


# Dual sport career experiences of student-athletes studying in South Africa and the USA

**Author:**Louis J. van Zyl<sup>1</sup> **Affiliation:**

<sup>1</sup>Department of Humanities Education, Faculty of Education, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

**Corresponding author:**

Louis van Zyl,  
lj.vanzyl@up.ac.za

**Dates:**

Received: 19 May 2023

Accepted: 28 Nov. 2023

Published: 02 Feb. 2024

**How to cite this article:**

Van Zyl, L.J. (2024). Dual sport career experiences of student-athletes studying in South Africa and the USA. *African Journal of Career Development*, 6(1), a96. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ajcd.v6i1.96>

**Copyright:**

© 2024. The Author.  
Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

**Background:** Institutions of higher education are hubs for student-athletes pursuing dual careers, in sports and higher education. The concepts of dual careers, transition models and support systems for student sports provide the conceptual framework for this study.

**Objectives:** The study investigated the dual sports career experiences of South African track and field student-athletes who studied at universities in South Africa and the United States of America (USA). Objectives determined satisfaction in terms of student-athlete support systems in their chosen localities.

**Method:** This qualitative study used a purposive sample of 12 participants from a general population of South African junior track and field athletes who pursued dual careers. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews.

**Results:** The respondents found the US National Association Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) sports system superior to the South African sports system. The dual-career student-athletes transitioning through the last two stages of the South African Long-Term Athlete Development model reported a lack of support that negatively impacted the success of their dual career balance.

**Conclusion:** The South African context of student sport is not generally conducive to creating and enabling a dual sports–academic career environment because of insufficient contextual, processional and sports-specific factors. The participants perceived the NCAA system of student sport as holistic and supportive of their dual-career development.

**Contribution:** This study adds to the limited pool of knowledge relating to the dual-career development of student-athletes, and provides a base line for future research studies.

**Keywords:** dual career; student-athletes; transition; support systems; South Africa; USA.

## Introduction

Globalisation has opened opportunities for the migration and mobility of people for labour and career development across national borders. This tendency is prevalent in several sectors of society including higher education and sport. Institutions of higher education promote internationalisation and development of their global reputation through migration and an exchange of faculty (Hristova et al., 2013), and by recruiting international students from diverse backgrounds (Arthur & Flynn, 2011; Peterson et al., 1999; Urban & Palmer, 2014).

Institutions of higher education are recognised hubs and training grounds for student-athletes who pursue elite sports careers while simultaneously furthering their academic studies, thereby following a dual-career trajectory (Hanassab & Tidwell, 2002; McMurtrie, 2011; Urban & Palmer, 2016). The significance of institutions of higher education as enablers of elite athlete-students' dual-career development is evident from the high percentage of student-athletes representing their countries at high profile sport events. Of the 626-member United States of America (USA) squad for the Tokyo Olympic Games, for example, 75% of the student-athletes had studied and competed at Division I, II and III universities in the USA (National Collegiate Athletic Association [NCAA], 2021). A similar situation was observed in the South African squad at the Tokyo Olympic Games – student-athletes comprised the majority (83%) of the 34-member South African Olympic squad.

Global internationalisation of the ecosystem of elite sport has become part and parcel of student-athlete career development. Institutions of higher education in the USA are widely recognised as the preferred choice of international student-athletes (Ryba et al., 2013) because of the unique

**Read online:**

Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

nature of their collegiate sport and support infrastructure (Israel & Batalova, 2021; Ryba et al., 2015). Full scholarships that are offered to promising South African junior athletes transitioning to senior competition are strong influencers for those wishing to attempt dual sports–academic careers in the USA (Nthangeni et al., 2021).

Student-athletes embarking on dual sports–academic careers face multiple challenges, especially if this coincides with a physical transition to a foreign country (Noriega, 2018). Common stressors include, among others, adapting to new high-performance education systems and socio-cultural contexts while sustaining their competition eligibility status (Noriega, 2018). It seems that student-athletes who successfully manage such stressors and demonstrate high-levels of task orientation are more successful than student-athletes who are more ego-oriented (NCAA, 2021). Johnson and Ivarsson (2017) warn, however, that when the stressors and demands of the transition process and changed competition structures exceed any student-athlete's coping capability, high levels of drop-out are evident. The extremely high drop-out rate of junior athletes (82%) among athletes who competed in the 2010 and 2012 junior International Associations of Athletic Federations (IAAF) World Championships as well as the 46% discontinuation rate of athletes after the 2012 Olympic Games (Alfred & Mayer, 2018) corroborate this actuality.

Student sport is embedded in some countries' sports development models and student-athlete support systems. Countries that structure sports participation according to a chosen model of sports development include Canada with its Sport for Life model (Way et al., 2016), the United Kingdom's Pyramid model (UK Talent Coaching and Performance, 2019) and South Africa's Long-Term Athlete Development (LTAD) model. To assist the significant transition from junior school to senior school sports participation, most institutions of higher education have dedicated units or department to manage their student-athletes (Burnett, 2010). Student-athletes are recognised as valuable enablers to build and grow a unique brand equity of their institutions and are subject to the criteria and guidelines of university sports structures to deliver mutual positive cost-benefit trade-offs (Macphail et al., 2003). In South Africa, University Sports South Africa (USSA) controls all student sports events while in the USA the NCAA functions as the legislative and administrative authority of most intercollegiate sport.

