gun approach to a very clearly defined professional environment where the student-athlete is very much at the centre being the centre and that we're creating that. I suppose it's a philosophy around supporting the student in their development. (P1, p.3, lines 55-58)

Academic Flexibility Policy. All participants recommended having a policy for dual career within each institute, specifically an academic flexibility policy. The rationale for this was that it would help to put weight behind decisions and provides surety to those providing support:

So if we really want it to be athlete-centred and help them navigate sport and academia, there needs to be a system, there needs to be policies, and then there needs to be somebody in the middle of it who knows and understands how to make relationships work. (P6, p.25, lines 605-608)

Several participants noted that having a policy in place would eliminate inconsistencies of practice as was discussed in the challenges sections previously: “so if it’s down in writing and if it’s made in the policy well then nobody can be having any arguments” (P3, p.27, lines 644-645).

Internal Structures and Procedures. In line with a formal policy, most participants felt that to make practices consistent, internal structures that serve as day-to-day procedures to follow are required, which would help drive behaviour. Specific recommendations developed within these discussions. Firstly, some participants commented on having centralised programmes with an identified contact person coordinating, suggesting this helps guide colleagues and plans.

Second, while all participants endorsed having designated academic mentors (a reoccurring theme) within each department to act as a liaison for the student-athlete, participants reiterated a need to have specific procedures and standards for mentors and support providers to follow to ensure uniformity. One participant commented that it was necessary: “for the mentors to understand what’s expected of them exactly so that there’s a minimum standard that’s high” (P13, p.14, lines 348-351). In addition, another emphasised that specific training was necessary for mentor consistency:

I think you know even internally, because we don’t have any training, there could be inconsistencies in how we mentor our athletes. And I think we need to decide okay well how many times a year are we gonna meet them, what type of templates are we

gonna use with them. You know the clear service provision in terms of the sports side.

And then we need to have a whole suite of well what else is on offer to give better consistency. We nearly would need a best practice toolkit. (P7, p.7, lines 164-170)

Training and upskilling was also recommended for any third-level support provider working with student-athletes. Participants felt that this would again help consistency and understanding of trained individuals providing support:

So by having a dual career provider with competencies nationwide in lots of different colleges and universities and asking colleges and universities to get up to that standard, I think gives each student-athlete a better opportunity to develop truly as a student-athlete and eventually as an employee. (P9, p.20, lines 471-475)

This sentiment was echoed in the following quote: “Anyone. Absolutely. Anyone who is in that role should or maybe is required to have this. Anyone who is in the dual career support should have to complete this course first (P11, p.27, lines 654-655).

In addition, this sentiment extended to student-athletes. Most participants highlighted that third-level institutes need to provide education and training programmes to develop student-athlete’s self-awareness and self-management skills of their own dual career pathway. One participant expressed that: “if we can educate the students to basically plan better, communicate better and manage their time better, and these are the options for them. I think it will make a lot of student’s lives easier” (P7, p.16, lines 393-395). Another participant suggested having “a list of FAQs you know of what do I do. There almost needs to be like a flowchart for a student-athlete in terms of you know for any athletes coming in first year this is the process around that” (P12, p.14, lines 336-338). Participants felt that student-athletes also have a role in their own support, and by educating them, it would help them use their own voices and take personal responsibility.

A final aspect discussed relating to internal structures was the communication of these elements. Some participants felt that it was challenging to get dual career consistency as many people were not aware of the practice and support available within third-level institutes. To overcome this, participants recommended having an effective communication procedure in place to communicate any policies or dual career procedures institute-wide to all necessary stakeholders. One participant commented that: “each institution probably has to take responsibility for ensuring that information is passed all the way down to every single person who represents them, whether it’s a professor or the people who are liaising with the students” (P2, p.8, lines 187-190). Similarly, participants suggested this formal communication practice be widened to external networks also: “a mapping exercise each year, where sitting down with the athlete and possibly their coach or sports director” (P12, p.8, line190).

Collaboration. As with the responsibility theme in general aspects, collaboration with external bodies was recommended:

I think the NGBs could do a lot in terms of developmental athletes and providing coaching and technical expertise in third level institutions and assisting those who are coaching at third level institutions to upskill. That would give the NGB an in within the institution. (P13, p.27, lines 662-665)

More prominently, most felt that a gap exists in terms of relationships with other stakeholders, and there was an opportunity to better support dual career athletes. One participant suggested:

But I think there would obviously need to be quite a lot of dialogue and negotiation, so sitting down with the coach or the course director and looking at kind of charting their sporting pathway over the year or four years or whatever it is and then trying to

blend and match the course or the program to the needs of that individual. (P13, p.14, lines 338-342)

Similarly, another participant commented: “So if we could plan with the governing body and sit down then and link in with the academic side, you can put something in place that’s far more centred around the needs of some really elite athletes” (P6, p.12, lines 294-296).

Evaluation. A final point recommended for third-level institutes was to effectively evaluate any dual career support yearly. Having a formal mechanism for “assessing it, for seeing is it working and getting feedback from the athletes as well” (P13, p.30, lines 726-727), was deemed necessary. This same participant continued this sentiment by suggesting that to have an effective dual career programme you should be; “listening to the athletes and really asking the athletes what they want, what works for them, what doesn’t work for them. That’s a key part of that, and that’s what we need to put to the institute” (P13, p.31, lines 754-756).

