



Guidelines for Sports Clubs on Supporting Dual Careers

Exploring global and EU frameworks supporting athletes' education and career development alongside their sporting excellence

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Why Dual Careers Matter



Balanced Development is Essential

Athletes need more than just sporting excellence to thrive throughout their lives. A dual-career approach combines high-performance sport with education or vocational training, creating well-rounded individuals prepared for life beyond competition.

This balanced development significantly reduces transition risks when athletes retire from competitive sport, whether due to injury, age, or personal choice. Research shows that athletes with educational qualifications experience smoother career transitions and better long-term life satisfaction.

Understanding the EU Definition



Structured Approach

A formalized system that enables athletes to pursue excellence in sport while developing academic or vocational competencies



Combined Pathways

Integration of sporting careers with educational programs, ensuring neither aspect is compromised



Institutional Support

Coordinated efforts between sports organizations, educational institutions, and employers to facilitate dual commitments

Key Challenges Dual Careers Address

Lack of Qualifications

Many elite athletes dedicate so much time to training that they miss opportunities to earn educational credentials, leaving them vulnerable when their sporting career ends. This gap can limit employment options and earning potential post-retirement.

Identity Dependence on Sport

When an athlete's entire identity is tied to their sporting performance, retirement can trigger severe psychological distress. Developing parallel skills and interests creates a more resilient sense of self-worth.

Financial Insecurity

Most athletes don't earn enough from sport alone to ensure long-term financial stability. Without alternative career skills, they face significant economic uncertainty after their competitive years end.



EU Policy Background

2012: EU Guidelines Established

The European Commission published comprehensive Guidelines on Dual Careers of Athletes, recognizing the need for systematic support across member states

1

Ongoing Development

Continuous refinement through Erasmus+ Sport projects and cross-border collaboration has strengthened dual-career ecosystems throughout Europe

3

2

Active Federation Involvement

European sports federations took on leadership roles in implementing dual-career frameworks, creating standards and best practices

Core Components of Dual-Career Systems

Education Flexibility

Adaptable learning schedules that accommodate intensive training periods and competition calendars



Career Guidance

Professional counseling to help athletes identify interests, skills, and viable career pathways beyond sport



Health Monitoring

Regular assessment of physical and mental wellbeing to prevent burnout and overtraining



Psychological Support

Mental health services addressing the unique pressures of balancing dual commitments



Education Models for Athletes

1 Flexible Learning Schedules

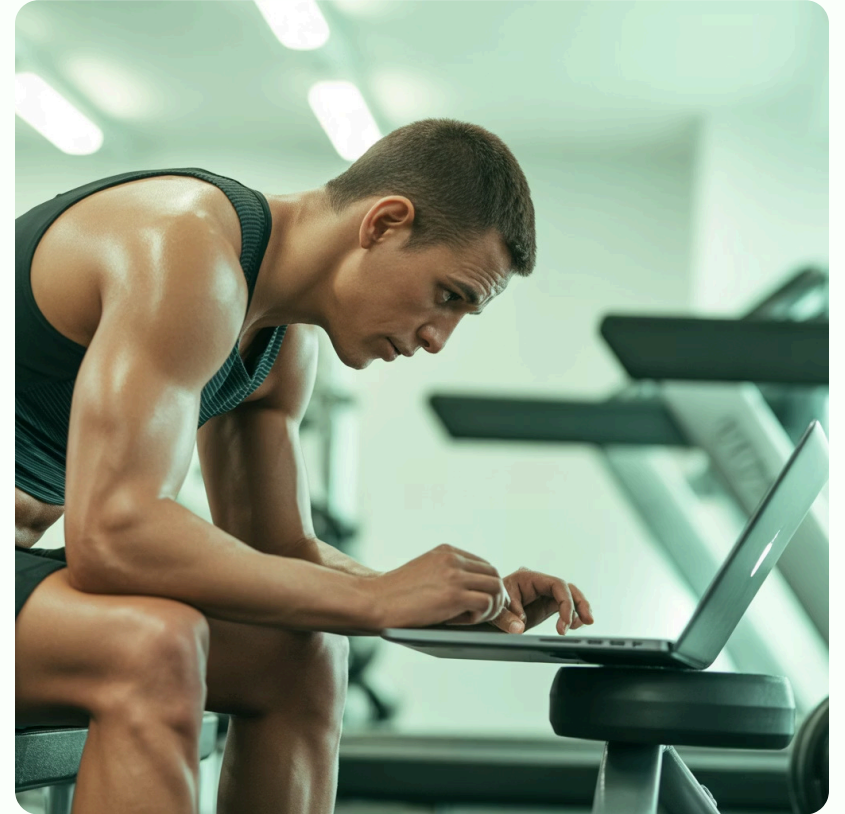
Universities and schools adjust class times, exam dates, and assignment deadlines to align with training camps and competition schedules, ensuring athletes don't fall behind academically