Pursuing a dual career while participating in elite sport is challenging whether the student-athlete embarks on this journey in their own or in a foreign country. A dual-career approach requires equal attention to be paid to education and sport. Setbacks are often experienced because of a combination of overtraining, burn-out, academic demands, and, in the case of transnational student-athletes, coping with homesickness and socio-cultural differences (Gomez et al., 2018). Balancing these demands in an equitable manner requires that strategies and support systems be readily available to the student-athletes to enable them to continue

their dual-career development in sport (Johnson, 2022; Johnson & Ivarsson, 2017).

The phenomenon of student-athletes pursuing dual careers at institutions of higher education is well researched (Aquilina & Henry, 2010; Condello et al., 2019; Guidotti et al., 2015; Lee & Opio, 2011; Ryba et al., 2015). Most of the research in this field focusses on the dual careers of student-athletes in European and USA institutions of higher education. Limited research has been devoted to the experiences of groups of student-athletes from Africa who locate to institutions of higher education in the USA (Lee & Opio, 2011). Sutherland (2018) explored the experiences of student-athletes pursuing sports careers at a South African school, but no studies were found exploring South African student-athletes' experiences at South African or US institutions of higher learning while pursuing dual careers in sport. This situation constitutes a significant gap in the scientific literature related to a South African student-athlete milieu.

The above-mentioned context led to the research question for this study: How do South African student-athletes experience their reality of dual careers in sport and education at South African and US institutions of higher education? Acknowledging that pursuing a dual sports career at a US institution of higher learning is the preferred choice of the majority of migrating student-athletes (Israel & Batalova, 2021), the aforesaid research question led to the aim of this study, namely to investigate and compare the experiences and life stories of South African dual-career track and field student-athletes who studied at South African and US universities. The objective of the study was to determine their satisfaction with the student-athlete support systems in their chosen locality, either the USA or South Africa, and to identify and analyse the contextual factors and variables influencing the experiences of dual-career student-athletes.

## Demarcation of the research context

The research context of this study was limited to a cohort of South African junior track and field student-athletes who received full scholarships to US universities, and who pursued dual-career paths in sport in South Africa and the USA. This study drew on a previous master's study from the author about the transition of track and field athletes from junior to senior elite sports participation.

## Conceptual framework

The discourse on student-athletes is informed by multiple concepts including the dual-career approach, transition theory, and student-athlete support systems. There continues to be interest in the topic of dual sports careers and this has been the focus of several researchers in recent decades (Condello et al., 2019; Isidori, 2015; Ryba et al., 2015; Stambulova & Wylleman, 2015; Stambulova et al., 2020; Vidal-Vilaplana et al., 2022). The globalisation and professionalisation of elite sport, together with the reality that sports careers end prematurely compared with other

professional careers, emphasises the importance of balancing sport and education in a dual-career approach (Aquilina, 2013). Ryba et al. (2015) define the concept of a dual career as the combination of challenges that student-athletes experience when combining an elite sports career with academic studies to empower them for future roles in society (Condello et al., 2019).

Following a dual sports career is a dynamic and multifactor process that unfolds on different levels. The responsibility of successfully pursuing a dual sports career is not only that of the student-athlete on a micro level but also of the dual-career culture or support systems on the meso, macro, and global levels (Condello et al., 2019). Individual factors, for example, socio-cultural background, sex, age and chosen sport (micro level), interact with relationships with coaches and parents (meso level), with culture and policies of institutions of higher learning (macro level), and with policies of international sports governing bodies (global level). Given the complexity of pursuing a dual sports career, Condello et al. (2019) argue that positive relationships and structured cooperation between multiple stakeholders is key to creating a conducive environment for student-athletes to successfully follow a dual-career approach.

Pursuing a dual sports career implies that student-athletes transition through several stages of skill development, increased levels of participation and performance, and personal difficulties in settings that require coping with change. Transitions refer to periods of change in individuals' life circumstances and events that cause disruptions of roles, routines and relationships (Barclay, 2017). Transition within sport and/or out of sport is inevitable during the dual careers of student-athletes, and several models explore the concept of transition. Transition models provide frameworks for understanding and contextualising the changes that influence or disrupt student-athletes' dual sports careers. For instance, Taylor and Ogilvie's (1994) model of transition focusses on the out-of-sport transition of athletes. Sports termination can be attributed mainly to age, deselection, injury or free choice. Furthermore, the outcomes of out-of-sport transition can be either positive or a crisis (distress). Coping skills and adaptation resources available to the athlete determine the quality of the transition (Choi & Kim, 2021). Schlossberg's transition model is arguably the model most widely used.

It postulates that individuals cope with transitional change in different ways depending on three dimensions: (1) characteristics of the transition (e.g., timing, onset, duration and role changes); (2) characteristics of the pre- and post-transition environments (e.g., support systems, institutional support and physical settings); and (3) characteristics of the individual experiencing the transitions (e.g., age, gender and psychosocial abilities). Changes or transitions affect the dual careers of student-athletes and can be either predictable (normative) or unexpected (non-normative) (Choi & Kim, 2021).