Discussion

Study 4 was conducted five years after Study 1. While Study 1 focused on examining sport scholarship programmes and the types of support available to student-athletes through third-level institutes, Study 4 focused on exploring support providers' experiences and recommendations for dual career practice in Ireland. Several findings confirm aspects of the previous three Studies, but also shed light on several systemic factors that appear to influence dual career practice in third-level institutes in Ireland.

Results suggest that dual practice in third-level institutes in Ireland is still primarily informal, with some participants using the words “ad hoc”. This confirms Study 1 and previous research emphasising a “Laissez-Faire” approach to dual career support in Ireland (Aquilina & Henry, 2010; European Commission, 2012, 2016). However, there also appears to be certain evolving aspects and structures of dual practice. The evolving structures were in the form of conducting internal reviews of sport and academic policies and practice within institutes and an increase in several aspects such as drafting academic policies, central coordination of sports scholarship programmes, and having academic mentors in place for student-athletes. These changes suggest small, but positive developments behaviourally and systemically within third-level institutes in Ireland, illustrating a move towards some criteria of the minimum standards of dual career practice (European Commission, 2012, 2016; ECO-DC, Work Package 4, 2018; Storm et al., 2021).

There are a few possible reasons for these changes. First, according to a European Commission report (2017), awareness of the concept of dual career has risen in Member States since the publication of the Dual Career guidelines in 2012. The concept of dual career has gained more discourse and research attention in Europe and Ireland in recent years. Participants in Study 4 appeared more familiar in terms of dual career concepts and practice

between Studies 1 and 4, with several suggesting a “mind-set shift” nationwide. Second, there are many dual career related projects currently being undertaken at a national and European level, and to the researcher’s knowledge, several Irish contributors are involved in the research teams (e.g. EMPATIA project; STARTING 11, 2018 [testing phase]). Third, as highlighted in the literature review, a new National Sports Policy was published in 2018 which has referenced the connection to second and third-level student-athletes for the first time. A final consideration is the researchers own influence on the current dual career landscape in Ireland. The researcher has presented at three dual career related events in Ireland since 2018, which could also account for some increase in dual career discourse.

As suggested in the introduction to this Chapter, although dual career guidelines are available and were designed to act as inspiration to policy makers to guide practice, there are also challenges and barriers to implementing dual career structures (European Commission, 2017; Ryan et al., 2017). Adding to this research base from a provider’s perspective, participants in Study 4 expressed national and third-level barriers that they felt hindered their ability to develop dual career practice in their day to day work. A lack of leadership at national and individual institute level, lack of supporting dual career policy, and lack of role clarity were the main reoccurring barriers discussed.

When considering dual career practice, it is important to be culturally specific as countries have divergent structures, economies, and policies (Aquilina & Henry, 2010; Henry, 2013; Kuettel et al., 2018; Stambulova & Ryba, 2013, 2014; Vasileiadou, 2016). Table 6 provides the key recommendations from dual career providers in Study 4. There are a few points to note from these recommendations. First, many of these points relate and extend those found in Studies 1, 2, and 3, adding to reoccurring themes over the past five years. Second, many of these recommendations have also been identified in other countries and

research in terms of dual career practice, challenges to implementation, and recommendations to enhance (Aquilina & Henry, 2010; Condello et al., 2019; European Commission, 2012, 2016; Geraniosova & Ronkainen, 2014; Guidotti et al., 2015; Henriksen et al., 2020; McKenna & Dustan-Lewis, 2004; Morris et al., 2020; Ryan et al., 2017; Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019; Storm et al., 2021). Third, many of the recommendations identified are clear and actionable pieces, and most of the above recommendations are in line with those outlined by the European Commission (2012, 2016).

From a provider perspective, extending Study 3 results, a recommendation to provide training and upskilling to all people who work with student-athletes was also identified in Study 4. This recommendation may be of interest to employers who wish to enhance dual career knowledge and practice within their environments. As discussed in previous Chapters and in particular in Study 3, it is important for support providers to have “contextual awareness” (Brown et al., 2015; Debois et al., 2015; Knight et al., 2018; McKenna & Dustan-Lewis, 2004; Stambulova et al., 2015) as unskilled people may not provide suitable support (Jowett & Lavalley, 2007; Rees, 2007; Rees & Hardy, 2000; Vangelisti, 2009).

Previous research suggests that macro environments (such as third-level institutes) are essential in helping student-athletes cope with demands and attain dual career success (Pummell et al., 2008; Stambulova et al., 2009; Stambulova et al., 2015; Wylleman & Lavalley, 2004; Wylleman & Reints, 2010; Henriksen et al., 2020). Yet, they can also be complex (Condello et al., 2019; European Commission, 2016; MacNamara & Collins, 2010; Ryan et al., 2017). The European Commission (2017) recommended that each Member State have a “lead agency” formulate and implement dual career policies. In agreement with this, what appears apparent from Study 4 is that dual career leadership is required in order to implement the recommended changes in Table 6.

Strengths and Limitations

Researchers and practitioners are encouraged to acknowledge and understand the entire environment in which student-athletes are based (Guidotti et al., 2015; Henriksen et al., 2020; Stambulova et al., 2015). While Study 1 provided a valuable overview of the dual career landscape in Ireland, Study 4 adds to existing literature relating to challenges and barriers to dual career practice (European Commission, 2017; Ryan et al., 2017). The findings are also novel as to the researchers' knowledge there is no existing research exploring the barriers from an Irish context. This study recognised recommendations from the European Commission report (2017) endorsing future individual research in Member States in order to understand influencing factors of implementing dual career guidelines.

