

## **Pathway Decisions During the Student-Athlete Transition out of University in the United Kingdom**

The student-athlete transition out of university requires athletes to make important decisions regarding their future. However, there is no research that focuses on the pathways that athletes take when they leave university and the factors that underpin athletes' decisions. The current study explored the pathways athletes take when they leave university in the United Kingdom (UK), and their reasons for taking these specific routes. Eleven elite UK former and current university student-athletes ( $M_{\text{age}} = 21.4$ ) from different sports were interviewed. Eight university stakeholders (e.g., head coaches, lifestyle advisor, performance sport manager) took part in a focus group. Data were thematically analysed. Results suggest that athletes take four different pathways following university: (1) advancing onto a postgraduate education and elite sport pathway, (2) full-time sport pathway, (3) sport and work pathway, and (4) dropping out of sport and moving onto an alternative pathway. There were multiple factors that led athletes to taking each pathway. These included a desire to qualify for the next Olympic Games, having an education 'safety net', goal of advancing onto a funded sport programme, and limited work-sport dual career opportunities. This article advances previous work in athlete transitions and athlete career pathways, focusing specifically on a key career transition point for UK athletes. Support providers could use the findings to help athletes critically reflect on their motivations and future goals and come to a decision around what their most suitable pathway should be.

Keywords: transitions in sport, dual career, student-athletes, athletic retirement, athlete pathways

Word count: 10758

## **Lay Summary**

We explored the experiences of UK student-athletes as they left university, including the factors that influence their decisions around what they do. Student-athletes were found to take four different routes and had different motives and reasons why they took the route that they did.

## **Implications for Practice**

- Practitioners should support athletes to critically reflect on their motivations and future goals when they are about to complete university and come to a decision around what their most suitable pathway should be.
- Risks of taking a make or break year as a full-time athlete after university without funding secured should be communicated to athletes.
- National governing bodies (NGB's) should consider more carefully how they can incorporate dual career opportunities into their centralised programmes.
- Universities are advised to offer postgraduate athlete support programmes.
- Parents, NGB's, and university stakeholders should use a collaborative approach to support the athlete to critically examine their opportunities post-university.

## Pathway Decisions During the Student-Athlete Transition out of University in the United Kingdom

Within their careers, athletes may encounter various transitions where they are required to make important decisions around their future pathway. A transition is defined as a turning phase in an athletes' development where they encounter new demands (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007). These demands require athletes to have adequate coping mechanisms and resources if they are to continue or progress on their chosen career pathway (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007). Athlete career research has generally focused on the transition issues that athletes may experience, including the athletic identity crisis associated with athletic retirement (e.g., Wylleman, Alfermann, & Lavallee, 2004). However, at present, there has been limited investigation into the factors that influence the planning and decision-making processes of athletes within their careers (Fogarty & McGregor-Bayne, 2008; Samuel & Tenenbaum, 2013). Athletes will, however, face career transition decisions at varying points in their careers, including the level of sport to engage in (e.g., whether to continue on a talent pathway), whether to migrate to a new country, and whether to go to university to combine elite sport with education (e.g., Defruyt, Wylleman, Kegalaers, & De Brant, 2019; Pummell, Harwood, & Lavallee, 2008; Ryba, Stambulova, Ronkainen, Bundgaard, & Selänne, 2015).

The growing body of athletic career transition research and theory has recently been summarised in a position statement (Stambulova, Ryba, & Henriksen, 2020). This statement outlines how the holistic athletic career model is one theory that has been widely used in athlete career literature (Wylleman, Reints, & De Knop, 2013). The theory highlights the complexity of athletes' careers by showing the different career development phases and transitions they may face at the athletic, psychological, psychosocial, academic/vocational, and financial levels (Wylleman et al., 2013). The model is also successful in illustrating coinciding transitions that athletes may face in their careers (e.g., transitioning into university at the same time as becoming

a mastery performer; Wylleman et al., 2013). To assist athletes in coping with the demands of transitions, career transition programmes have been developed across the world (see Torregrossa, Regüela, & Mateos, 2020). These programmes assist athletes in multiple ways, including through the provision of financial aid, and preventative measures such as resource development (Torregrossa et al., 2020).

Career transition research has also begun to explore the dual career transitions of athletes, such as the student-athlete transition into university (Brown et al., 2015; MacNamara & Collins, 2010; Mateu et al. 2020). A dual career is the combination of sporting pursuits alongside education or work (e.g., Aquilina, 2013; Ryba et al., 2015). Research has indicated that athletes who follow a dual career pathway may have a more balanced lifestyle, enhanced employment prospects, and enhanced support systems (e.g., a network of sports practitioners within university settings; Aquilina, 2013; Torregrossa, Ramis, Pallarés, Azócar, & Selva, 2015). Research also suggests that engaging in other activities (e.g., education) alongside sport can help athletes avoid the development of identity foreclosure that has the potential to lead to mental health issues (e.g., see European Commission, 2020; Tekavc, Wylleman, & CeciĆ Erpič, 2015; Torregrossa et al., 2015). Despite the recognised benefits, pursuing sport and educational goals simultaneously can create challenges for athletes; these can include difficulties with effectively managing their time and coping with multiple stakeholder expectations (e.g., Cosh & Tully, 2014; Tekavc et al., 2015). Such demands can leave dual career athletes feeling under pressure to compromise either the sport or educational facet of their dual career (Ryba et al., 2015).