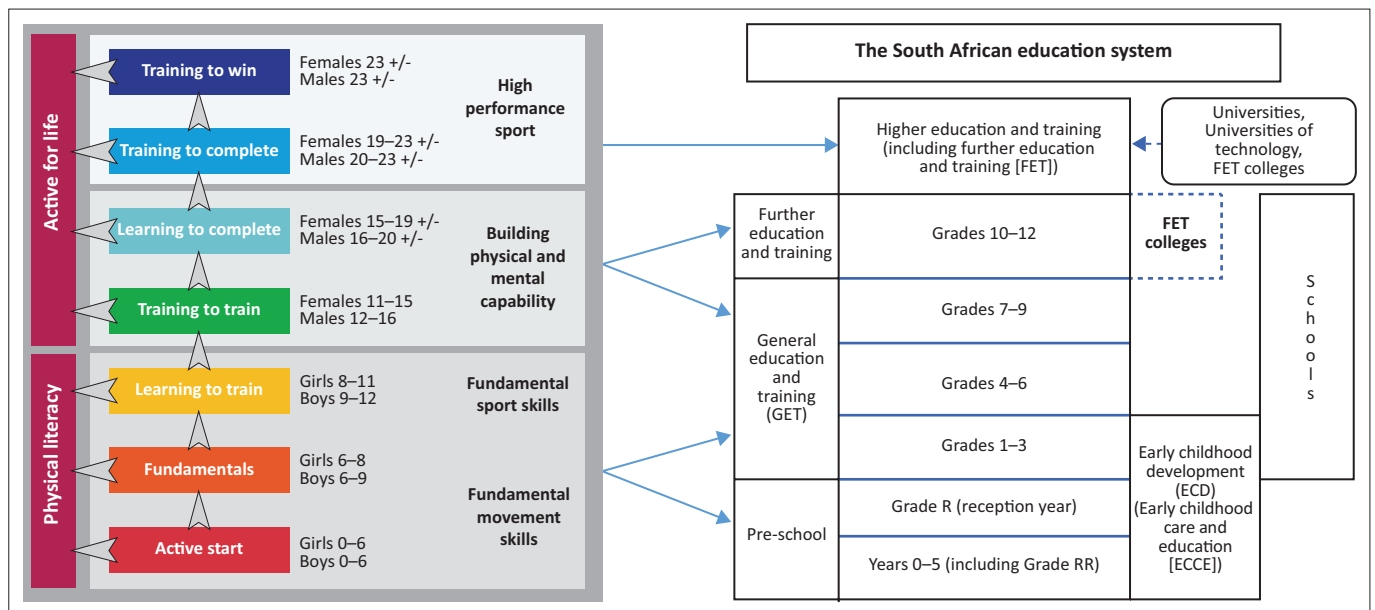
Stambulova's sports career transition model and Wylleman and Lavalée's development model add to the conceptual understanding of within-sports career transitions (Wylleman & Lavalée, 2004). According to Stambulova's model (Choi & Kim, 2021), athletes face several demands and barriers that require coping and support strategies during their careers. Wylleman and Lavalée argue that student-athletes experience physical, individual, psychological, and academic transitions in their dual-career journeys (Choi & Kim, 2021). The common denominator of the transition models is the challenges and changes in the dual-career sports journeys of student-athletes. Access to and quality of support systems and individual capability to handle change determine negative or positive outcomes of within-sports dual-career transitions.

The nature of a dual career in sport requires multifaceted support systems to enable student-athletes to simultaneously study and participate in sport. Encouraging student-athletes to follow dual sports careers places complex demands on all the role players and frameworks in the South African sportscape. This often poses a challenge for national sport federations, institutions of higher learning, and the USSA. As role players, they have to organise, develop and maintain teaching, learning, tutoring, coaching and career development systems as well as pathways to support the student-athletes (Isidori, 2015). In South Africa, LTAD is recognised as the generic support system to guide the transition of athletes over seven stages from introductory sports participation to elite sports participation and dual-career pathways (Way et al., 2016).

The progress of athlete career pathways is captured in the differential and progressive stages of the LTAD model that reflect the specific needs, contexts and associated developmental phases. The main elements of LTAD, captured in the left quadrant of Figure 1, corresponds to the different school phases or grades of the South African educational system to transition from school sport to post-school sports participation (Beckmann & Bipath, 2016).

The final two stages of the LTAD model (training-to-compete and training-to-win) connect to high performance or elite sports contexts relating to student-athletes' dual careers. National sport federations represent significant actors in the LTAD model as they are responsible for sports-specific governance and support to transition successfully through the stages of the LTAD model. Against the background of the LTAD model, student sport at South African institutions of higher learning is collectively governed by national sports federations and the USSA, which aims to facilitate and influence the development and delivery of student sport from mass student-sports participation to elite sport student-sports performers (USSA, 2023).

In the USA, the NCAA governs student sport at institutions of higher learning. The NCAA strives to provide world-class academic experiences for student-athletes that foster lifelong well-being (NCAA, 2023). To achieve this mission, the NCAA



Source: Beckmann, J., & Bipath, K. (2016). South Africa: Research on South African public school principals, an uncompromising desire to improve the quality of education. In H. Årlestig, C. Day, & O. Johansson, (Eds.), *A decade of research on school principles. Studies in educational leadership* (vol. 21, pp. 521–523). Springer

**FIGURE 1:** Long-Term Athlete Development model (Balyi et al., 2013) in articulation with the South African education system.

organises and delivers safe, fair and inclusive sports competitions in collaboration with Division I, II and III colleges and universities. Eligibility to participate in NCAA competitions are guided by rules, regulations, and academic, financial, and coaching support systems to facilitate the dual sports careers of student-athletes (NCAA, 2023).