Successful dual career practice emphasises the need for mutual accommodation between all environments involved, for example, sport and education (Henriksen et al., 2010; Henriksen & Stambulova, 2017; ECO-DC, 2018; Henriksen et al., 2020; Storm et al., 2021). Study 4 focused on third-level institutes, however, did not consider the sporting environment perspective. Future research could consider challenges and barriers of dual career practice from a sport environment perspective.

Conclusion

Study 4 results identified several challenges and barriers for dual career practitioners in Ireland from a macro level perspective. Table 6 presents some actionable recommendations that may be of interest to policymakers at Government level, within the Higher Education sector, and within the sports sector (e.g. Sport Ireland) in Ireland. The next Chapter will discuss the theoretical and applied implications of the collective results across the four Study Chapters.

Chapter Eight

Final Discussion

Introduction

Dual career research in Europe has developed significantly (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019; Stambulova et al., 2020). Existing literature has recommended that researchers consider dual career from a whole environment perspective (Guidotti et al., 2015; Henriksen et al., 2020; Stambulova et al., 2015) and from a culturally specific perspective (Aquilina & Henry, 2010; Lupo et al., 2015; Ryan et al., 2017; Stambulova & Ryba, 2014; Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019). However, dual career research from within an Irish context is scant. As such, the researcher's primary aim of this thesis was to explore dual career practice and experiences of third-level student-athletes and stakeholders in Ireland from a micro, meso, and macro perspective. Four studies were designed to help achieve this.

Study 1 provided a comprehensive overview of sport scholarship programmes and the types of support available to student-athletes through third-level institutes in the Republic of Ireland from a macro perspective. Study 2 explored experiences of student-athletes combining sport and third-level education and their perceptions of support available from a micro perspective. A key theme of social support (meso perspective) from Studies 1 and 2 led to Study 3, which focused on exploring social support from a provider and receiver perspective. Finally, based on findings from Study 1 and previous research regarding challenges to implementing dual career guidelines and policies (European Commission, 2017; Ryan et al., 2017), Study 4 explored support providers experiences of and recommendations for dual career practice in Ireland. This thesis makes a significant and original contribution to dual career research from an Irish perspective. Several theoretical and applied implications emerged from these four studies. This final chapter will discuss these implications, strengths and limitations of the thesis and conclude with recommendations for future research.

Theoretical Implications

Dual Career from a Macro Perspective

Studies 1 and 4 explored dual career from a macro perspective. The dual career system in Ireland has been referred to as Laissez-Faire (Aquilina & Henry, 2010; European Commission, 2012, 2016). However, to the researcher's knowledge, no comprehensive internal report regarding dual career practices in individual third-level institutes in Ireland has been undertaken. Agreeing with previous research (Aquilina & Henry, 2010; European Commission, 2012), a key finding of Study 1 revealed that dual career practice in third-level institutes is primarily informal and does not meet many of the "Minimum Quality Requirements for Dual Career Services" (European Commission, 2016). In particular, the following three elements of the minimum quality requirements were noted as lacking; 1) a lack of dual career leadership at national and individual institute level; 2) a lack of communication between sport and education; 3) a lack of formal academic flexibility policies. From a taxonomy perspective, third-level dual career practice in the Republic of Ireland can be most associated with Sport Friendly Institutes (Morris et al., 2020; Storm et al., 2021) as many formal and informal supports are reported (Table 1 in Chapter 4).

Although positive informal practices were noted through Studies 1, 2 and 4 (e.g. mentoring, informal academic flexibility), formal dual career policies were lacking in most instances. A lack of consistent and formal practice may not adequately support dual career athletes causing increased demands and stress, can lead to dropout from sport and education, and can impact retirement paths (Aquilina, 2013; Capranica et al., 2015; Cosh & Tully, 2014; European Commission, 2012; Kuettel et al., 2018; Stambulova et al., 2015). Adding to this literature, the impact of a Laissez-Faire dual career approach was noted throughout Studies 2 and 3 from a student-athlete perspective. For example, from a student-athlete perspective,

Study 2 data revealed that student-athletes found the lack of communication between sport and education an additional source of stress, extending previous research (Adams et al., 2015; Brown et al., 2015; Caput-Jogunica, 2012; Puskas & Perenyi, 2015; McKenna & Dustan-Lewis, 2004; Rees, 2007).

Particular challenges and barriers to implementing dual career structures exist (European Commission, 2017; Ryan et al., 2017). Each country has specific political and cultural aspects that influence the interest, direction, and policy provision (Aquilina & Henry, 2010). Adding to this research base, participants in Study 4 expressed national and institute level barriers that they felt hindered their ability to develop dual career practice in day to day work. The main reoccurring barriers related to a lack of dual career leadership, lack of supporting dual career policy, lack of role clarity, and a lack of dedicated dual career personnel. These barriers identified are all key elements of previous recommendations from the “European Union Guidelines for Dual Career Practice” (European Commission, 2012), the “Minimum Quality Requirements for Dual Career Services” (European Commission, 2016), and the “Ecology of Dual Careers” project (ECO-DC, 2018).

Dual Career from a Student-Athlete Perspective

Study 2 provided an insight into student-athletes experiences of combining sport and education, adding to limited existing research from an Irish perspective (Gomez et al., 2018; Lane et al., 2015; Murphy et al., 2016). Three primary theoretical implications were noted in this study.