Literature in this field has also recently explored the different types of dual career pathways that athletes follow. Cartigny, Fletcher, Coupland, and Taylor (2019) found that athletes can follow three types of dual career pathways in their career: the dual pathway, the sport-dominant pathway, and the education/vocation-dominant pathway. It is suggested that athletes within each route require unique levels of support (e.g., athletes who follow the sport-

focused pathway require increased support following their athletic retirement because they may lack vocational experience; Cartigny et al., 2019). In addition, recent research has also focused on the transnational dual career pathways of athletes, including the decision to migrate to the United States (US) collegiate system (e.g., Garrett, Vickers, Fletcher, & Taylor, 2020; Ryba et al., 2015), and factors that European athletes take into consideration when deciding to initiate a dual career at the university level (e.g., the flexibility of the university to facilitate the combination of elite sport and studies; Defruyt et al., 2019; Harrison, Vickers, Fletcher, & Taylor, 2020). European athlete experiences of the transition into university have also been explored, suggesting that the transition is multifaceted for athletes (e.g., Brown et al., 2015). Following the transition into university, research suggests that athletes need to take increased responsibility for their athletic development, adapt to a new support team, and manage conflict between academic and sporting timetables (e.g., Brown et al., 2015; MacNamara & Collins, 2010).

To date, however, the pathway decisions that European athletes face at the end of the university dual career and their experiences of this process have not yet been explored. Defruyt et al. (2019) suggest that leaving a dual career context may be challenging because athletes may have been in an educational environment for many years and may not be prepared for the shift in routine that they can experience when they leave. The dual career pathways of athletes in Europe are diverse because contexts are organised differently across each country (Aquilina & Henry, 2010). Researchers are therefore encouraged to be context sensitive when conducting dual career research (Stambulova & Ryba, 2013). In the UK, a growing number of talented and elite level athletes are choosing to follow a university dual career pathway (Haley & Saghafi, 2012). Several British universities are now high-performance centres where athletes can receive a range of services (e.g., lifestyle support) to support their holistic development (Brown et al., 2015). The opportunity to combine university level education with high performance sport may be

higher in the UK than other European countries due to the large number of universities that now offer athlete support programmes. A recent study found there to be 95 universities within the UK that offered sport scholarship programmes to athletes (Vickers, 2018). However, at present, what British athletes decide to do when they leave university has not been academically explored. Studies that have focused on the transition out of university are from collegiate populations in the US. These studies have suggested that due to the limited opportunities in professional sport in the US, many athletes will leave competitive sport when they transition out of college (Smith & Hardin, 2018). In the US, sport at the university level is a huge commercial enterprise, and for athletes, being at university is one of the primary sources of elite athletic development (Despres, Brady, & McGowan, 2008; Ridpath, Rudd, & Stokowski, 2019). Some US collegiate athletes may choose to attend graduate school or maintain opportunities to train at a professional level within the collegiate system. For many US athletes, however, when leaving university, they may lose the opportunity to continue competing in their sport to a high level. In several European contexts, including the UK, however, the main body of elite sport development takes place within an external sport club system that lies separate to education (Fort, 2000; Ridpath et al., 2019). This difference may mean that UK athletes have increased opportunities to continue competing to a high level following their transition out of university and this may impact on their pathway opportunities and decisions. Taking this difference into consideration, when UK athletes leave university, they may take alternative routes that require different types of preparation and social support (e.g., seeking flexible employment to facilitate training and competition).

Research that provides an understanding of these context-specific factors could help stakeholders to put effective support processes in place for athletes prior to their exit from university. Fogarty & McGregor-Bayne (2008) suggest that athletes in the earlier stages of their elite sport careers may require more support and assistance when making decisions regarding

their athletic careers. If student-athletes leaving university are not supported in making decisions regarding their future pathways, this could significantly impact the transition outcome.

Stambulova (2017) suggests that the direction of athletes' development depends on how effectively they make decisions at key transition phases in their careers. When approaching the transition out of university, if athletes have limited awareness of the pathways they could take, this could lead to a crisis transition (Stambulova, 2017). Therefore, poor decision-making during this transition could negatively impact on athlete well-being, and inhibit their sporting performance moving forward (Stambulova, 2017). By understanding the pathway decisions of athletes, the findings could be used as a framework to help athletes identify the optimal route for them.

Accordingly, the aim of the present study is to explore the pathways that UK student-athletes take when they transition out of university. In addition, a secondary aim is to explore the decision-making process and understand what factors influence athletes' decisions regarding the path that they take. This study will achieve the above aims by not only gaining the perspectives of athletes, but the university stakeholders that play a role in supporting the transition. Gaining a multifaceted perspective that includes both athletes and their support network has been suggested to be of importance in previous dual career literature, because support providers play a key role in helping athletes manage dual career demands (e.g., Brown et al., 2015; Debois, Ledon, & Wylleman, 2015; Knight, Harwood, & Sellars, 2018). Gaining the perspectives of university stakeholders that have a role in assisting student-athletes transition out of university may allow a greater understanding of the pathways that athletes take and their motivations for doing so.

## **Method**

### ***Philosophical Perspective and Design***

The design and analysis of the study were consistent with a critical realist epistemology. For critical realists, an object's structure is made up by internal social relations that possess specific capabilities and tendencies to act in certain ways under particular conditions (Sayer, 2000). Many critical realists argue that the only way to gain a good understanding of the world and constructs within it is to gain a majority understanding from the perspectives of individuals who have a knowledge of the area under investigation through their own personal experiences (Maxwell, 2012). In line with this epistemological view, the present study explored the experiences of athletes' and stakeholders' perceptions of the transition out of university to help increase understanding of athletes' social worlds, acknowledging that individuals develop subjective meanings of their experiences (Creswell, 2013). Given that this study was interested in exploring the experiences of UK student-athletes transition out of university, including the pathways taken and factors that underpin athlete's decisions, a qualitative research design was deemed most appropriate. This design allowed participants' perceptions to be captured and the exploration of new factors. The use of qualitative methods can stop research becoming constrained by the hypothesis-driven focus of many quantitative research methods (Guest, Namey, & Mitchell, 2013). Instead, the experiences of athletes and stakeholders are based on their own perceptions, beliefs, and feelings.