## Research methods and design

### Research design

This study followed a qualitative, exploratory and interpretive research design that allowed respondents to self-report and interpret their experiences as student-athletes as they transitioned from junior to senior levels. It also allowed the researcher access to insightful and informative data and added richness and depth to the respondents' narratives (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

### Research area and sample

The general population of the study included 58 male and female junior track and field athletes ( $N = 58$ ) aged 18–20 years who were enrolled at institutions of higher learning at the time of data collection. A non-probability purposive sample of 12 respondents ( $n = 12$ ) was collected from the general population. Four respondents followed dual careers at US universities while eight pursued dual careers at South African universities.

### Research instrument and data collection

Semi-structured interviews were used to answer the research question and achieve the objectives stated for this study. The seven-step interview process of Skinner et al. (2015) was followed to ensure the quality and integrity of the data and which allowed the respondents to reflect on their dual-career

sports journeys through narrative accounts (Skinner et al., 2015). The interviews were conducted at a location and time of the participants' choice to allow for private conversations and an environment relatively free from interference.

### Data analysis

The interviews were voice recorded with the written consent of the respondents and transcribed verbatim. The transcriptions were then analysed using a coding index to identify themes and sub-themes (Skinner et al., 2015), and to establish links and comparisons between the respondents' dual-career experiences in the USA and in South Africa. The coding process identified related words or phrases used by the respondents concerning specific incidents or which were mentioned repeatedly by more than one participant. Themes and sub-themes were interpreted against the background of Stambulova's sports career transition model, Wylleman and Lavallee's development model, the LTAD model, and the support systems of the NCAA.

### Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness refers to the credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability of research findings (Belotto, 2018). To obtain this, the transcripts were subjected to member-checking by the respondents for accuracy and consent (Rose & Johnson, 2020). Field notes and my insider's perspective as a former international student-athlete provided key insights into the contextual realities of the research group and served as a form of data triangulation (Maree, 2019).

### Ethical consideration

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the University of Pretoria, Faculty of Education ethics committee (No. HU 17/03/04). The respondents' rights to



self-determination, anonymity, confidentiality and informed consent were observed. The respondents were advised that they could withdraw from the study at any time. They were numbered from 1 to 12 in the transcriptions to ensure anonymity. Confidentiality was maintained by saving the data on a secure, password-protected computer.

## Results

Three primary themes emerged from the data analysis: (1) the student-athlete dual-career system, (2) transition from junior (school) to senior (university) sport, and (3) dropping out of competitive sport while ensuing a dual sports career.

## Findings and discussion

From the data, three themes emerged regarding the athletes in the South African and US cohorts: dual-career student-athlete systems, school-university transition, and dropping out of competitive sport.

### Dual-career student-athlete systems

A considerable difference was observed between the dual-career student-athlete systems in South Africa and the USA. The respondents commented repeatedly on the remarkable and holistic support systems in the USA, which enabled the student-athletes to succeed in both their sports and academic careers. The results revealed support systems that provided academic support, specialist coaching, optimal training, competition as part of athlete preparation, and medical support in the case of injuries and rehabilitation. The US universities participating under the umbrella of the NCAA provided a wide variety of educational services to assist in the student-athletes' academic progress and general transition to the higher demands of university sport. Athletic advisors assisted departmental faculty (who were officially responsible for academic advisement) and NCAA rules and regulations to maintain eligibility.

Conversely, the respondents pursuing dual careers at South African institutions of higher learning articulated disappointing experiences with their student-athlete support systems. Medical support appeared to be a substantive challenge for the respondents pursuing dual careers in South Africa. It appears that holistic support systems for these student-athletes to navigate the demands of transition within sport was largely absent when compared with that of the NCAA in the USA. The student-athletes in South Africa were responsible, for example, for their own medical costs when injuries occurred and they did not have dedicated academic advisors to guide their academic journeys towards graduation. The disparities between the South African and the US student-athlete systems are highlighted by following respondents' comments:

'It is just completely different in America compared to here in South Africa. The facilities and coaching staff are just amazing [USA-based student-athlete].' (Participant 6, Female, 23 years old)

'If South Africa was able to put in place a structured system to support athletics, I think we could be world beaters. However, this support system would need to assist all athletes, not just have one or two athletes who compete in 100m, 200m, or 400m sprint events. We could have three athletes in a final at every world championship and Olympics [South Africa-based student-athlete].' (Participant 9, Male, 24 years old)

Sports performance involves a multifaceted mixture of coaching, training and sports science that focusses on sports-science-related factors in congruence with training. During the interviews, it was evident that the respondents experienced a range of training programmes. All the respondents reflected positively on their coaches and training programmes during university-level track and field events. There was general consensus among the respondents that their coaches played a significant role during the initial years of their dual sports careers at university level. Several respondents indicated that if it had not been for the coach, they would have dropped out of high-performance sport. All the respondents indicated an increased and more professional approach towards their training following their transition from junior- to senior-level sports participation. It seems, however, that the USA-based student-athletes followed an intensive training and competitive programme that was more demanding than that offered at South African universities. Even though all the respondents indicated that they had access to training facilities designed and used primarily for training in sports programmes and which consisted of outdoor-indoor athletic fields and related facilities, including gymnasiums, specialised equipment and training rooms, offices, locker rooms and retail concession areas attached to training facilities, the US context proved superior. One of the US-based student-athletes commented, 'It is just completely different in America compared to here in South Africa. The facilities and coaching staff are just amazing'.

