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THE UNIVERSITY'S ROLE IN THE DUAL CAREER OF STUDENT-ATHLETES WITH DISABILITIES: THE PRELIMINARY DATA OF THE "PARA-LIMITS" PROJECT

IL RUOLO DELL'UNIVERSITÀ NELLA DOPPIA CARRIERA DEGLI STUDENTI-ATLETI CON DISABILITÀ: I DATI PRELIMINARI DEL PROGETTO "PARA-LIMITS"

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Abstract
The inclusion of people with disabilities is also achieved through the guarantee, for talented and high level athletes, of the right to be able to combine a sport career with quality tertiary education without unreasonable efforts.
For the Council of Europe, the protection of student-athletes with disabilities represents one of the main challenges in the context of interventions in favor of dual career, but there is a lack of studies and research on this specific population.
Based on these premises, this work intends to open an empirically based reflection on the role of the university in the dual career path of student-athletes with disabilities starting from their perception of barriers that hinder the optimal balance between university study and sport and their suggestions about the possible solutions.
Data from a sample of 62 student-athletes with disabilities involved in the European project "Para-limits" will be presented, analyzed and discussed taking into account the research conducted on student-athletes without disabilities.
The results that emerged confirm that the alliance between different stakeholders who at different levels are responsible for the success of dual career paths is essential to facilitate coexistence between sport and university studies.

L'inclusione delle persone con disabilità si realizza anche attraverso la garanzia, per gli atleti di talento, del diritto di poter combinare la carriera sportiva con l'educazione terziaria di qualità senza sforzi irragionevoli.
Poiché le doppie carriere si estendono per un periodo di circa 15-20 anni durante il quale gli atleti si trovano a fronteggiare sfide e transizioni evolutive che riguardano molteplici dimensioni esistenziali

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Per la Consiglio d'Europa, la salvaguardia degli studenti-atleti con disabilità rappresenta una delle principali sfide nell'ambito degli interventi a favore della doppia carriera, ma mancano studi e ricerche su questa specifica popolazione.
Sulla base di queste premesse, il presente lavoro intende aprire un riflessione empiricamente fondata sul ruolo dell'università nella doppia carriera degli studenti-atleti con disabilità a partire dalla loro percezione delle barriere che ostacolano l'equilibrio ottimale tra lo studio universitario e lo sport, e dai loro suggerimenti sulle possibili soluzioni.
A tal fine, verranno presentati, analizzati e discussi alla luce delle ricerche condotte sugli atleti-studenti senza disabilità, i dati di un campione di 62 studenti-atleti con disabilità coinvolti nel progetto europeo "Para-limits". I risultati emersi confermano che per facilitare la coesistenza tra lo sport e lo studio universitario è necessaria l'alleanza tra diversi stakeholders che a diversi livelli sono responsabili del successo dei percorsi di doppia carriera.

Keywords:
Dual Career; Disability; Higher Education; Student-Athletes
Dual Career; Disabilità; Università; Studenti-Atleti