First, in line with The Holistic Athletic Career Model (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004; Wylleman et al., 2013; Wylleman & Rosier, 2016), Study 2 participants experienced transitional changes. Two particular changes identified were an increase in responsibility and

demands experienced and also a change in relationships. Regarding relationships, social identities were influenced as there was a narrowing of the types of friendships experienced. Many participants found it difficult to maintain existing relationships due to the time demands of being a student-athlete while also noticing a similar constraint on making new friendships in third-level. Although participants in Study 2 felt that being a student-athlete provided a positive distraction, research suggests that social identities are also important to consider (Jetten et al., 2009; O'Halloran & Haslam, 2020). For example, belonging to multiple social groups is a protective factor during transition and retirement from sport (Jetten et al., 2009). In contrast, participants in Study 2 expressed that many of their friendships were associated with their sport, highlighting a potential negative impact on memberships of multiple social groups.

Second, previous research regarding student-athlete third-level transition experiences has reported different findings. Some reported a higher demand and need for support in the first year of third-level (Gayles, 2009; Giacobbi et al., 2004; Miller & Kerr, 2002), while others reported a gradual increase in demands from first to final year (Debois et al., 2015; Fuchs et al., 2016; MacNamara & Collins 2010; Ryba et al., 2014; Stambulova et al., 2015). In line with the later research findings, Study 2 participants reported a gradual increase in demands (sport and academic) between first and final year, illustrating the dual career transition as a process (Schlossberg, 1981; Stambulova, 2003; Wylleman & Lavalley, 2004). This is of particular importance as simultaneous demands can add pressure and stress for student-athletes, which can lead to burnout (Adams et al., 2015; Burden et al., 2004; Condello et al., 2019; Pummell et al., 2008; Stambulova, 2003; Stambulova et al., 2015). Adding to the previous point and in line with transition models (Danish et al., 1992; Schlossberg, 1981; Stambulova, 2003; Wylleman & Lavalley, 2004), timing and context were

influential to student-athlete experiences. For example, the timing of exams and sporting season (competitive season with a high volume of travel) influenced perceptions of demands.

Third, supporting the Athletic Career Transition Model (Stambulova, 2003), participants in Study 2 required a balance between dual career demands and resources available. Two key demands found through Study 2 were tiredness and conflict regarding support providers. Tiredness has also been found in previous literature (Brown et al., 2015; Burnett et al., 2010; Condello et al., 2019). In addition, previous literature regarding facilitators of successful dual career environments recommends reducing travel requirements for student-athletes by having a training environment near the living and study environment (Christensen & Sorensen, 2009; Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; Morris et al., 2020). In contrast, many of the participants in Study 2 were required to travel for training each week, which in some cases was over two hours in each direction, contributing significantly to time demands and reduced recovery time.

Regarding the conflict theme, understanding emerged as significant across all four studies, particularly Studies 2 and 3. The majority of participants felt that some support providers (education and sport) did not understand dual career commitments, contributing to demands. In particular, team athletes reported representing more than one team. This caused conflict due to mixed messages from various stakeholders (linking to lack of communication in the previous section). Previous research has reported similar stakeholder conflict (Adams et al., 2015; Burden et al., 2004; Christensen & Sorensen, 2009; Condello et al., 2019). A lack of empathy from providers (stakeholders) has been found to contribute to student-athlete burnout (Adams et al., 2015; Caput-Jogunica, 2012; Rees, 2007).

Regarding resources, the type and availability of support are important. Participants in Study 2 revealed that financial support, academic flexibility, mentoring and a supportive

environment were among the most valuable types of support within third-level institutes to help combine education and sport. This is in line with previous dual career research (Aquilina, 2013; Brown et al., 2015; Burnett et al., 2010; Condello et al., 2019; Geranosova & Ronkainen, 2015; Papanikolaou et al., 2003). However, an important finding across Studies 1 and 2 suggests that two of the most beneficial and requested supports (academic flexibility and mentoring) were the least formal and least available types of support within the third-level institutes (see Study 1, Table 1). This aspect is important to acknowledge as research suggests that a dual career is rarely possible without some degree of flexibility (Aquilina, 2013; Brown et al., 2015; Burnett et al., 2010; Condello et al., 2019; Wylleman & Reints, 2010) and many third-level institutes in the Republic of Ireland may not have consistent dual career support in place.

The Influence of Social Support

A Receiver Perspective. Three primary social support reflections emerged from Study 3 that complement previous literature. First, a significant finding from Studies 1 and 2 was the emergence of social support as a significant resource. Study 3 explored the concept in more depth from a support provider and receiver perspective. Social support was deemed an important resource for dual career athletes, which adds to existing literature (Brown et al., 2015; Gabana et al., 2017; Knight et al., 2018; McKenna & Dustan-Lewis, 2004; Pummell et al., 2008; Rhind et al., 2011; Stambulova et al., 2009). Studies 2 and 3 found that perceived support played an important role in dual career support. Providing support for the Main Effects Model (Cohen & Willis, 1985), Study 3 found that when support providers used regular monitoring and enquiring (i.e. checking in), this helped facilitate a sense of support. In particular, knowing that someone was there if and when needed provided a sense of

security for participants. This finding supports previous research proposing that higher perceived social support can lead to a greater feeling of control, enabling a sense of coping in stressful situations (Bianco & Eklund, 2001; Freeman et al., 2009; Freeman & Rees, 2009; Rhind et al., 2011; Uchino, 2009).