### ***Participants***

Student-athletes and support staff (n = 19) took part in the current study. Sample size was determined when the authors perceived theoretical saturation had been reached. As Charmaz (2006) identified, theoretical saturation is achieved when gathering fresh data no longer sparks new theoretical insights, nor reveals new properties of your core theoretical



categories. We achieved this saturation as the latter interviews conducted resulted in no further theoretical insights being amassed. Eleven student-athletes from a variety of sports (e.g., rowing, judo, para basketball, aerial skiing; see Table 1) and nine UK universities took part in the study. The universities were geographically spread across the UK. Student-athletes were either about to make the transition out of university within the next 2 months ( $n = 6$ ) or had left university within the last 18 months ( $n = 5$ ). Student-athletes were studying or had studied a variety of academic courses (e.g., Sport and Exercise Science, Psychology, and History), and were aged between 20 and 24 ( $\bar{x} = 21.42$  years;  $SD \pm 1.22$ ). To be eligible for this study, student-athletes had to have received a sport scholarship from their respective universities during their dual career and competed at high national or international level in their chosen sport. In addition, the athletes had to have completed their undergraduate degree within the last two years or be due to complete their degree within 6 months.

This criterion was put in place so that athletes could draw on their personal experience of competing in high-level sport and completing their degree programme while transitioning out of university. Data from 8 stakeholders who all worked at the same UK university were also collected. The roles of these stakeholders varied within the institution (see Table 2), and included head coaches ( $n = 3$ ), strength and conditioning coach ( $n = 1$ ), athlete lifestyle advisor ( $n = 1$ ), coaching and competitions manager ( $n = 1$ ), performance sport manager ( $n = 1$ ), and director of sport ( $n = 1$ ). Stakeholders had been working with student-athletes between 5 and 18 years ( $\bar{x} = 7.91$  years;  $SD \pm 4.43$ ). Aside from the 3 head coaches that worked with specific sports, the remaining 5 stakeholders worked across multiple sports. To be eligible for inclusion, stakeholders had to have a role that involves providing provision to student-athletes. Provision included both direct support (e.g., as a coach) and indirect support (e.g., as a manager overseeing a sport scholarship programme). All participants were given a pseudonym to maintain anonymity.

### ***Procedure and Data Collection***

Institutional research approval was obtained before participant recruitment commenced. Initial contact about the research then took place via email to relevant staff (e.g., university sport scholarship managers) to gain access to student-athletes and stakeholders. These contacts emailed potential student-athlete and stakeholder participants on behalf of the research team with the relevant information about the study (including an information sheet outlining the purpose, risks, safeguards, and benefits of taking part). Subsequently, those who were interested in taking part in the study contacted the first author, with informed consent collected before data collection commenced. Student-athlete data were then collected via 11 semi-structured interviews, both in person and online (e.g., Skype) owing to geographical distance. To build rapport with athletes that were interviewed over Skype, the author exchanged emails with participants before the interview to share information about each other and the project (Deakin & Wakefield, 2013). Interviews lasted between 43 and 55 minutes ( $\bar{x} = 48$ ;  $SD \pm 4$ ). Stakeholder data were collected through one focus group held at the university that the stakeholders worked within. The focus group lasted 64 minutes. Collecting research via a focus group methodology allows for multiple perspectives rooted within the context to explore and illustrate the problem of interest (Lewis & McNaughton Nicholls, 2014). The researchers chose to include all stakeholders in the same focus group to allow for interaction between roles that have differing levels of contact with transitioning student-athletes. For example, a head coach may have a more direct form of interaction with transitioning student-athletes than the director of sport, who oversees the transition from a strategic perspective. This difference in the level of contact may mean they could have had different perspectives on the same process and this examination of multiple perspectives may give a greater overall understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. Power within focus groups is positioned as a procedural problem that can sabotage interaction and limits data quality

(Carey & Asbury, 2012). To minimize the dynamics of power during the focus group, the facilitator used strategies such as selective eye contact, direct challenge, and interruption where required (Carey & Asbury, 2012).

### ***Interview and Focus Group Guides***

Interviewing has the potential to yield data that provides depth and detail to create an understanding of phenomena and lived experiences (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Similarly, collecting data via a focus group methodology allows for discussion from multiple perspectives rooted within the context which allows exploration of the problem of interest (Lewis & McNaughton Nicholls, 2014). Semi-structured interview and focus group guides (n = 3) were developed based upon athlete career development theory (Wylleman et al., 2013), and previous student-athlete literature (e.g., Smith & Hardin, 2018). Two interview schedules were developed for athletes: one for athletes who were about to leave university, and one for athletes who had already made the transition. Example questions for athletes about to leave university included - "what plans do you have for when you leave university?" and "what are the reasons that you are taking your identified pathway out of university?" Athletes who had already left university were asked similar questions around the pathway they had taken and their motivations for doing so. Example questions included - "Following your transition out of university, what path have you taken?" and "when deciding what to do when you left university, did you have any specific motivations or reasons that influenced your decision?" An interview guide was also developed for the stakeholder focus group and centred on understanding university staff perceptions and knowledge of the pathways that athletes take when they leave university. Example questions from the stakeholder interview schedule included - "what different paths have you seen athletes take when they leave university?" and "what factors might underpin the decisions athletes make when they leave university?"