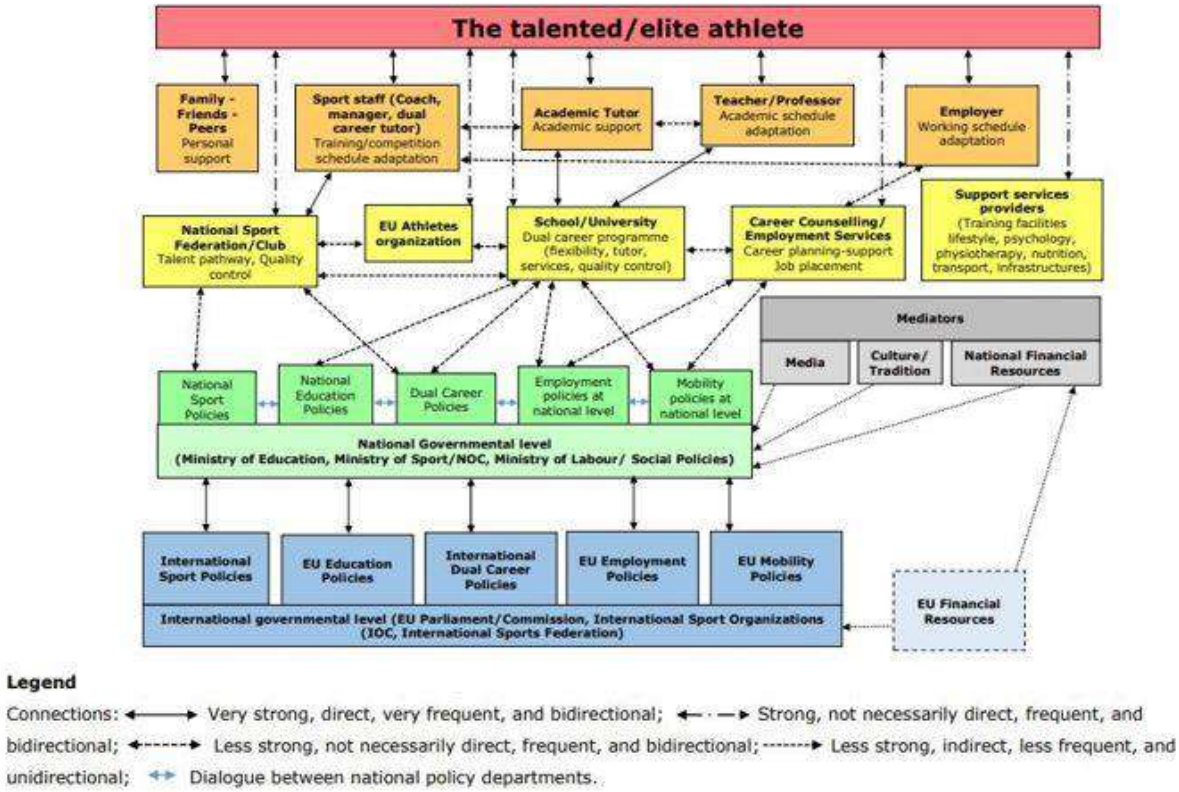
1-Introdution

Athletes who aspire to compete at high levels in sports face the complex challenge of combining sporting activity with study, a challenge which, if not adequately supported, can mistakenly lead to the discontinuation of sporting practice or the educational path. In this regard, it is estimated that about one-third of children/adolscents between the ages of 10 and 17 leave sports every year as they consider it an obstacle to studying and achieving training and career goals (EU, 2012).
To urge governments to take the necessary measures for accommodating the specific needs of athletes, in 2012 the European community enacted the guidelines on dual career, a concept that refers broadly to the possibility of "initiate, develop and finalise an elite sporting career as part of a lifelong career, in combination with the pursuit of education and/or work as well as other domains which are of importance at different stages of life, such as taking up a role in society, ensuring a satisfactory income, developing an identity and a partner relationship" (EU, 2012, p. 6).
In recent years, the issue of dual careers has gained more and more space both at the institutional level (EC, 2007; 2011; EU, 2012; IOC, 2005) and in scientific research (Guidotti et al., 2015; Li & Wai Sum, 2017; Rodrigues da Costa et al., 2021; Stambulova & Wylleman, 2018). It is undoubtedly an issue that has significant cultural implications: putting athletes in a position to be able to combine, without unreasonable efforts, a sport career with study, means first of all recognizing that sport does not it is antithetical to education/training courses, but on the contrary, it represents an integral and enriching part of it, as a fertile ground for the development of soft skills that can also be useful in contexts other than pure sports. From this point of view, the challenge of the dual career, in addition to being strategic for the pursuit of fundamental objectives of European action in the field of youth, sport, and education (contrasting the discontinuation of studies and sports practice, greater employment, etc.), fits fully into the wider context of lifelong, formal, non-formal and informal learning, whose recognition was solicited by the European Council (2012) and of which sport is undoubtedly a key player (Battiston, 2019).
In short, there is much more at stake than the need to guarantee athletes the possibility of dedicating themselves to sports without neglecting the other fundamental dimensions of their life project, there is the possibility of reconciling two systems, sport and education, which at least in Europe are still strongly disconnected, giving breath to the classic idea of an authentic paideia (Migliorati et al., 2016; 2017).
As dual careers span around 15-20 years during which athletes face challenges and developmental transitions affecting multiple existential dimensions (Wyllemann, 2004; 2010), the responsibility of