Achieving success as a student-athlete following a dual career depended on a set of interactive factors. The synergy created between contextual (funding), processual (lifestyle support, cooperation between role players) and specific (hierarchy of well-structured competition opportunities) factors supplied the bedrock for success for dual-career student-athletes (Houlihan & Green, 2008). It became apparent that the student-athletes in the training-to win-stage of the LTAD model received limited to no financial support from the national sports federations or from the umbrella sports systems in South Africa. Parents were the main financial support for most of the South African-based student-athletes. One such respondent expressed his perceptions as follows:

'I didn't receive any financial support from Athletics South Africa, SASCOC, or the HPC [High Performance Centre] when trying to resolve this issue. My parents paid for all my bills because there is no system currently in place to assist athletes in this regard.' (Participant 11, male, 24 years old)

Processual factors were also underdeveloped in the South African student sports context as can be deduced from the following narrative:

'I was interviewed, and the interview was broadcast on television, but I never received any financial support. Following the Youth Olympics, I never heard from organisations again, despite running competitive times in my matric year. I was never approached by Athletics South Africa or SASCOC again. [*South Africa-based student-athlete*]' (Participant 12, Female, 24 years old)

## Transition from school to university

The transition from high school to university athletics posed challenges for many of the student-athletes. They had to adapt and adhere to academic requirements while balancing the demands of their sport, social lives, mental health, new environments, proper nutrition, and getting sufficient rest and quality sleep. They were expected to navigate their new lifestyle environments while succeeding athletically, academically and socially. To accomplish this transition, universities in the USA offered comprehensive support to the dual-career student-athletes through mentoring and tutoring programmes, first-year seminar classes, and regular meetings with academic advisors and coaches (Gardner, 2018). The supremacy of the holistic support systems available to student-athletes in the USA was evident from some of the respondents' reflections:

'It was difficult to know at the time and staying in South Africa may have become a decision I would regret as well. The South African facilities and support programmes cannot be compared to those in America, but we have competent coaches who are knowledgeable enough. We have all the coaches necessary for different aspects of athletics – such as strength training and track training. However, Americans provide an entire system to support their athletes, and that is where they gain the advantage over us [*USA-based student-athlete*].' (Participant 1, Male, 24 years old)

'I did not run well now. I have struggled with an injury for years, but, as in terms of, their stuff is much better explained, as you become part and you, you do not have to worry, you do not have to worry, you can just practice. [*USA-based student-athlete*].'

'It was very difficult for me because it is a new coach and because I am not used to how they train in America. But this is how I am because I mean, I was a junior [*USA-based student-athlete*].' (Participant 2, Male, 24 year old)

South Africa-based athletes found transitioning from school to university sport challenging. The respondents pointed out that the role changes (junior to senior track and field), new coaches, and the academic demands of a dual career were not supported by an enabling environment. Similar challenges by international students were found by Lawerncia Okai (Okai, 2023).

## Dropping out of competitive sport

The student-athletes following dual careers voiced multiple reasons for retiring from competitive sport. Those who had studied at US universities cited various reasons if they had had unsuccessful dual careers in the USA. These were: winning-at-all-costs-environments; the negative impact from coaches, the demands of different stakeholders, a lack of communication and support for athlete well-being, and the challenges of combining their studies with sports

participation. Even though 4 of the 12 respondents were awarded scholarships in the USA, 3 returned to South Africa less than a year after arriving in the USA. They found the transition from being home-based during their school careers to studying independently abroad too daunting and overwhelming, and subsequently dropped out of track and field altogether on their return to South Africa. Only one respondent remained in the USA and progressed to an Olympic Games final at the following Olympic cycle.

Unexpected, that is non-normative, injuries were cited as the main reason why South Africa-based track and field athletes terminated their dual sports careers at institutions of higher education in South Africa. This can be attributed to a lack of contextual and processual support:

'I didn't receive any financial support from Athletics South Africa, SASCOC, or the HPC [*High Performance Centre*] when trying to resolve this issue [*injuries*]. My parents paid for all my bills because there is no system currently in place to assist athletes in this regard [*South Africa-based student-athlete*].' (Participant 11, Male, 24 years old)

All 12 respondents ( $N = 12$ ) transitioned through the stages of LTAD during their sports participation journey in South Africa as junior athletes up to the last two stages, namely training-to-compete and training-to-win. The four respondents who migrated to US institutions of higher education transitioned successfully to the training-to-win-stage and pursued dual sports careers under the auspices of the integrated and comprehensive NCAA student-athlete system. The reflections and narratives of these respondents confirmed the superiority of the NCAA system as a structured, competitive university league system, which increased their chances of dual-career student success. This finding validates the conclusions of Israel and Batalova (2021) and Stambulova et al. (2015) on the dominance of the US student-athlete system.