Second, close and trusting relationships helped to facilitate social support interactions. In line with previous literature (Adams et al., 2015; Bianco & Eklund, 2001; Brown et al., 2015; Giacobbi et al., 2004; Puskas & Perenyi, 2015; Rees, 2007), receivers felt more comfortable approaching someone they knew and were comfortable with. This point emphasises the potential importance to take time to actively develop relationships.

However, as a third and final reflection, the provider's role was found to impact social support to a certain extent, particularly for team sport athletes. For example, many team sport athletes reported that a coach's role influenced what they shared with the coach due to perceived potential implications of being chosen to play. These findings are in line with previous research (Hassell et al., 2010; Pensgaard & Roberts, 2003). This is important to consider in this instance as the team sport athletes in Study 3 all expressed an absence of a neutral sports-related person to confide in within their sport setting, highlighting a potential gap in social support provision.

Provider Perspective. Across Studies 1 and 3, all support providers reported an interest and understanding regarding dual career support. However, a gap in dual career training for support providers was identified in Studies 3 and 4. Many participants reported they did not feel fully equipped to deal with specific dual career requirements and were also unsure of what their role was in supporting student-athletes. As identified in the "Dual Career from a Macro Perspective" section, a lack of role clarity and leadership regarding dual career may be an influential factor. These findings are of particular importance from a meso

perspective as unskilled support providers may provide unsuitable support (Brown et al., 2015; Freeman et al., 2014; Jowett & Lavalley, 2007; Moll et al., 2017; Rees, 2007) and research has proposed the importance of support providers having “contextual awareness” (Brown et al., 2015; Knight et al., 2018; Debois et al., 2015; Stambulova et al., 2015).

Practical Implications

Table 6 in Study 4 provides an overview of several actionable recommendations to enhance dual career practice in the Republic of Ireland from a national and individual third-level perspective. Many of these recommendations can also be associated with previous dual career research, in particular, the “European Union Guidelines for Dual Career Practice” (European Commission, 2012), the “Minimum Quality Requirements for Dual Career Services” (European Commission, 2016). Based on the findings, there is great potential to encourage national-level organisations, third-level institutes, and support providers to embrace several of the recommendations which will now be discussed.

National Level

Study 4 results highlight that many dual career practice barriers are influenced by a lack of leadership and clarity in dual career across sport and education sectors. Assigning a designated organisation to lead, regulate, and communicate dual career standards at a national level may benefit formal practice at an individual institute level. This can be associated with adopting level 2 (*State as Sponsor/Facilitator*) or level 3 (*National Sporting Federations/Institutes Act as Intermediaries*) of Aquilina and Henry’s (2010) typology of dual career systems.

Across all four studies, communication between support providers was a prominent theme. The benefit of having effective communication and the consequences of not having it were evident, particularly in Studies 2 and 3. However, providers in Study 3 were unsure how to develop better stakeholder communication or who's a responsibility to develop it, suggesting a gap in responsibility between sport and education stakeholders. It may benefit each sector (sport and education) to assign a dedicated dual career liaison. The benefit of support provider relationships and congruent messages for student-athletes has been illustrated in previous research (Knight et al., 2018). In line with European Commission recommendations (2012, 2016), increasing discourse and relationships between sport and education providers can enhance dual career support.

Third-Level Institutes

Studies 1, 3, and 4 suggested that many support providers, particularly within sport scholarship programmes, have a broad role that may not explicitly include dual career support. On a practical level, this impacts time, duties, and focus. Assigning a designated dual career support team or lead person could help develop dual career support, coordination, and practice consistency. This is also in line with previous dual career recommendations (European Commission, 2016; Morris et al., 2020).

Regarding resources, according to Cartigny et al. (2019), there are different types of student-athletes with different levels of support required. As such, there may be a difference between "dual career athletes" and "sport scholarship athletes" needs. Although several sport scholarship programmes (as outlined in Study 1) have a tiered approach to supporting student-athletes depending on their athletic level, some gaps in support were identified through Studies 2 and 3. For example, Studies 1 and 2 found that the two of the most valuable

support for student-athletes (academic flexibility and mentoring) was the least available. In Studies 2 and 3, sport scholarship requirements to play can add to student-athletes demands. It may benefit third-level institute providers to consider and clarify the vision and philosophy regarding the type of support available through support programmes. In addition, conducting yearly programme evaluations can help student-athlete support programmes gain a consistent insight into student-athletes needs. This could enhance the support available within third-level programmes and develop how support can be provided more effectively.

Several dual career demands were identified through Studies 2 and 3 (e.g. timing, tiredness, conflict with support providers), which is consistent with existing transition models and research (Aquilina, 2009; Brown et al., 2015; Danish et al., 1992; Debois et al., 2015; Schlossberg, 1981; Stambulova, 2003; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). Studies 2 and 3 also highlighted that some student-athletes were not fully aware of all the support available to them and may not use certain support available (e.g. “work away” themselves). Educating student-athletes regarding transitions, what support is available, and engaging effectively with support providers may help student-athletes to access and use support proactively. Supporting previous recommendations, providing personal life skills education (Condello et al., 2019; De Brant, 2017; GEES, 2016; MacNamara & Collins, 2010) through third-level institutes or sporting organisations could help student-athletes develop their own skills and create proactive awareness and understanding of managing a dual career effectively.