accompanying athletes cannot reside in a single person, institution, or specific context but necessarily calls into question the multiple actors who at different levels are responsible for the success of dual career paths (Figure 1). Only an adequate and extensive support network based on alliances between all the actors involved can support the athlete in the insidious dual career path, helping him to manage the difficulties, challenges, and critical moments that this path inevitably entails (Capranica, 2016).
Within this framework, even university institutions are called upon to make their own contribution in order to guarantee student-athletes the right to quality education that allows them to reconcile a sports career with a higher education path. In this regard, various measures have been identified to facilitate dual career paths, including personalized educational programs based on specific commitments and needs, the implementation of distance learning and the introduction of additional exam sessions, economic facilitations, tutoring services and sports facilities (Abelkalns et al., 2021).
However, the dual career-university education combination seems to be the one in which significant criticalities still emerge: in a European framework in which there are considerable differences compared to the implemented measures, in most Member States, opportunities for pursuing an academic education and a sports career are inadequate or not planned (EU, 2012).
As far as the Italian context is concerned, among the noteworthy initiatives, the signing of a memorandum of understanding which has among its various objectives the support and facilitation of dual careers[5], and the creation of the inter-university network UNISPORT, born with the general goal to enhance the phenomenon of sport within university which also include actions in support of dual careers among its aims.
However, in a context characterized by a "Laisser-Faire/ No Formal Structures" policy approach, any measures in favor of dual careers still seem to depend more on the initiatives taken by individual university institutions based on their decision-making autonomy than on a formalized organizational structure based on cooperation and coordination between the various stakeholders (Aquilina & Henry, 2010). It is therefore not surprising that research conducted on a sample of 100 Italian universities shows that only 22 declare that they have adopted programs in favor of dual careers (Bastianon & Greco, 2018).

Figure 1 - Relationships between European dual career stakeholders (Guidotti, Capranica, 2016)

[5] The agrement was signed on 12 December 2016 between the Ministry of Education and Research (MIUR), the Rectors' Conference of Italian Universities (CRUI), the Italian National Olympic Committee (CONI), the Italian Paralympic Committee (CIP), The Italian University Sports Center (CUSI) and the National Association of Bodies for the Right to University Study (ANDISU).



In this context still full of critical issues, little attention has been paid to athletes-students with disabilities, even though to the Council of Europe (2012) their protection represents one of the main challenges in the context of interventions in favor of dual career.

The student-athlete with disabilities is a complex profile, comparable, to paraphrase Isidori to a "super-centaur", partly student, partly athlete, partly person with disability. Therefore a fragmented and unstable profile in itself that requires a holistic approach in terms of models of support, learning, organization, and structuring of educational experiences (2017). In this sense, it becomes fundamental for the university institution to build educational alliances both external, with the other stakeholders involved at different levels in the dual career paths, and internal, involving and enhancing the contribution of the various actors of the university system, first and foremost the Professors, classmates, the rector's delegate for disability and the university's disability service, to create inclusive and personalized courses (Bellacicco, 2018).

A fundamental aspect on which the alliance between the actors involved must be founded is represented by an analysis of the educational needs and the life plan of the student-athlete, because in this direction it will be possible to build a solution that takes into account both the training path needs and the sports ones.

The limited data available indicate that people with disabilities participate in sports activities and attend university courses significantly less than their peers (European Commission, 2018; Eurostat, 2011; Istat, 2019), suggesting that athletes-students with disabilities may face even more barriers in combining sports practice with university study, but according to our knowledge no studies have yet been conducted to map their needs and give voice to their experiences.

In an attempt to fill the existing gaps, in 2021 the European Union funded "Para-Limits", a project that has as an ambitious general objective the promotion of the dual careers of athletes-university students with disabilities, thus contributing to EU policies in subject of social inclusion. In particular, the project aims to create, test and disseminate at a European level an innovative online curriculum

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aimed at training expert mentors capable of facilitating the university pathways of student-athletes with disabilities. To this end, the project envisaged a field research phase which aim at detecting needs and barriers of this group in their sports and academic careers.