3 Athletic Scholarships

Financial support that reduces economic barriers, enabling talented athletes to pursue higher education without sacrificing training time to part-time employment

2 Distance and Blended Learning

Online courses combined with periodic in-person sessions allow athletes to study from training locations worldwide, maintaining educational progress regardless of where competitions take them



Vocational Training Options

Short-Term Qualifications

Accelerated programs that deliver practical skills in condensed timeframes, perfect for athletes with limited study windows between training cycles

Business Certificates

Entrepreneurship, management, and marketing courses that prepare athletes to launch businesses or work in sports management after retirement

Digital Skills Training

Technology-focused programs covering social media management, digital marketing, and data analytics—increasingly valuable in modern careers

Coaching Certifications

Formal coaching qualifications allow athletes to leverage their sporting expertise into sustainable careers mentoring the next generation



Role of Sports Clubs in Dual Careers



Educational Partnerships

Sports clubs establish formal agreements with schools and universities to create pathways for athlete-students. These partnerships include coordinated scheduling, shared facilities, and joint program development that benefits both institutions.



Training Flexibility

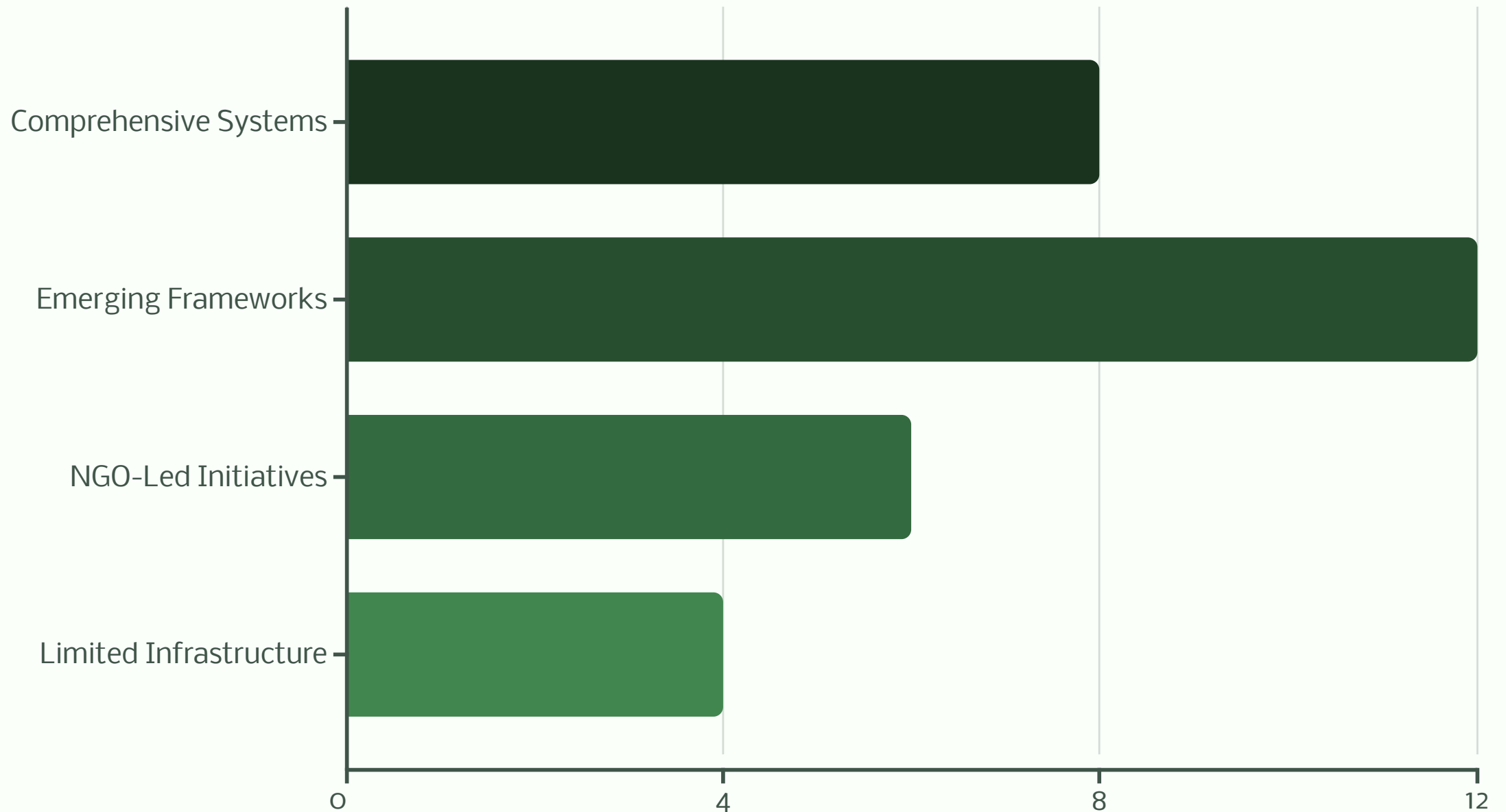
Forward-thinking clubs design training schedules that respect educational commitments, offering early morning or evening sessions and adjusting intensity during exam periods. This flexibility demonstrates that clubs value athletes as whole people.