Support Providers

Many participants across Studies 3 and 4 (particularly sport providers) felt they lacked the necessary skills or training to provide certain dual career support elements. Specific training for dual career providers could increase contextual awareness of student-athlete

needs, understand their role in providing dual career support, and help increase competencies to provide the necessary support. Sport organisations and third-level education providers may benefit from considering training and upskilling support for all support providers working with student-athletes. As noted in Chapter 6, an example of this being enacted in other countries can be noted through the Talented Athlete Scholarship Scheme in the UK (TASS), where they have developed several training programmes for different dual career support providers such as coaches, sport scholarship coordinators, and parents (e.g. Introduction to Lifestyle Support; Understanding Lifestyle Support; TALS - Talented Athlete Lifestyle Support; TASTE - Talented Athlete Support in Transitions and Education).

Finally, Studies 2 and 3 highlighted the importance of perceived support for student-athletes. In many instances, this was enacted by “checking in” regularly with student-athletes. This finding may be of interest to support providers as it highlights the benefit of simple day to day interactions that may be taken for granted, proposing the advantage of developing “soft skills” and a focus on “how” support is provided.

Strengths in the Research

Previous dual career research has identified gaps in the research and proposed recommendations for future research. In particular, researchers have advocated that more cultural specific research be conducted (Brown et al., 2015; Caput-Jugunica et al., 2012; Lupo et al., 2015; Stambulova & Ryba, 2013, 2014; Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019; Stambulova et al., 2020) and that researchers consider dual career from micro, meso, and macro perspective to fully understand each context and make appropriate resources available (Condello et al., 2019; Guidotti et al., 2015; Henriksen et al., 2020; Li & Sum, 2017; Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019; Stambulova et al., 2020). Due to the lack of research on dual

career practice in Ireland, little is known regarding the experiences and practice of dual career in Ireland and this thesis makes a significant contribution to dual career literature by addressing this gap. The results contribute to and increase the research knowledge of dual career in third-level institutes by providing an understanding of dual career support and practice across all third-level institutes in the Republic of Ireland, demonstrating divergent practices. In addition, the literature adds political and structural contexts to these findings. The conclusions highlight a lack of formal engagement with European recommendations for dual career practice but also uncovered barriers and challenges that influence developing these practices. This research recognised recommendations from the European Commission report (2017) endorsing future individual research in Member States in to understand influencing factors of implementing dual career guidelines. As such, the findings identify clear, meaningful, and actionable recommendations to enhance and formalise dual career practice in the Republic of Ireland that may be of interest to National Governing Bodies and individual third-level institutes throughout the Island of Ireland. In addition, these findings may inspire and assist other European countries to consider potential barriers regarding applying European dual career recommendations and conduct more applied research.

The current thesis captured the experiences of student-athletes and stakeholders. This adds depth to the Athletic Career Transition Model (Stambulova, 2003) and its application within the third-level dual career phase by considering both perspectives regarding potential demands and resources. For example, conflict between various stakeholders was highlighted by student-athletes as a significant demand (e.g. receiving varying or contrasting messages and information), yet social support was also identified as a significant resource. These aspects have also been found in previous literature regarding student-athlete experiences (Brown et al., 2015; Knight et al., 2018). By also considering the stakeholder perspective, the

results highlighted clear support gaps. These were contributed to by gaps in leadership, role clarity and responsibility, and training regarding dual career support providers. Collectively, these results provide a more in depth understanding of the divergent experiences of student-athletes and stakeholders and can enable researchers and practitioners to consider their role and responsibility to dual career practice.

Limitations in the Research

This current study used the Holistic Athletic Career Transition Model (Wylleman et al., 2013; Wylleman & Rosier, 2016) and the Athletic Career Transition Model (Stambulova, 2003) as theoretical frameworks. However, other models can also be considered when exploring dual career practice and environments such as the Dual Career Development Environment Model and the Dual Career Environment Success Factor Model (ECO-DC, 2018). Drawing from these models, for example, could highlight further specific factors contributing to the internal and external processes of successful dual career practice.

Study 1 employed a web-based study to gather information regarding the 43 third-level institutes in the Republic of Ireland. Although this method was deemed most appropriate to gather such information (Kim & Kuljis, 2010), one potential difficulty with using this method is the accuracy of the information. Accuracy in this instance relates to how frequently the information on each website is updated and much information is clearly provided. As noted in Chapter 3 and 4, to increase the reliability and researchers understanding of the context of the information gathered, further methods to triangulate and advance the data during this phase was included (e.g. semi-structured interviews). Although from a research perspective I am confident I have captured the primary context of the dual

career landscape within Studies 1 and 4, I acknowledge other informal practices could exist that were not captured in the data.

Study 2 used focus groups to generate data. From a research design perspective, I believe that this was the most suitable method of data collection to achieve the aims of the study. However, the choice of sampling employed is a potential limitation. For each of the five focus groups, some participants knew each other while others did not. Although I attempted to create a welcoming environment (as outlined in Study 2), a potential unequal dynamic in focus groups could have influenced participants contributions. Future research could consider using “friendship groups”, where all participants are familiar with each other (e.g. same sport, same year group).

Study 3 relates to the timing of interviews. Perceptions of support and circumstances can be dependant on timing and context. Interviews with student-athletes took place between April and June, before and after the exam period for the student-athletes. This data collection period also represented different points in the competitive sporting calendar. Future research could consider a longitudinal approach with varying points of interview throughout a year. This could help to enhance the data generated and identify changes in perceptions and experiences for different sport and year groups.