2-Aims

The preliminary results of the "Para-Limits" Project will be presented to open an empirically based reflection on the possible contribution of the university to the dual career paths of athletes-students with disabilities, starting from their perception of the barriers that hinder the achievement of optimal balance between study and sport and their suggestions regarding possible solutions.

3-Methods

The revised form of the questionnaire formulated for the “Estport” project was used (Sanchez-Pato et al. 2016; 2017). The questionnaire is online and consists of a part on socio-demographic data, a part relating to participation in sport, and a part on personal and environmental barriers that can hinder the university pathways of athletes-students with disabilities.

The scale of barriers is composed of 12 items, each of which evaluates a possible barrier to achieving an optimal balance between sport and study. The respondent must indicate the degree of agreement on a 5-point Likert scale (from 1 = completely disagree to 5 = completely agree). The scale has a high internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.815$). Moreover, as we might expect, it correlates positively with the item "How difficult is it to match sporting activity with study?" ($r = 0.390$; $p < 0.01$).

The answers to closed questions were subjected to quantitative description analyses using SPSS-22. In particular, to identify the factors perceived as barriers by a significant portion of the sample, the percentage frequencies of those who agree or completely agree with the statements were counted.

In addition, the answers to the open question "In your opinion, how can the university facilitate dual careers?" were analyzed to collect suggestions from student-athletes with disabilities. the responses were subjected to basic content analysis (Drisko & Maschi, 2016) with the help of Atlas 9.1. In the first stage, the parts of each ansewer significant for the purposes of the analysis (quotations) have been identified. In the second stage, quotations have been grouped into conceptual categories. Furthermore, to verify the relevance of each conceptual category, the percentage of quotations relating to each catagory was calculated out of the total of the quotations considered.

4-Sample

The sample was selected as part of the “Para-Limits” project. To be included in the sample, the following 3 conditions had to be met:

1) To have a physical or sensorial (visual or auditory) or mental disability or cerebral palsy
2) To be currently enrolled in the last year of high school or a degree course (Under or Master) or a Post-graduate program.
3) To be enrolled in a sports federation recognized by the CIP and currently practice sport at a competitive level.

Three different non-probabilistic sampling strategies were used:

1) Reasoned choice: the referents of the national section of the CIP (Italian Paralympic Committee) of the regional sections of the CIP, of the different sport federations recognised by the CIP and of the CNUUD (National University Conference of Disability Delegates), were contacted by phone to clarify the aims of the project, define sample criteria and collaboration request. The phone call was followed by an email with the link to the questionnaire to be circulated among student-athletes with disabilities.
2) Convenience sampling: we tried to recruit other candidates directly networking at the University of “Foro Italico". All athletes with disabilities currently enrolled in any degree course at the university of “Foro Italico” were involved.

3) Snowball sampling: The respondents were asked to share the link of the questionnaire with other student-athletes with disabilities.

Recruitment began on September 10th, 2021 and responses were received from September,19th to January, 30th, 2022. In total, the actual sample consists of 62 respondents.

5- Analysis

5.1- Socio-demographic characteristics

The main results regarding socio-demographic variables and sporting activity are shown in tables 1. We recorded 40 male respondents (64,5%) and 22 female ones (35,5%) ranging from 16 to 38 year (Mean=22,6; SD=5,2). 16 (25,8%) subjects are in their final year of high school, 30 (48,4%) subjects are currently enrolled in the Bachelor degree (BA), 12 (19,4%) are currently enrolled in a Master degree and 4 (6,4%) in a Post-graduate course. The educational institutes to which they are affiliated are mainly located in Northern Italy (N=28; 45,2%) and Centre Italy (N=26; 41,9%), while the south of Italy is barely represented (N=8; 12,9%).