### ***Data Analyses***

Before the data analysis process, focus groups and interviews were audio taped and transcribed verbatim by the lead researcher following each interview - this allowed the researcher to become immediately immersed in the data. The lead author transcribed data after each interview took place, and therefore became more familiar with the topic as the interviews progressed. Athlete interviews and the stakeholder focus group were analysed separately. Findings were then combined and contrasted prior to combining the data. Following the transcription of the focus groups and interviews, inductive thematic analysis took place on the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This approach was deemed appropriate as it allows the analysis of the key issues, factors, and processes that underlie and influence phenomena (Braun & Clarke, 2019), such as, in this instance, the transition out of university for student-athletes. Braun and Clarke's (2019) six phases of thematic analysis were followed to summarise key factors and allow any unanticipated insights to be gleaned. First, there was a process of 'actively reading' the transcripts, with any initial thoughts being noted down. Following this, initial codes were generated, and points of interest that may form the basis of themes were noted. Codes were then sorted into relevant themes and clustered into overarching themes relevant to the research question. Themes were then reviewed to check that they fit with the overall data set, and then were refined and named. Subsequently, data write up took place.

### ***Enhancing Rigour***

Several factors were considered to assess and enhance the rigour of the present study. First, in line with recommendations from Levitt et al. (2018) and Tracy (2010), researcher reflexivity was of concern and is described as vital practise within qualitative research. The lead researcher engaged in continued self-reflection throughout the study development, data collection and data write up, considering ways in which biases may have inadvertently

influenced the study (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). The lead researcher had experience of making the transition out of university as an athlete and chose to undertake reflective journaling which were discussed with fellow researchers to help reduce any biases. In addition, researcher reflexivity was achieved through regular discussions with critical friends during the collection of the data and analysis phase (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). How the data had been interpreted was regularly challenged by the second author (Smith & McGannon 2018), and comments from external colleagues at academic conferences were actively taken on board. Levitt et al. (2018) also recognise data adequacy as an essential factor in establishing methodological integrity - this involves researchers collecting data from sources that can shed light upon variations in the phenomenon that are relevant to the research goals. In the present study, the perspectives of athletes who were at differing stages of the transition out of university (e.g., about to start transitioning out of university and had already completed the transition out of university) and stakeholders who had different roles in supporting athletes in the transition were collected. The authors also considered the transferability of the findings to similar contexts. Transferability is described as the degree of similarity between the research setting in which the phenomenon studied occurs and the settings in which the results are expected to be transferable (Rodon, 2008). To assist with the transferability of the research, factors such as information on the context of the study, the number of organisations taking part, any restrictions on participants, and a detailed overview of the methods have been included (Shenton, 2004). Finally, Sparkes and Smith (2014) recognise significant contribution as an important factor when assessing the rigour of qualitative work. Although literature on the student-athlete transition out of university has been conducted on US collegiate athletes, this study is the first to examine the factors that influence the pathways that UK student-athletes take when they leave university. This has significant applied

implications for how practitioners can support this process, meaning the study can have a significant contribution to the discipline.

## **Results**

When athletes approach the end of their undergraduate university dual career, they must make decisions regarding what their next steps will be. Within the current study, different pathways were identified that student-athletes might take. These pathways included (1) advancing onto a postgraduate education and elite sport pathway, (2) full-time sport pathway, (3) sport and work (and education) pathway, and (4) dropping out of sport and moving onto an alternative pathway. The pathway is outlined, including some of the experiences and challenges that athletes may experience when taking this route. Following this, the different factors (including reasons and motivations) that can underpin student-athlete's decisions to take specific pathways when they leave university are discussed (e.g., finances, goal of qualifying for an Olympic Games, lack of dual career opportunities, and major injury). To make it clear whether a quote is from an athlete or a university stakeholder, athletes have been labelled (a), and stakeholders have been labelled (s).

### ***Advancing onto a Postgraduate Education and Elite Sport Pathway***

Athletes may decide to continue their education when they finish their undergraduate studies by advancing onto a postgraduate degree (e.g., masters degree, PhD programme) in combination with their sporting commitments, either in the UK or abroad (e.g., the US). Natalie (s) said – “there is a trend to go abroad, where they know their sport is either a lot more funded or more accessible, whether that be Australia, New Zealand, Europe or America, and do a post-grad [degree] out there.” A head coach described how this is a pathway that they often encourage student-athletes to take; “...it's something which I'm trying to sell to English students who have aspirations to go and play at the highest level of the NCAA, there's potential exit routes there [out of a university undergraduate dual career].”

Generally, the experiences of athletes that followed this pathway at UK universities in the current study were positive as these individuals were highly motivated to continue their studies. Paul (a) noted – “I had looked at graduate schemes and I had looked at going into full-time work, but there was just nothing that really appealed to me as much as doing a masters [degree] and pursuing my sport.” Greg (a) suggested that due to the low contact time of his postgraduate degree, this facilitated his commitment to his sport:

My university work, the lecture time I think is only four hours a week and I am just about to start on my dissertation...so the workload is not too bad. I’ve got a bit more free time [than undergraduate level], which gives me more time to do my sport.

The lower contact hours of some postgraduate degrees could provide athletes with more time to train. University stakeholders commented that the recruitment of athletes into postgraduate study is increasing across the university sector. Dan (s) stated – “...everyone [universities] is recruiting so many athletes, it’s massive, it’s a real marketplace, athletes are talking to 3 or 4 universities at a time about postgrad study, trying to get one thing out of another.” This comment suggests that this pathway could become a popular option for athletes, due to the increased opportunities available to undertake postgraduate study and gain a university sport scholarship.