Recommendations for Future Research

- 1) Successful dual career practice emphasises the need for mutual accommodation between all environments involved, for example, sport and education (Henriksen et al., 2010; Henriksen & Stambulova, 2017; ECO-DC, 2018; Henriksen et al., 2020; Storm et al., 2021). This thesis primarily focused on the education sector of dual career. There is an opportunity to extend this research in Ireland and include the sport

sector. For example, similar to Studies 1 and 4, conducting a comprehensive overview of dual career support programmes available through National Governing Bodies (e.g. lifestyle management programmes) and exploring potential challenges or barriers within the sporting environment.

- 2) There is an opportunity to use the Dual Career Development Environment Model or the Dual Career Environment Success Factors Model (ECO-DC, 2018) to conduct case studies in specific third-level environments across Ireland to explore good examples of environments.
- 3) Given the new National Sports Policy (2018-2027) and the Sport Ireland High-Performance Strategy (2021-2032), which were launched towards the end of this PhD and referenced in the Literature Review Chapter, there is an opportunity to conduct a similar study and explore dual career developments in third-level institutes in Ireland across several years.
- 4) Participants in Study 2 described a potential narrowing of social identity when transitioning to third-level education. Similar to personal identity, the narrowing of social identity can lead to difficulty adjusting to retirement from sport for some athletes (Jetten et al., 2009; O'Halloran & Haslem, 2020). This topic is under-represented in dual career research, and there is an opportunity to explore the social identity construct of third-level student-athletes.
- 5) There is an opportunity to consider the academic staff perspective of understanding and managing dual career athletes and academic flexibility within third-level institutes. As academic staff are at the "front line" regarding the provision of academic flexibility, understanding their perceptions and experience could provide a valuable contribution to research and practice.

- 6) In addition to point three, support provider understanding and contextual awareness regarding dual career are crucial for providing adequate support (Brown et al., 2015; Knight et al., 2018; McKenna & Dustan-Lewis, 2004; Moll et al., 2017). McKenna and Dustan-Lewis (2004) conducted a novel action-based intervention study regarding academic staff in third-level institutes. They reported success in providing educational programmes for academic staff. There is an opportunity to conduct this type of research within Ireland's sport and or education sectors.

Conclusion

A quote that resonates with me as a researcher in this area is that dual career is a “complicated mosaic of various internal and external factors interplaying in student-athletes development” (Henriksen et al., 2020, p. 3). From the results of all four Studies, I agree that dual career practice is complex and requires consideration from micro, meso, and macro perspectives (Guidotti et al., 2015; Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019; Stambulova et al., 2020). Although positive support is being provided to student-athletes in third-level institutes in the Republic of Ireland, there are gaps in support and practice that are not meeting the needs of dual career athletes. There is an opportunity to develop and progress dual career support based in particular on the recommendations identified in Study 4. National Governing Bodies, third-level institutes, and support providers may find the recommendations contained in Table 6 in Study 4 helpful.

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Appendix A
Study 1 Interview Schedule

1. Can you describe your role?
2. How did you become involved in the programme?
3. Can you provide an overview of the scholarship programme within the institute?
 - a. How long has this programme been running?
 - b. What type of support is available?
 - c. How the programme works (day to day practice)?
 - d. Is this programme modelled on any other programme?
4. From your experience, what do you feel is the most important support in place for student-athletes in your institute?
 - a. Why do you feel this is an important support?
5. From your experience and knowledge of other institutes and sport scholarship programmes throughout Ireland, how would you describe the current sport scholarship system in Ireland?
6. How would you describe the coordination and communication between the sport scholarship programme, student-athletes, and the academic staff?
7. How would you describe the coordination and communication between the sport scholarship programme, student-athletes, and external sporting bodies?
8. I have read that the Irish Institute of Sport offers support to third-level institutes regarding high-level student-athletes. Can you tell me about this link between your institute and IIS?
9. How successful do you feel the programme is in helping student-athletes manage their sporting and academic demands?

- a. What challenges do you see for student-athletes trying to manage the two?
10. Is there anything else you would like to add regarding student-athlete support in your institute that we have not covered?

Appendix B

Study 2 Focus Group Interview Schedule

Introduction and Experience

1. Can you give me a brief history of your sporting background to date?
2. What made you decide to combine third-level education with pursuing sport?
3. What has been your experience of combining third level education and sport?
4. On a day-to-day basis how do you deal with a dual focus?
 - a. Do you have any strategies /coping mechanisms?

Support through Institute

5. Can you describe what is included in your sport scholarship package?
6. What does having a sport scholarship mean to you?
7. What do you feel are the benefits of a scholarship?
8. How do you feel about the types of support that are available through the scholarship programme?

Probe: Helpful, not helpful, is it meeting your needs as a student-athlete

9. How do you feel about the coordination of the scholarship programme?

Probe: Access to support, availability of support

10. What is the most useful/important support for you as a student-athlete?

General Support/Social Support

11. What does the term “support” mean to you? How would you describe it?

Probe: What words come to mind, what is involved, who is involved

12. What does the term “social support” mean to you? How would you describe it?

Probe: What words come to mind, what is involved, who is involved, is it different from what you described in support above

Closing

13. Thank you for your time and thoughts. To finish up, is there anything you would like to add in terms of your experiences and thoughts in relation to sport scholarships and third-level education?