Table 1 - Main socio-demographic variables

		N	%
Participants		62	100
Age	≤23	40	64,5
	>23	22	35,5
Sex	Male	40	64,5
	Female	22	35,5
Study	High School (last year)	16	25,8
	Under degree	30	48,4
	Master degree	12	19,4
	Post-graduate	4	6,4
Disability Type	Physical	19	30,6
	Auditory	16	25,8
	Visual	15	24,2
	Cerebral palsy	11	17,8
	Other	1	1,6
Disability level	Mild/Minimal	23	37,1
	Sever	39	62,9

19 (30,6%) subjects have a physical disability, 16 (25,8%) have a hearing impairment, 15 (24,2%) have a visual impairment, 11 (17,8%) a cerebral palsy and 1(1,6%) have an intellectual disability.
For most of them, the family is an important source of financial support, while sport is declared as a source of income only for 6 subjects (9,7%).
26 (41,9%) respondents play individual sports while 36 (58,1%) play team sports.
Almost all student-athletes participate in different kinds of competitions: 57 (91,9%) participate in the Italian championship, 29 (32,2%) in the european championship, 10 (16,1%) in the world championship and 8 (12,9%) in the Paralympic Games. In addition, 6 (9,7%) participate in the regional championship.
Respondents considered themselves to be amateur athletes in 26 cases (41,9%), semi-professional athletes in 29 cases (46,8%), and professional in 7 cases (11,3%). In addition, 37 (59,7%) claim to be

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at the beginning of their career, 29 (32,2%) at the top level of their career and 10 (16,1%) towards the end of their career. As expected, it was found a positive correlation between the phase of the sport's career and age (r=.409; p<.01).

Table 2 – Main data on Sport

		N	%
Participants		62	100
Type	Individual	26	41,9%
	Team	36	58,1%
Competition	Regional Championship	6	9,7
	Italian Championship	57	91,9
	European Championship	29	32,2
	World Championship	10	16,1
	Paralympic Games	8	12,9
Level	Amateur	26	41,9
	Semi-professional	29	46,8
	Professional	7	11,3
Stage	Start	37	59,7
	Higher level	29	32,2
	End	10	16,1

5.2 - Barriers to dual career

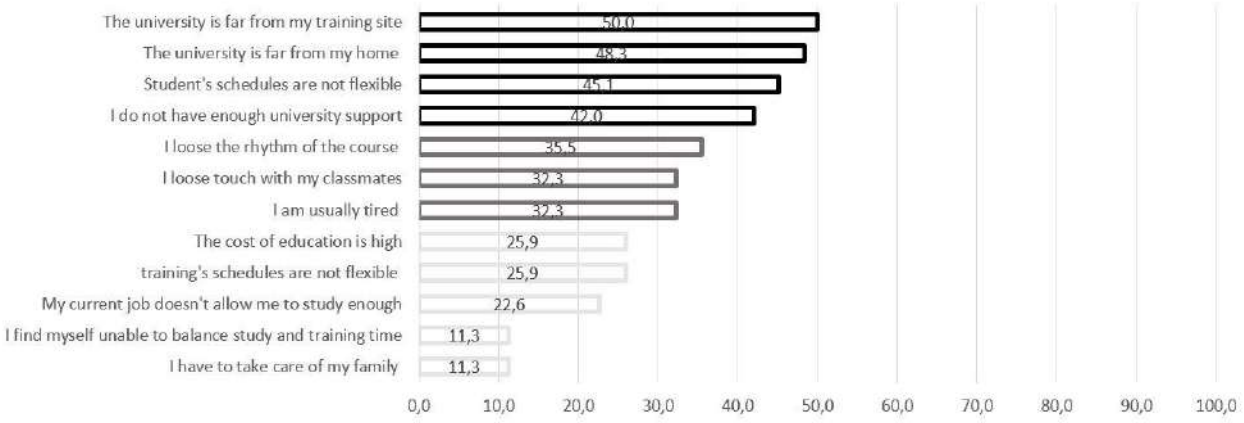
When asked 'how difficult is it to manage sports and study?', just over half of the sample answered, 'so and so'. (N=33; 53,2%), no one thinks it is 'very easy' and few think it is 'easy'. (N=10; 16,1%). Almost 1/3 of the sample thought it was "difficult" (N=17; 27,4%) or "very difficult". (N=2; 3,2%). Many subjects felt that their studies interfered with their sporting performance (29; 46.8%) or that their sporting performance affected their studies (30; 48,4%), and admitted to having some personal difficulty in effectively balancing their commitments on the two dimensions due to either lack of time or time overlapping between classes, exams on the one hand, training and competitions on the other. In the graphic 1 are shown the percentage frequencies of those who agree or completely agree with the statements relating to the difficulty of achieving a good balance between study and sport.