Career Support Infrastructure

Leading clubs employ career advisors, provide access to professional networks, and create mentorship programs connecting current athletes with successfully transitioned former players.

National Approaches to Dual Careers



Dual-career support varies dramatically across the EU. While some nations have built comprehensive, government-funded systems with dedicated facilities and staff, others rely primarily on non-governmental organizations or grassroots efforts. This inconsistency creates inequality, with athletes' opportunities often depending more on their country of origin than their talent or dedication.

Best Practice: Austria



A Model of Integration

Austria has developed one of Europe's most mature dual-career systems, built on decades of collaboration between sports academies and universities. The Austrian model features dedicated sports gymnasiums that integrate athletic training with standard academic curricula.

Universities across Austria offer specialized support services for student-athletes, including flexible attendance policies, extended exam periods, and academic advisors who understand the demands of competitive sport. This long-standing commitment has produced generations of athletes who successfully transition into professional careers after sport.

15+

Years of Development

Building institutional knowledge and refining best practices

85%

Graduate Success Rate

Athletes completing both sporting and academic programs

30+

Partner Institutions

Universities collaborating in the dual-career network



Best Practice: Netherlands

Elite Athlete Centres: Integrated Support

The Netherlands has established specialized Elite Athlete Centres that bring all dual-career services under one roof. These centres provide athletic training facilities alongside educational resources, career counseling, psychological support, and health monitoring—creating a truly integrated athlete development ecosystem.



Individual Assessment

Each athlete receives personalized evaluation of sporting potential, academic interests, and career goals



Ongoing Support

Regular check-ins ensure plans remain relevant as athletes progress through their sporting and educational journeys



Tailored Development Plans

Career counselors embedded within sports federations create customized roadmaps balancing both careers



Transition Assistance

Dedicated support during the critical period when athletes move from competitive sport to post-athletic careers