#### *Factors underpinning decision*

Athletes had differing motives as to why they chose to move into postgraduate study and continue their elite sports dual career. Gregory (a) had two main motives to advance onto a postgraduate education and elite sport path: to have a safety net if he sustained any injuries, and to continue to have an additional focus outside of his sport:

I always find that it is good to have something else to do as well, especially when you’re in a contact sport with potential injuries and stuff like that, so if

you're doing something else as well as your sport, it's good for the mind as well, it keeps your mind active, it's something else, it's another outlet.

This comment suggests that athletes see the value that a dual career pathway can have on their psychological health. Paul (a) was motivated to pursue postgraduate education to give him further career opportunities – “this new degree that I’m adding...I’ve got economics, but this is more business orientated, I’m looking at maybe getting a job abroad afterwards, because it gives me the opportunity to go into management.” Some athletes, however, may be less career minded when choosing to continue their dual career into postgraduate education. Natalie (s) said - “there tend to be a lot [of student-athletes] that also then look into postgraduate study as a form of being able to sustain their career in their sport”. Cameron (s) supported this statement - “...they [student-athletes] admit to us that they want to do a postgrad because it’s just again the use of the [sport] scholarship services, to keep them here...they get the full works, strength and conditioning, physio, lifestyle, nutrition, and more.” This suggests that athletes may wish to continue their education so that they can continue to access the support services available.

### ***Full-Time Sport Pathway***

Athletes may choose to leave university and end their dual careers to become full-time athletes. The current study found that within this pathway, there are also different alternatives. Of the four athletes in the current study to take this route, three did so without being on a funded programme (e.g., UK Sport World Class Performance Programme). Instead, they decided to have what they identified as a make or break year, and train within their home sports clubs, often with the financial support of parents. Bradley (a) said - “I’m only going to ski full-time, planned for a year...I suppose with most people it’s a year where if they make it, they make it.” Marie (a) expressed her concerns over taking this route, suggesting that if it does not go as planned, she may need to reconsider her path - “I feel like



if it doesn't go well in this first year [of being a full-time athlete], it's really going to make me think what my priorities are".

One of the challenges that athletes experienced when they made this transition was knowing what to do with their free time outside of sport. David (a) said - "...just knowing what I'm doing with myself, you know I don't have that feeling of should I be doing work, or should I be revising for something, I just don't know, I'm lost." Lara also discussed how a 'lack of stuff to do' after moving out of education and only having sport was not a favourable change. In addition, a challenge identified by athletes undertaking a year as a full-time athlete without any funding was the drop in financial income that they received when in education.

Bradley (a) stated:

At university, I was getting free gym membership and some support from them...I think I brought in around 7,000 pounds from sources of funding last year, such as the university sport scholarship, whereas this year I think I'll literally be down to only 500. It is a massive, massive drop.

In addition to losing financial bursaries and not having other activities to focus us, moving to a new or returning to a home environment, changing coach, uncertainty over the future, and a new routine were all identified by athletes as being new challenges associated with the transition to full-time sport.

### *Factors underpinning decision*

Different factors influenced athletes' decisions to transition to full-time in their sport. The possibility of improving their sporting level to advance onto a funded programme was a motive for athletes. David (a) said:

It is just the one year...I've taken a risk...I'm hoping that it's going to pay off this year and then hopefully I can get on a bigger contract. I'll hopefully be that person who is going to step up and compete consistently at the major

championships, on the international stage...I'm hoping if that then comes through then I will start to get sponsors.

Liz (a) perceived that she had one last chance to become part of a funded programme following university- "...you're either on the Olympic Podium Potential Programme or you're not on the programme at all, so it's all or nothing for me this year." For some athletes, finances were a factor to why they could only invest in one year as a full-time athlete.

Bradley (a) said:

"I'm not a funded athlete, and my sport has not got any funding from UK sport or my national governing body [NGB] at all, so getting to the Olympics is very dependent on funding and me carrying on my skiing career...I definitely wanted to or at least try and get to the Olympics and the only way I could do that was to focus full-time on skiing for a year."

Support staff also witnessed how finances factored into athlete's decision about becoming a full-time athlete. Dan (s) said – "...a lot of it does come down to the individual's financial circumstances, and which of them can graduate and be funded by their parents to have a go at their sport." When athletes had the support of parents, this was an additional factor to them deciding to become full-time athletes. David (a) said – "I've relied on my parents [financially] sort of a bit more than some other athletes could, but obviously it's not something that I want to have to do for the rest of my life." Liz (a) also said - "...they've [parents] let me stay at home, and they've always said, we won't charge you rent until you're working full time." Bradley (a) perceived that parental support was imperative when deciding to go full-time as an athlete - "...my parents are a huge part of my support [after university], financially, and they helped me to get sponsors...they let me decide whether I wanted to take it on full-time." Parents may be a vital support source for athletes who continue to pursue their sport post-university but have limited support from their NGBs.

A further motive that athletes had to take a make a year as a full-time athlete was the desire to qualify for a major event, such as the Olympic Games. Bradley (a) stated – “...we have Olympic qualifications this year and I knew I definitely wanted to or at least try and get to the Olympics and the only way I could do that was to focus full-time on skiing.”. Finally, athletes went into full-time sport after leaving university because they had not prepared or perceived that there could be another pathway that they could take. David (a) said:

Mentally I didn't want to give myself any other option [other than full-time sport], like in a way I did just put all of my eggs in one basket and though this was the only option, if I did go to careers fairs, maybe they would have opened my eyes to other options, and it would almost be like admitting failure to athletics.

This comment was also supported by Bradley (a) – “exploring other avenues could have been helpful but I wasn't proactive enough to do anything about it.” Lack of preparation or exploration around potential other dual career opportunities after university may lead athletes to enter full-time sport without having explored the potential challenges of doing so in the absence of support programmes.