The factors perceived as possible barriers by a significant portion of the sample refer to both the personal and environmental spheres. In particular, the main factors perceived as barriers to achieve a good balance between sporting life and studies are: “The university is far from my training site” (N=31; 50%); “The university is far from my home” (N=30; 48,3%); “Students’ schedules are not flexible” (N=28; 45,1%), and “I do not have enough university support” (N=26; 42%).

Other significant barriers are “I lose the rhythm of the course (N=22; 35,5%); “Training’s schedules are not flexible (35,3%); “I lose touch with my classmates” (N=20; 32,3%) and “I am usually tired’ (N=20; 32,3%).

Finally, the factors perceived less as barriers are “The cost of education is high (N=16; 25,9%); “Training schedules are not flexible” (N=16; 25,9%), “The current job does not allow me to study enough” (N=14; 22,6%); “I find myself unable to balance study and training time (N=7; 11,3%) and “I have to take care of my family” (N=7; 11,3%).

Graphic 1 – Barriers to Dual Career
(Percentage frequencies of those who agree or completely agree with the statements relating to the difficulty of achieving a good balance between study and sport)



5.3 – Suggestions from student-athletes with disabilities

57 citations were identified out of 62 answers given to the question “"In your opinion, how can university facilitate dual career paths?" (5 unvalid answers). Quotations were divided into 7 conceptual categories (Table 3). The conceptual category that emerges the most from the answers is undoubtedly the flexibility of the curriculum: in summary, according to student-athletes with disabilities, the university could facilitate dual career paths through personalized educational programs based on their specific needs, in particular through the provision of online, streaming or deferred lessons, the inclusion of additional exam sessions, and the repeal of the obligation to attend. In addition to these organizational measures, student-athletes with disabilities require the possibility of being able to train in the structures made available by the university, they would like sports practice to be recognized and valued within the training course, possibly through the assignment of extra-CFU, and call for greater communication with Professors and greater alliance between the university and the sports federation.

Finally, some student-athletes would also like to be supported through economic measures (scholarships) and the activation and/or increase of the tutoring service.

6-Conclusion

In an attempt to fill a gap in the national and international scientific literature, this study analyzed the perception of student-athletes with disabilities regarding the barriers that hinder the optimal balance between study and sport and the possible interventions the university can put in place to facilitate dual career paths.

About a third of the difficult sample thought it was difficult or very difficult to combine sports practice with study, while nearly half believed that their studies interfere with their sports performance or vice-versa.

Overall, the data on barriers and possible solutions appear substantially consistent with those of the literature about athletes-students without disabilities (Abelkalns et al., 2021; Bastianon & Greco, 2018; Brustio et al., 2019; Condello, 2019) and confirm the need to adopt a holistic approach based on the alliance between different actors belonging to the university context and on the collaboration between the university and the other actors involved in dual career paths (Guidotti, Capranica, 2016). In particular, the lack of flexibility in the curriculum represents one of the main barrier emerged, suggesting that the Dual Career paths of student-athletes with disabilities could be facilitated starting from organizational interventions like the implementation of distance learning, the introduction of recorded lessons or sessions of additional exams, as the same athletes-students with disabilities suggest.

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Table 3 – Basic Content Analysis of the answers to the question "In your opinion, how can university facilitate dual career paths?"