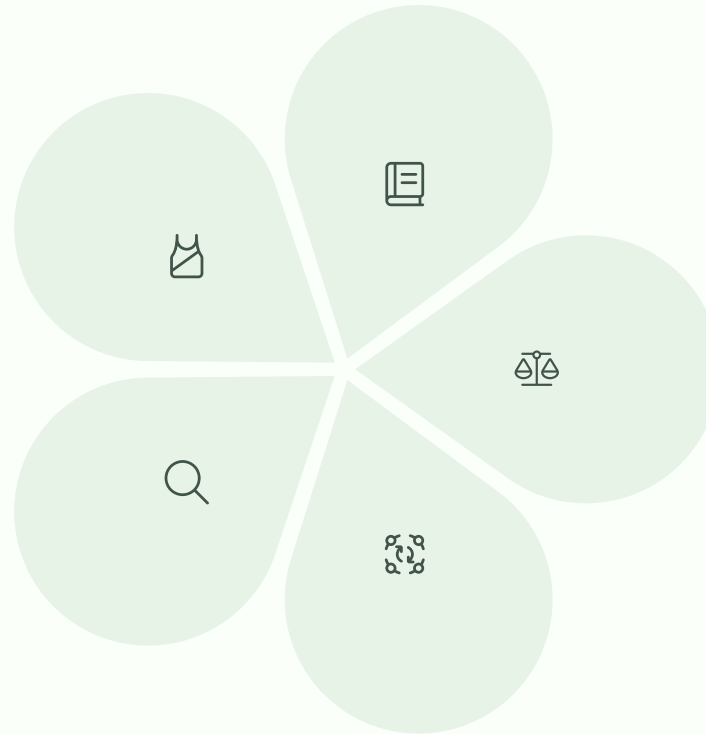
Best Practice: Sweden

Athlete-Centered

Individual needs drive all program decisions

Sustainable Development

Long-term success valued over short-term results



Lifelong Learning

Education continues throughout and after sporting careers

Wellbeing Focus

Mental and physical health prioritized equally with performance

Social Integration

Athletes maintain connections outside sport

Sweden's holistic approach emphasizes athlete wellbeing and personal development alongside sporting achievement. Swedish programs recognize that sustainable high performance requires athletes who are mentally healthy, socially connected, and intellectually engaged. This comprehensive model has produced not only successful athletes but well-adjusted individuals prepared for fulfilling post-sport lives.

Gaps in Existing Systems

1

Geographic Inequality

Athletes in smaller EU countries or rural regions often lack access to dual-career programs available in major urban centres, creating systematic disadvantages based on birthplace rather than ability

2

Inconsistent Policy Application

Even within countries with dual-career policies, implementation varies widely between sports federations, educational institutions, and regions, leading to unpredictable support quality

3

Funding Instability

Many dual-career programs depend on short-term grants or project funding, creating uncertainty and preventing long-term planning that athletes need for multi-year educational commitments

4

Limited Awareness

Many athletes, coaches, and even sports administrators remain unaware of available dual-career resources, resulting in underutilization of existing programs



The Critical Role of Psychological Support

Mental Health in High-Performance Sport

The psychological demands of elite athletics are immense: constant performance pressure, fear of injury, competitive stress, and public scrutiny. When athletes simultaneously pursue education or vocational training, these pressures multiply.

Psychological support is not optional—it's essential infrastructure. Athletes need access to sports psychologists who understand the unique challenge of managing dual commitments, can recognize early warning signs of burnout, and provide strategies for maintaining mental health during intensive training and academic periods.

Research shows that athletes with access to regular psychological support demonstrate better stress management, improved performance in both domains, and significantly lower dropout rates from educational programs.



Employers and Dual Careers



Flexible Employment

Companies create part-time positions with adjustable hours that accommodate training schedules, recognizing the discipline and time management skills athletes bring to the workplace

Athlete Internships

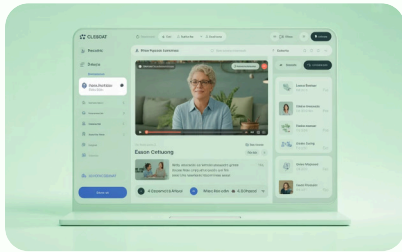
Structured internship programs provide real-world work experience during off-season periods, building professional networks and practical skills while maintaining competitive careers



Corporate Partnerships

Forward-thinking organizations partner with sports federations to create athlete-friendly workplaces, benefiting from athletes' unique qualities while supporting their development

The Role of Technology in Dual Careers



Digital Learning Platforms

Advanced e-learning systems deliver university-quality education accessible from anywhere, featuring video lectures, interactive assignments, and virtual collaboration tools that fit around training schedules



AI Career Guidance

Artificial intelligence tools analyze athlete skills, interests, and market trends to suggest optimal career pathways, provide personalized learning recommendations, and predict skill gaps that need addressing



Smart Assessment Tools

Digital platforms track progress across both sporting and educational domains, providing coaches, educators, and athletes with integrated dashboards that identify potential conflicts and optimize scheduling

Contributions of the ABS Project

AI-Powered Guidance Systems

The ABS (Athlete Balance Support) Project has developed sophisticated artificial intelligence tools that provide personalized career guidance at scale. These systems analyze individual athlete profiles, local labor markets, and educational opportunities to suggest optimal dual-career pathways. The AI learns from successful transitions, continuously improving its recommendations and identifying patterns human advisors might miss.

Standardized Resource Libraries

ABS has created comprehensive, multilingual resource libraries covering dual-career topics from time management strategies to specific vocational training options. These standardized materials ensure consistent quality information reaches athletes across all EU countries, reducing the knowledge gaps that currently disadvantage those in less-developed dual-career regions.

Integrated Tracking Tools

The project provides digital platforms for monitoring athlete progress across sporting, educational, and wellbeing dimensions simultaneously. These tools enable early intervention when athletes struggle in any area, facilitating timely support adjustments and preventing dropout from either their sporting or educational commitments.