As predicted by Stambulova's sports career transition model, the US-based respondents' normative transition to the training-to-win stage of the LTAD model was better supported by the infrastructure and coping and support strategies of the NCAA at US institutions of higher education than it would have been in South Africa. The dual-career student-athletes in the USA were adequately supported to cope with physical, psychological and financial changes and, therefore, experienced their within-sport transitions as positive and successful (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2015). However, student-athletes' coping abilities also determined the perceived success of transitions within sport (Choi & Kim, 2021). In this regard, the findings suggest that despite a superior NCAA system most of the respondents who pursued dual careers in the USA experienced distress as 75% of the respondents indicated that they had returned to South Africa within a year. This, according to Schlossberg's transition theory, points to a lack of individual psychosocial coping abilities to handle their individual settings successfully (Choi & Kim, 2021).

The South Africa-based respondents who transitioned to the training-to-win stage of the LTAD model at South African institutions of higher education also experienced their normative transition from junior- to senior-level sport as stressful. The respondents reflected on the lack of support systems and coping strategies as they were largely left to their own devices. The support systems and resources of the South African national sport federation as well as that of the USSA system were experienced as ad hoc compared with those of the NCAA. Moreover, the student-athletes following dual careers at local South African institutions of higher learning were exposed to external factors such as politics and economics. Financial support was lacking that influenced their performance when seeking to attain dual-career success. Internal factors such as self-esteem, self-belief and interpersonal relationships also had an impact on their dual careers. Against the background of Schlossberg's sports career transition model (Choi & Kim, 2021), these findings were expected, as predicted in Wylleman and Lavallee's development model (Stambulova & Lavallee, 2015), which argued that a misalignment of one or more factors could likely lead to negative outcomes of within-sport transition.

A comparison between the narratives of the South African-based and US-based respondents revealed the perception that the USA NCAA was regarded as the gold standard of dual sports career development. This finding is in line with Houlihan and Green's (2008) and Israel and Batalova's (2021) notions that institutions of higher education in the USA are the preferred choice for dual-career sports pathways because of their holistic NCAA support system for student-athletes.

## Conclusion and recommendations

This qualitative exploratory study focussed on answering the research question of how track and field student-athletes experienced the realities of their dual careers at South African and US institutions of higher education. Overall, the findings indicate that even though the South African LTAD model theoretically provides support throughout all seven stages of sport participation, in reality, student-athletes with dual careers experience limited support, which causes distress during their within-sports transitions (Choi & Kim, 2021).

It becomes clear that the South African context of student sport is not particularly conducive to creating and enabling a dual-career sports environment because of insufficient contextual, professional and sport-specific factors (Houlihan & Green, 2008). Student-athletes in South African dual-career contexts continue to be, to a great extent, left to their own financial devices and to parental support. Furthermore, a lack of coherent and cooperative dual-career development management strategies between the role players to achieve a positive transition between the last two stages of the LTAD model appear to be lacking. Conversely, dual-career student-athletes participating under the NCAA student sports system

in the USA experienced holistic support in the form of funding, lifestyle support, cooperating strategies between the role players, and a well-developed hierarchy of opportunities for competition. Yet, the findings also indicated that the South African respondents in the NCAA system were unable to cope with psychosocial demands of the transition from junior to senior sport and, hence, most of the respondents who had been based at US institutions of higher education returned prematurely to South Africa.

In response to the findings of this study, it is proposed that a holistic student-athlete support system should be prioritised in South Africa. Practical strategies such as sustainable financial support and strategic alliances between the national sports governing bodies, the USSA and institutions of higher education are desperately needed to enable dual sports career success within the parameters of the South African LTAD model. Furthermore, a well-developed system of regular, high-quality national competitions are required to scaffold the performance of student-athletes to Olympic participation levels.

## Limitations of the research

The limitations of this study include the lack of generalisability of the findings because of the qualitative research design and the relatively small purposive sample size. The self-reported data collection method presents another limitation to the study as the lack of previous research on dual-career development of student-athletes in South Africa inhibited verification of the results of the existing research. The exploratory nature of the study demarcated the research context to only South African student-athletes participating in one sports discipline, namely track and field.

## Further research in this area

Against the background of the results of this study, the following future research directions are recommended: (1) Expand the research context to analyse and compare the experiences of dual-career student-athletes from different nationalities in African Union Region 5 and different sports to contribute to the scholarly literature on dual-career development in Africa; (2) conduct similar studies with bigger probability sample sizes to allow for generalisation of the research findings; and (3) investigate the out-of-sport transitions and post-sports success of dual-career athletes who successfully graduated from South African institutions of higher education.

## Acknowledgements

The author would like to extend heartfelt gratitude and appreciation to the participants who generously contributed to this research project. Their invaluable participation and cooperation were crucial in obtaining the necessary data and insights to address the research objectives and the future generation of athletes.



## Competing interests

The author has declared that no competing interest exists.

## Author's contributions

This academic research article reflects the collaborative effort of a single author. The author acknowledges sole responsibility for the conception, design, execution, analysis, and interpretation of the research project presented herein.