### ***Sport and Work (and Education) Pathway***

Following the transition out of university, some student-athletes experience an alteration in their dual career pathway and combine their sporting commitments with work, or in one athlete's case, a triple career of sport, work, and postgraduate education. For the athletes in the current study, all work commitments were part-time to allow for training and competition, and none of the athletes had a job role that they identified as meeting their career aspirations. In the current study, athletes experienced various challenges when moving into this new dual career path, including the loss of sport science support services they had access to through their university scholarship programmes. David (a) said:

The physio support and the strength and conditioning support...there was quite a lot of support available when you are at university, and that is something that I have actually found tough then when you come out of university, it's that there's not a lot of support available, and that the support is very much focused on people in full-time education. You need to be in education to get the support.

Liz (a) expressed concern over finding work that supported her competition commitments:

We have long competitions where we are away for ten days, and a Friday here and there [off work] is a lot easier than a whole week kind of thing so having a job that's lenient enough for me to travel to events, and good enough to support me and pay for rent and food is tough to find.

Flexibility of work hours to incorporate training was discussed as a challenge for all athletes, and athletes noted that they had not appreciated the lenience of time they had when they were at university. Emily (a) also outlined how being in work allowed an escape from the rigours of sport:

I actually enjoy doing it [working] and it is something different other than sport...at times it gets really manic and busy, but I think you kind of, from university, you learn to deal with that, so like time management and stuff, all those skills that you kind of have to be good at it to survive university, and it's a case of just switching lectures for something else.

This suggests that the skills required from a university dual career could be applicable to a work-sport dual career.

### *Factors underpinning decision*

For athletes that entered a work-sport dual career path post-university, the most common motivator to take this path was so that athletes could continue to fund their sports career. Emily (a) said:

I was put on a low band of funding...which isn't enough to live on, so then I had to get a part-time job, which is a lot easier said than done considering my training schedule because training is three times a day... I tutor A Level PE, so the money is kind of sorted...that was one of the main worries, because whilst you're at university, you've kind of got your parents backing.

Financial circumstances were also a motive for David (a) to take on a work-sport dual career path after he lost the funding he received when at university – "...that's the reason I'm only working part-time...I was sponsored by Nike, which actually came to an end, I had a three-year deal which basically saw me through university." Support staff also recognised that taking this path may be a motivator for some athletes because they could earn more money than being a professional athlete. Alexander (s) said – "...you will earn more money as a semi-professional player at national 1 and national 2 [level], and having a job, than you would being a professional player in the championships." When Liz left university, she chose to combine both work and postgraduate education with her sports career, creating a 'triple career'. Finances were again the major motivator for Liz (a) to work alongside postgraduate education and sport.

I can't not work, I wouldn't be able to afford to run my car which is how I get to training. I've been working at the post office, I can't afford to do my training and my masters [degree] without it, the only way to do all three was to have a job as well.

### ***Dropping out of Sport and Moving onto an Alternative Pathway***

Following exit from university, two athletes discontinued involvement from their sport and took an alternative path (into full time employment and into postgraduate study in a new country). Jason (s) suggested that, as a university, they have limited knowledge around how to support athletes that are leaving sport at the same time as they leave university – “I’m not sure how much we can prepare people for that double transition.” Faye (a) supported this - “...going to university, it’s the norm to be that elite athlete, when you leave, it takes away that elite athlete identity to think, ok, I am just a normal person, there’s nothing special about me.” Faye (a) further discussed how she felt when leaving her sport during the transition out of university:

It was really difficult for me, because I was injured at the time that I left [university], and I knew that I was going to move to France to start a new life ...I knew that I wasn’t going to be able to continue paddling at that point, and I had to leave both my sport and my university behind.

Loss of both sport and their life as a student could be a challenging scenario for athletes to cope with.

### ***Factors underpinning decision***

Athletes and stakeholders identified various factors that could lead student-athletes to drop out of sport at the same time as leaving university and take on new roles. Christine (s) said - “I think sometimes it’s [dropping out of sport] not under their control”. Ryan (s) supported this – “...there are more and more sports who are looking at university very positively and want universities to be part of their programmes...when they graduate and they’re no longer a student, suddenly they may not be required...and that leads to a lot of people just dropping out of their sport actually.” These comments suggest that for some athletes, their participation in sport is closely linked to being in education. Faye’s (a) decision

to discontinue involvement in her sport after leaving university was also out of her control due to a severe injury – "...it was a difficult decision, but it was kind of made for me [the decision to leave sport], the nature of my injury was just horrendous, so I just couldn't [continue competing], even now I would not be capable of training anymore." The reasons to take this path identified above are all out of the athletes' control. In addition, Ollie (a) spoke of his aspirations to continue his dual career after graduating university, but due to the structure of his sport, he felt no option but to end his sporting career:

You have to be a full-time athlete...all the top guys [athletes] are in London, you have to live there, all the sessions are half nine until half eleven and then in the evening it's like four until six, so to have a proper job would be impossible...it's difficult to go to university as well, I think that kind of made my decision as well actually [to drop out of sport]...that really cut me off.

This quote suggests that limited dual career opportunities post-university could lead athletes to take new paths. Finally, finances may also be a reason why athletes drop out of sport when leaving university. Ollie (a) also stated – "...where I was in the sport [not at a world-class level], I don't think I could financially do that either [continue competing], unless my parents were willing to fund me completely."