Dual Career Competency Model

Skills Athletes Must Develop Beyond Sport



■ Leadership ■ Communication ■ Digital Skills ■ Critical Thinking ■ Adaptability ■ Financial Literacy

Successful dual careers require athletes to develop competencies that extend far beyond their sport. Leadership abilities transfer to team management roles. Communication skills prove essential in coaching, business, and public relations. Digital competencies open doors in media, marketing, and technology sectors. Critical thinking and adaptability enable athletes to navigate career transitions and overcome obstacles.

Monitoring and Evaluation in Dual Careers

Regular Assessment

Periodic evaluation of progress in both sporting and educational domains

Plan Adjustment

Modifications to training schedules, educational commitments, or support services based on findings



Data Analysis

Systematic review of performance metrics, attendance, and achievement indicators

Wellbeing Check

Assessment of physical and mental health status to ensure sustainable balance

Effective dual-career programs implement continuous monitoring cycles rather than one-time assessments. This ongoing evaluation ensures athletes remain on track toward their goals in both domains while maintaining the wellbeing necessary for sustained high performance. When monitoring reveals challenges, programs can intervene early rather than waiting for crises to develop.

Mentorship and Networking



The Power of Role Models

Former athletes who successfully transitioned to post-sport careers provide invaluable guidance to current athletes navigating dual-career paths. These mentors offer practical advice, emotional support, and proof that balanced development is achievable.

Peer-to-peer mentoring programs connect athletes facing similar challenges, creating supportive communities where experiences, strategies, and resources are shared. These networks often become lifelong professional and personal connections extending well beyond athletic careers.

Research consistently shows that mentored athletes demonstrate higher educational completion rates, smoother career transitions, and greater overall life satisfaction compared to those without mentorship support.



Policy Recommendations

1 Standardized EU-Level Frameworks

Establish minimum standards for dual-career support across all member states, ensuring every athlete has access to baseline services regardless of their country. This standardization would reduce inequality while allowing nations to exceed minimums based on their resources and priorities.

2 Institutional Integration

Mandate formal cooperation agreements between sports organizations and educational institutions, moving beyond voluntary partnerships to systematic integration. This includes shared funding models, coordinated scheduling protocols, and joint accountability for athlete outcomes.

3 Sustainable Funding Mechanisms

Replace project-based funding with permanent budget allocations for dual-career programs, providing the stability necessary for long-term educational commitments and allowing programs to mature and improve over time.

Sustainability of Dual Career Programs



Long-Term Funding

Securing permanent financial resources through government budgets, lottery funds, and private partnerships



Institutional Adoption

Embedding dual-career support into organizational structures rather than treating it as a temporary initiative



Professional Development

Training coaches, teachers, and administrators to understand and implement dual-career principles



Policy Framework

Establishing legal and regulatory foundations that protect athlete rights to pursue dual careers

5

Cultural Shift

Transforming attitudes to view education as complementary to rather than competitive with athletic excellence

True sustainability requires more than initial enthusiasm—it demands systemic change that outlasts individual champions and funding cycles.

Role of Erasmus+ Projects



Cross-Border Cooperation

Erasmus+ Sport funding enables partnerships between organizations across multiple countries, facilitating knowledge exchange and joint program development



Innovation Testing

Project funding allows experimentation with new approaches like AI guidance systems without risking core program stability

Erasmus+ projects have been instrumental in advancing dual-career support across Europe, providing the collaborative infrastructure and financial resources necessary for innovation and knowledge transfer.

Best Practice Sharing

Systematic documentation and dissemination of successful dual-career approaches helps less-developed programs learn from established systems



Scaling Solutions

Successful pilot projects receive support to expand across regions and countries, accelerating the spread of effective practices

Final Conclusions

Essential for Athlete Wellbeing

Dual-career systems are not optional extras—they're fundamental to athlete welfare, providing security, identity development, and preparation for life after sport. Athletes deserve support that recognizes them as whole people with futures extending beyond competition.

AI Creates Long-Term Impact

Innovative solutions like the ABS Project demonstrate how technology can democratize access to quality dual-career guidance. AI-powered tools scale personalized support to reach athletes in every country and sport, creating lasting positive impact on athlete transitions and wellbeing.

Collective Responsibility

Success requires commitment from sports clubs, educational institutions, employers, policymakers, and athletes themselves. By working together, we can ensure every athlete has the opportunity to excel in sport while building skills for a thriving post-athletic future.