## Funding information

This academic research project was conducted without receiving any external funding or financial support. The research was carried out solely based on the resources available within the researcher's institution or personal means. The absence of external funding did not influence the design, execution, analysis, interpretation, or reporting of the research findings. The researcher involved in this project declares that he has no conflicts of interest related to funding or financial support that could potentially bias the results or conclusions.

## Data availability

The data utilised and/or generated during this research are available upon reasonable request. Researchers, scholars, and individuals interested in accessing the data may contact the corresponding author or the responsible institution to initiate the data sharing process.

## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this academic article are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any organisation, institution, or individual associated with the author, and the publisher. The author bears complete responsibility for the content presented herein.

## References

- Alfred, L., & Mayer, R. (2018). *ASA South African Athletics Annual* (66th ed.). Luke Alfred & Richard Mayer.
- Aquilina, D. (2013). A study of the relationship between elite athletes' educational development and sporting performance. *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 30(4), 374–392. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09523367.2013.765723>
- Aquilina, D., & Henry I. (2010). Elite athletes and university education in Europe: A review of policy and practice in higher education in the European Union Member States. *International Journal of Sport Policy*, 2(1), 25–47. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19406941003634024>
- Arthur, N., & Flynn, S. (2011). Career development influences international students who pursue permanent immigration to Canada. *International Journal of Educational and Vocational Guidance*, 11, 221–237. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10775-011-9212-5>
- Balyi, I., Way, R. & Higgs, C. (2013). *Long-term athlete development*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.
- Barclay, S.R. (2017). Schlossberg's transition theory. In W.K. Killam & S. Degges-White (Eds.), *College student development: Applying theory to practice on the diverse campus* (pp. 23–34). Springer.
- Beckmann, J., & Bipath, K. (2016). South Africa: Research on South African public school principals, an uncompromising desire to improve the quality of education. In H. Arlestig, C. Day, & O. Johansson, (Eds.), *A decade of research on school principles. Studies in educational leadership* (vol. 21, pp. 521–523). Springer.
- Belotto, M.J. (2018). Data analysis methods for qualitative research: Managing the challenges of coding, interrater reliability, and thematic analysis. *The Qualitative Report*, 23(11), 2622–2633. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2018.3492>
- Burnett, C. (2010). Factors influencing the recruitment of students for university sport: The case of University of Johannesburg, South Africa's research. *African Journal for Physical, Health Education, Recreation and Dance*, 16(s1-1), 63–71. <https://doi.org/10.4314/ajpherd.v16i4.64260>
- Choi, J., & Kim, H.D. (2021). Sustainable careers of athletes: Themes and concepts regarding transition theories involving athletes. *Sustainability*, 13(9), 4824. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13094824>
- Condello, G., Capranica, L., Doupona, M., Varga, K., & Burk, V. (2019). Dual-career through the elite university student-athletes' lenses: The international FISU-EAS survey. *PLoS One*, 14(10), e0223278. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0223278>
- Creswell, J.W., & Creswell, J.D. (2018). *Research design* (5th ed.). Sage.
- Gardner, G. (2018). *The effect of parental involvement on student-athlete academic performance, academic self-efficacy, functional independence, and achievement of adulthood criteria*. PhD thesis, Graduate Student theses, dissertations, & professional papers, University of Montana. Retrieved from <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd/11169>
- Gomez, J., Bradley, J., & Conway, P. (2018). The challenges of a high-performance student-athlete. *Irish Educational Studies*, 37(3), 329–349. <https://doi.org/10.1080/003233315.2018.1484299>
- Guidotti, F., Cortis, C., & Capranica, L. (2015). Dual career of European student-athletes: A systematic literature review. *Kinesiol Slov*, 21(3), 5–20.
- Hanassab, S., & Tidwell, R. (2002). International students in higher education: Identification of needs and implications for policy and practice. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 6(4), 305–322. <https://doi.org/10.1177/102831502237638>
- Houlihan, B., & Green, M. (2008). Comparative elite sport development. In B. Houlihan & M. Green (Eds.), *Comparative elite sport development: Systems, structures and public policy* (pp. 1–25). Elsevier.
- Hristova, S., Petrovska, I., & Dimitrova, M. (2013). Internationalization in higher education: Trends and opportunities. *Analele Universitatii 'Eftimie Murgu' Resita. Fascicola II*, 90–100.
- Isidori, E. (2015). The dual career of student-athletes: A pedagogical challenge. *Cultura, Ciencia y Deporte*, 10(29), 99–101. Retrieved from <https://www.redalyc.org/pdf/1630/163042539001.pdf>
- Israel, S., & Batalova, J. (2021, 14 January). International Students in the United States. *Migration Policy Institute*. Retrieved from <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/international-students-united-states-2020>
- Johnson, G. (2022, May 24). NCAA Student-athlete well-being study 2022: Mental health issues remain in minds of student-athletes. *NCAA Research*. Retrieved from <https://www.ncaa.org/news/2022/5/24/media-center-mental-health-issues-remain-on-minds-of-student-athletes.aspx>
- Johnson, U., & Ivarsson, A. (2017). Psychosocial factors and sport injuries: Prediction, prevention and future research directions. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 16, 89–92. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2017.04.023>
- Lee, J., & Opio, T. (2011). Coming to America: Challenges and difficulties faced by African student-athletes. *Sport Education and Society*, 16(5), 629–644. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2011.601144>
- Macphail, A., Gorely, T., & Kirk, D. (2003). Young people's socialisation into sport: A case study of an athletics club. *Sport, Education and Society*, 8(2), 251–267. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13573320309251>
- Maree, K. (2019). *First steps in research* (3rd edn.). Van Schaik.
- McMurtree, B. (2011, November). International enrolments at U.S. colleges have grown but still rely on China. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from <http://chronicle.com/article/International-Enrollments-at/129747/>
- NCAA. (2021). *International student-athlete participation*. NCAA Research. Retrieved from <https://www.ncaa.org/sports/2018/3/21/international-student-athlete-participation.aspx>
- NCAA. (2023). *Mission and objectives of the NCAA, Global sports matters*. Retrieved from <https://www.ncaa.org/sports/2021/6/28/mission-and-priorities.aspx>
- Noriega, E. (2018, 8 May). Wish I knew then: International student-athletes face unique challenges. *Global Sports Matters*. Retrieved from <https://globalsportmatters.com/culture/2018/05/08/international-student-athletes-unique-challenges/>
- Nthangeni, S., Toriola, A., Paul, Y., & Naidoo, V. (2021). Student-athlete or athlete-student: Analysis of benefits and barriers of university sport participation in South Africa. *Annals of Applied Sport Science*, 9(2), 0–0. <https://aassjournal.com/article-1-924-en.html>
- Okai, L.B. (2023). Adjustment challenges of international students: Implications for social work practice. *International Journal for Social Work*, 10(2), 16. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/373912518\\_Adjustment\\_Challenges\\_of\\_International\\_Students\\_Implications\\_for\\_Social\\_Work\\_Practice](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/373912518_Adjustment_Challenges_of_International_Students_Implications_for_Social_Work_Practice)
- Peterson, D.M., Briggs, P., Dreasher, L., Horner, D.D., & Nelson, T. (1999). Contributions of international students and programs to campus diversity. *New Directions for Student Services*, 86, 67–77. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ss.8609>
- Rose, J., & Johnson, C.W. (2020). Contextualizing reliability and validity in qualitative research: Toward more rigorous and trustworthy qualitative social science in leisure research. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 51(4), 432–445. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00222216.2020.1722042>
- Ryba, T.V., Stambulova, N.B., Ronkainen, N.J., Bundgaard, J., & Selänne, H. (2015). Dual career pathways of transnational athletes. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 21, 125–134. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2014.06.002>
- Ryba, T.V., Stambulova, N.B., Si, G., & Schinke, R.J. (2013). ISSP position stand: Culturally competent research and practice in sport and exercise psychology. *International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 11(2), 123–142. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1612197X.2013.779812>