## **Discussion**

This qualitative study provides advancements to athlete dual career pathway and transition literature by exploring the paths that UK student-athletes take when they transition out of university and the factors underpinning pathway choice (e.g., Cartigny et al., 2019; Ryba et al., 2015). The current study found that athletes may advance into new dual career roles after their undergraduate university degrees, including that of a postgraduate student whilst competing in elite sport, and into a work-sport (and education) dual career. In addition,

athletes may advance onto full-time sport pathways; this decision is often made in the absence of being on a funded pathway (a make or break year). Finally, athletes may also (often involuntarily) retire from elite competitive sport following their transition out of university, and move onto an alternate pathway (e.g., full-time employment, postgraduate student). An additional element of this research was the exploration of the decision-making process around which path to take. This study identified a variety of factors that can impact athletes' decisions around what they do when they leave university and is valuable knowledge for stakeholders that play a role in supporting athletes during the decision-making phase.

Literature from the US outlines that when collegiate athletes leave university, the majority will experience a simultaneous transition out of competitive sport (e.g., Moreland-Bishop, 2009; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990; Smith & Hardin, 2018). This exit from sport for collegiate athletes highlights the almost inseparable relationship between elite sport development and education in the US (e.g., Fort, 2000; Ridpath, 2018). This was the same case for two athletes in the current study who had to involuntarily drop out of sport when they left university. These athletes attributed their drop out to not having the funds to train and compete (after losing multiple support sources), major injury, and the structure of professional training programmes limiting their ability to find suitable work. Lack of support to manage a dual career has previously been discussed as a factor that can lead to drop out from sport during the transition from the junior-to-senior level (Andronikos, Westbury, & Martindale, 2019). However, dropping out from elite level sport during the transition out of university because of limited opportunities to manage professional sport programmes with other areas of life (e.g., work) has not been discussed. This is despite research supporting the notion that engaging in education or work can have a positive impact on sporting performance (Lavalley, 2019).



An additional finding of this research was that some UK athletes leave university and enter a pathway as a full-time athlete without being on a funded support programme, identified as being a make or break year. Motivations to take this pathway included athletic goals (e.g., qualifying for an Olympic Games), financial backing from parents, perception that postgraduate education/work would be an obstacle to achieving desired sporting goals, and the aim of gaining selection for a funded support programme. If athletes are leaving university and training full-time in their sport in the absence of support programmes, it may be critical for career counsellors and other student-athlete professionals to meet with athlete's pre-transition to realistically examine the likelihood of athletes advancing their athletic careers (Lally & Kerr, 2005). Research suggests that transitioning from highly supportive university environments where athletes have access to various support services (e.g., lifestyle support, financial bursaries) to environments with no support can lead to mental health challenges (Jewett, Kerr, & Tamminen, 2018). Athletes who take this pathway could be at risk of poor well-being as they are under pressure to achieve in their sport before their make-or-break year is up. Athletes who pursued full-time sport in the absence of being on a recognised pathway also described being in challenging financial situations due to losing financial backing from their national governing body (NGB), and financial bursaries received through their universities. In some cases, it may be appropriate for athletes who are motivated to take this pathway to be supported in stepping away from high-level sport and with transitioning into an environment where they can financially support themselves (e.g., full-time work) and find new fulfilling roles (e.g., full-time employee). Another option would be for this population of athletes to be supported in staying on a dual career pathway when they leave university (e.g., find work alongside their sports roles or continue with their education).

An additional reason that athletes made the decision to enter full-time sport in the absence of support programmes was due to a lack of preparedness for a post-university

vocational career, that aligns with recent research on dual career pathways in sport (Cartigny et al., (2019). The ‘mind the gap’ model outlines that athletes on a ‘sport-dominant’ pathway at university may not perceive it to be important to prepare for a vocational career immediately after university (Cartigny et al., 2019). Due to a lack of funding to pursue careers as full-time athletes, these athletes may need to be mindful of the need to leave university and transition into work or further study.

Alongside the benefits that a dual career can have on psychological well-being (i.e., can switch focus onto other areas; Tekavc et al., 2015; Torregrosa et al., 2015), a factor that underpins athletes’ decision to advance into postgraduate study may be the valuable support services that they can continue to receive as part of sport scholarship programmes. This finding further highlights the key role that universities can play in the athletic development of elite athletes (Aquilina & Henry, 2010), and the value that extending university education can have not only on advancing career prospects, but also athlete’s sports careers. Alongside key support services (e.g., physiotherapy), universities can provide athletes with crucial financial support, with some UK universities providing as much as £10,000 to elite level athletes (Vickers, 2018). Finances were identified as a factor that underpinned athletes’ decision to take all four pathways. This suggests that the financial situation of an athlete is a critical factor in determining what athletes’ options are when they leave university and can create difficult decisions for athletes (e.g., decision around whether to combine work with lower-level sport or become a professional athlete on a lower wage).

Previous literature has suggested that when students leave university, they experience reduced financial dependence on their parents (e.g., Buhl, 2007). In contrast, the current study found that when some athletes left university, parental support (e.g., living expenses, emotional support) was a motivator for them to take a make or break year and transition into full-time sport. This finding suggests that family support may occur at an earlier time point

for UK student-athletes than outlined in previous theory (e.g., Wylleman et al., 2013).

Wylleman et al.'s (2013) holistic athletic career model suggests that family support may be reinstated when an athlete approaches athletic retirement. This finding suggests that despite being adults, parents may be a vital source of support for athletes during the decision-making phase around which path to take following exit from university and should be engaged during the process.

### ***Limitations and Future Research***

Although athletes from various sports were included in the current study, the complexities of the transition across different sports were not examined. A topic of interest for future research may be to explore whether there are any common themes across sports regarding the pathways taken by athletes and their motivators to take these pathways (e.g., is there a pattern between athletes in specific sports dropping out of sport during this transition). Athletes in specific sports may be appropriately supported to take certain post-university pathways, and stakeholders (e.g., NGB staff) may recognise that athletes are limited with the pathways that they can take after university in their sport. In addition, many athletes discussed the vital role that support and funding from their NGB played in their decision-making processes. Including NGB stakeholders in future research would be beneficial to understand their perceptions on the factors that underpin athletes' decisions around what they do when they leave university.