QUOTATIONS	CATEGORY	%*
"It could include recorded lessons for people like me who sometimes can't go to university"	FLEXIBILITY OF THE CURRICULUM	59
"Could record lectures if I can't go to university"		
"Introducing the possibility of distance learning"		
"It would be enough for the university to record the lessons"		
"The possibility of following the lessons online and moving the exam dates"		
"Recorded lessons"		
"Could record the afternoon lessons"		
"Providing remote connections and recordings of lessons"		
"Allowing me to catch up on lessons when I'm busy with training"		
"Fixed lesson times in the morning to have the afternoon available for training"		
"With flexible lesson schedules"		
"With exam and lesson schedules that don't end too late"		
"More flexibility in lessons"		
"Making lessons and exams more flexible based on the sportsman's commitments"		
"By activating an educational program suitable for your sports training"		
"Allowing me to catch up on lessons"		
"Adjustment of schedules and programs"		
"Eliminating the compulsory attendance"		
"Avoiding the obligation to attend"		
"Not penalizing myself if I can't attend"		
"More exam sessions"		
"Giving an alternative exam session option for athletes"		
"Maybe it can be more flexible on schedules, exams and so on"		
"Possibility of extraordinary sessions"		
"More written/oral exams"		
"Leaving flexibility for exam dates"		
"Helping athletes to move exam dates to other days"		
"Moving the exam sessions in the event of a competition"		
"Could put more exam dates"		
"More flexibility in everything (lesson times, exams, etc.)"		
"An agreed organization of exams"		
"Possibility of extraordinary sessions"		
"By facilitating the training of student-athletes more"	STRUCTURES AND EQUIPMENT FOR SPORTS PRACTICE	13,1
"Through sports projects organized by the institute itself"		
"Providing structures and materials that favor sports practice"		
"Organizing sports activity courses on-site"		
"Allowing me to train"		
"If I can train here I save time"		
"Providing adequate spaces for training"		
"Providing training equipment and training disabled athletes"		
"Could recognize training credits to those who practice competitive sports"	RECOGNITION AND ENHANCEMENT OF SPORTS ACTIVITIES	8,2
"Recognizing the sporting activity in the study plan, where relevant"		
"Recognize sports experience with additional credits		
"Also recognize sporting commitments and various results"		
"Providing conventions and competent people to do sports in nearby centers"		
"Communicating more with the sports federation"	UNIVERSITY-FEDERATION ALLIANCE	6,6
"Making agreements with the sports federation"		
"Liaising with the federations to simplify the relationship between student-athletes and the university"		
"Making it clear to the federation that I have study commitments that must be respected"		
"Strongly increase Professor-student direct communication"	PROFESSOR-STUDENT COMMUNICATION	4,9
"Teachers should be more willing to listen to the needs of athletes"		
"Facilitating relations between the student and the Professor"		
"Giving scholarships"	ECONOMIC SUPPORT	4,9
"Already only with scholarships"		
"With scholarships"		
"More hours of specialized tutoring"	TUTORING	3,3
"With hours of tutoring and support"		
* The percentages are representative of the relevance of each conceptual category for the analyzed sample and have been calculated as the ratio between the number of quotations belonging to each conceptual category on the total of the analyzed quotations		100

These preliminary results are very consistent with the results of a previous study carried out with Italian student-athletes without disabilities. The authors of this study concluded their analysis of a sample of 711 units by stating that "the flexibility […] of the academic demands could represent the first step to support student-athletes in dual career" and that "better schedules of lessons and exams could represent the most crucial solutions to effectively combine sport and academic demands" (Brustio et al, 2019, pp. 181-182).

In addition to these organisational factors, there are other, more structural factors, which seem to affect student-athletes with disabilities, and which relate to the well-known lack of accessible sport facilities and services (Martin, 2013). Almost half of the sample felt that the distance between the training site and both home and the university were an obstacle to dual careers. This implies more time to reach the training centers, in an existential framework in which the lack of time is one of the main problems that student-athletes have to face (Bastianon, 2019).

These data, together with the suggestions given by the athletes-students with disabilities themselves, leads to the hypothesis that the dual career paths could be facilitated if universities, in collaboration with the sports federations to which the athletes belong, offered spaces and equipment accessible to student-athletes with disabilities, perhaps adapting those already available for students without disabilities.

Other possible interventions suggested by student-athletes with disabilities are already called into question for student-athletes without disabilities (Abelkalns et al., 2021) and include financial support, increased tutoring hours, and the recognition of sports practice within the university curriculum, as well as the facilitation of internal relationships between student-athletes and professors, and the alliance with the sports federation.

Finally, it should be considered that for approximately 33% of the sample, the loss of contact with fellow students and the course represents a further barrier to dual careers. This leads us to believe that the involvement of course mates is a fundamental component of any tutoring programme and that teaching strategies based on peer collaboration, such as peer tutoring and cooperative learning, should be privileged whenever circumstances make it possible, involving and enhancing the contribution of professors and the specialized tutoring service, in order to promote academic and social inclusion in the university community (Dudley et al., 1997).

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