- Skinner, J., Edwards, A., & Corbett, B. (2015). *Research methods for sport management*. Routledge.
- Stambulova, N.B., Ryba T.V., & Henriksen K. (2020). Career development and transitions of athletes: The International Society of Sport Psychology position stand revisited. *International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 19(4), 524–550. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1612197X.2020.1737836>
- Stambulova, N.B., & Wylleman, P. (2015). Dual career development and transitions. *Psychology, Sport and Exercise*, 21, 1–134. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2015.05.003>
- Sutherland, D.R. (2018). *An exploration into the dual experience of the TuksSport High School learner-athlete*. Unpublished master's dissertation. Counselling Psychology, Department of Psychology, University of Pretoria.
- Taylor, J., & Ogilvie, B.C. (1994). A conceptual model of adaptation to retirement among athletes. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 6(1), 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10413209408406462>
- UK Talent Coaching and Performance. (2016). *Understanding the pyramid sport development model*. UK Coaching. Retrieved from <https://www.ukcoaching.org/resources/topics/guides/understanding-the-pyramid-model>
- University Sport South Africa (USSA). (2023). *Constitution. Amended 15 April 2023*. Retrieved from <https://ussa.org.za/doc/ussaconstitution.pdf>
- Urban, E.L., & Palmer, L.B. (2014). International students as a resource for internationalisation of higher education. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 18(4), 305–324. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315313511642>
- Urban, E.L., & Palmer, L.B. (2016). International students' perceptions of the value of U.S. higher education. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 18(4), 153–174. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v6i1.486>
- Vidal-Vilaplana, A., Valantine, I., Staskeviciute-Butiene, I., Gonzalez-Serrano, M.H., Capranica, L., & Calabuig, F. (2022). Combining sport and academic career: Exploring the current state of students' dual career research field. *Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport & Tourism Education*, 31, 100399. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhlste.2022.100399>
- Way, R., Balyi, I., Trono, C., Harber, V., & Jurbala, P. (2016). *Sport for life – Long-term athlete development resource paper 2.1*. Sport for Life Society. Retrieved from [https://sportforlife.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/LTAD-2.1-EN\\_web.pdf?x96000](https://sportforlife.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/LTAD-2.1-EN_web.pdf?x96000)
- Wylleman, P., Alfermann, D., & Lavallee, D. (2004). Career transitions in sport: European perspectives. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 5(1), 7–20. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1469-0292\(02\)00049-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1469-0292(02)00049-3)