A limitation of this study is that data collection occurred at only one time point. Future research may benefit from interviewing the same athletes over a longitudinal period to explore the impact that specific motivations have on the desired success and well-being of athletes in their chosen paths (e.g., does the motivation to attend an Olympic Games lead to success for athletes who pursue a make or break year in full-time sport). In addition, tracking athletes longitudinally after they have left university may increase understanding on the types

of support that athletes may need at specific timepoints in their post-university journey, and whether such support is available. A further limitation of this study was the sampling of stakeholders from a single university. Different UK institutions may offer differing levels of support and thus observe differing experiences of student-athletes. Future research should look to include a multi-university stakeholder perspective. In addition to the sampling of stakeholders, a further limitation may have been the integration of stakeholders in a single focus group. It could be argued that by having managerial staff (e.g., director of sport) in the same focus group as staff that work under this stakeholder, they may not have contributed to the questions as honestly as they would have liked. Future research within this topic area should look to separate data collection with managerial staff and practitioners.

The results of this study outlined the key role of parents during transition. However, it would also be beneficial to understand the support mechanisms that are available and used from a micro (e.g., individual athlete characteristics), meso (e.g., teachers and coaches), and macro (e.g., university, NGBs) level during the transition out of university. In doing so, key stakeholders may have a greater understanding of how to adequately prepare student-athletes to take different pathways when they leave university, and the type of support that athletes require at different points during transition.

### ***Practical Implications***

The findings of this study are of interest to practitioners (e.g., coaches, lifestyle advisors) both inside and outside a university setting, sports clubs, and NGBs that play a role in supporting student-athletes decision-making around what their next steps will be.

Practitioners can use the findings to help athletes make well-informed decisions about what path to take after university. More specifically, using the underpinning factors, practitioners can support athletes to critically reflect on their motivations and future goals and come to a decision around what their most suitable pathway should be. Transitioning into full-time

sport in the absence of support programmes was a pathway that some athletes took. One of the reasons they did so was a lack of career exploration and perception that they would not need to consider another option (Sum et al., 2017; Lally & Kerr, 2005). If athletes at university are considering taking this path, practitioners (e.g., lifestyle advisors) should help them to become aware of the potential challenges they may face. As witnessed in this research, opportunities to transition into fully funded sports programmes after university may be limited and therefore practitioners need to address the reality with athletes that they may need to consider alternative options other than full-time sport.

Additionally, limited dual career opportunities in centralised or professional sport programmes (e.g., due to required training times) may imply that some sports do not consider or compensate for the possibility of their athletes continuing with a dual career post-university. This may subsequently lead to athletes feeling that they have no option but to retire from elite competitive sport. An implication of this research is that NGBs may need to consider more carefully how they can incorporate dual career opportunities into their centralised programmes (e.g., flexing training times) to allow athletes the opportunity to continue on a dual career path after their undergraduate university degree. Facilitating dual career opportunities may be of benefit to these organisations because undertaking a dual career has been identified as a factor that can both prolong and positively impact athletes' sporting careers (e.g., Lavalley & Robinson, 2007; Lavalley, 2019; Warriner & Lavalley, 2008). A lack of dual career support has also been associated with premature retirement from high-level sport (Aquilina, 2013; Wylleman & Reints, 2010), suggesting that investment in dual career opportunities and support could help to lengthen athletes' careers, and in turn, strengthen the sport. In addition, universities that currently do not support elite-level student-athletes in postgraduate study may need to consider developing support programmes that accommodate athletes advancing onto this level of study. The athletes that took this pathway

described positive experiences of doing so and had the opportunity to enhance their personal development, receive high-level support services (e.g., strength and conditioning), and in some cases, have increased flexibility of time to pursue their sport.

Finally, the results suggest that different stakeholders may have an impact on the pathway decision of athletes. These include parents (who may be in a position to offer financial support), NGBs (who often dictate athlete funding decisions), and university support staff (who can offer sport scholarship programmes). Therefore, it is important that when athletes are making the decision around which path to take when they leave university, there is a collaboration between different support sources to help the athlete critically examine their opportunities post-university. It has been suggested that collaboration between support providers is critical in dual career environments (e.g., Henriksen, Storm, Kuettel, Linnér, & Stambulova, 2020). To elaborate, university support providers (e.g., athlete lifestyle advisor), NGB representatives, parents, and any other key stakeholders (e.g., club coach) could hold a formalised meeting with the athlete to develop an exit plan. These stakeholders may play a valuable role in supporting the athlete to develop an exit plan as they can advise on the possibility of accessing supporting services, and possible funding opportunities (e.g., the NGB can advise whether the athlete is in a position to access funding to become a full-time athlete).

## **Conclusion**

This article contributes to existing athlete career pathway and transition research by highlighting the pathways that student-athletes may take when they have completed their university undergraduate studies and the factors that underpin their decision-making (e.g., finances, aim of qualifying for Olympic Games, lack of dual career opportunities, perception that work or further study will be an obstacle to achieving sport goals). This research also adds to the existing literature base as limited research has explored the athlete transition out

of a dual career context (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019). As many countries in Europe have similar education and sport systems as the UK (e.g., The Netherlands, Germany; Fort, 2000; Ridpath et al., 2019), the findings may be transferable to other European contexts. It is recommended that further studies should focus on the support mechanisms available from a stakeholder perspective (e.g., NGB, university) during this transition. In addition, understanding the longitudinal experiences of athletes after undergraduate university study would be of benefit.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

### **Data Availability**

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article [and/or] its supplementary materials.

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