Appendix C

Study 3 Support Provider Interview Schedule

1. How long have you been working with this athlete?
2. What is your role in working with the athlete?
3. What type/form of support do you intend to provide the athlete over the next 9 months?

Probe: Can you provide examples?

4. What are your intentions behind this support provided within this time?

Probe: How do you feel the athlete benefit from this? Can you explain or provide examples?

5. How is/will the intended support be operationalised and implemented?

Probe: How is it delivered; are there policies in place or set structures; can you provide examples of how this works?

6. Is there anything you feel can hinder the intended support?

Probe: Any constraining factors?

7. How do you anticipate overcoming these barriers?

8. Are there any particular situations/stressors that you feel are relevant to this athlete that may appear throughout the year?

Probe: Any particular additional stressors/situations that you feel may crop up with this particular athlete over the coming year that may need special attention?

9. How/would this change the support you intend to provide?

Probe: Would you need to increase, decrease or change the type of support?

10. Do you feel there are any gaps between what you would like to provide this athlete and what you can provide?

Probe: Why does this gap exist?

Probe: What would need to be done to close this gap?

11. Is there anything you would like to add in relation to supporting the athlete that we have not covered?

Appendix D

Study 3 Student-Athlete Interview Schedule

1. Can you tell me about your sport and course you are studying?
2. How long have you been on a scholarship? How long have you been working with “Nominated HEI Support Provider”?
3. How long have you been working with “Nominated Sport Support Provider”?
4. Can you tell me what role you feel they play in supporting you?
 - a. And their role in supporting your dual career?
5. What type of support do you feel they could offer you?
6. Over the last 9 months, what support did you receive from them?

Probe: Can you provide examples of this?
7. Were there any particular stressors/situations that you felt you needed additional/specific support?
8. How did this change or add to the support received?
9. Do you feel the support received matched your needs? Do you feel the support provided/received over the past academic year was appropriate for your needs/Are you satisfied with the support received?

Probe: Did it benefit you as a dual career athlete, can you give me examples of specific situations where you feel the support received was sufficient and specific to your needs?
10. Are there any gaps between support you feel you needed and what was actually provided?
11. How was the support negotiated and utilised over the past 9 months?

Probe: Can you provide examples/explain; did you need to ask for it, was it spoken about; did you just feel it was present?

Anything that hindered the support and if so how was that negotiated?

12. What do you feel was/is the most beneficial?

Probe: Examples and why

13. Do you think your dual career is adequately considered here?

Probe: Can you clarify and explain answer?

14. Would you have any opinions on improvements?

15. Is there anything you would like to add?

Appendix E

Study 4 Interview schedule

Introduction for participants

As we have discussed previously, I am conducting a PhD in the area of Dual Career Support in Higher Education. This particular section of my study is the final stage of data collection. It is designed to explore recommendations for change. The interview will be in two sections – firstly, I will ask about your experiences as a support provider, your reflections on current provision and structures in third level institutions in Ireland and how dual career support might move forward. In the second section, I will share with you some of my initial findings to get your thoughts on those, as well as on some international recommendations on dual career support and how they might apply to Ireland.

Consent process

- Have you read the information sheet and consent form that was send to you prior to this interview?
- Do you have any questions before we begin?
- Do you consent to taking part in this study?

Schedule

1. Please tell me about your role and experience in dual career support?
2. Can you give me an overview of how dual career support is organised within your institute?
3. Can you tell me what you feel is working well within dual career support within your own organisation?

- a. What are the strengths of the system?
 - b. Why do you feel these are strengths/how do they facilitate dual career support?
4. What challenges are you experiencing as a support provider within your own organisation?
- a. How do you feel this is impacting on dual career support?
5. What policies, if any, are in place that outline or support the system you have described?
- a. How is the system supported by policy?
 - b. How did this current system come about?
6. How do you think what you've told me about your experiences in your organisation compare to the situation more generally in Ireland?
- a. Can you share any reflections on the strengths or challenges in dual career support nationwide?

I would like to move on now to explore with you some of the findings from my research and international recommendations about dual career support and get your views on those.

7. Firstly, one of the main findings I have identified from student-athletes is the feeling of inconsistency between internal providers. (Vignette)

This is something that I have been reflecting on within my own role as a lecturer and support provider and I am curious about your views and those of others who I am interviewing.

- a. What are your thoughts on this?
- b. Have you got any examples of this working well or not so well from your experience?

8. A broader aspect that has been emphasized as a problem area at times is an uncoordinated approach between the various support providers internally and externally (e.g. coach's, HEI's etc). (Vignette)
 - a. What are your thoughts on this?
 - b. Whose responsibility is it to facilitate communication between various support providers?
9. From our discussion so far, if you could make one recommendation to improve dual career support in your institution what would it be?
 - a. What difference do you think that would make to dual career support?
 - b. What would that change look like in practice/?
 - c. How might that change come about? What would need to happen?
 - d. Whose responsibility would it be to make this change?
 - e. What are the barriers to this happening? Are there any opportunities that would help to bring it about?
 - f. Are there any other recommendations you would make to improve dual career support?
10. There are European guidelines/recommendations for dual career support which suggests for countries like Ireland which have no legislation in place to come to a "general agreement" between support providers and define a common statute of Dual Career support. What are your thoughts on this?
 - a. What are the challenges and opportunities you see with this?
 - b. What are your thoughts on how this can be achieved?
11. What have I missed from our discussion?