**‘Winning in the Long Run’ (2015-2018), Ministry of Education and Culture report**

‘Winning in the Long Run’ (2015-2018), PI: Docent, Dr Tatiana Ryba  
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The key aim of the project was to examine risk and resilience factors underpinning the dual career construction of athletes in elite athlete upper secondary schools in Finland. **We examined student athletes’ abilities to combine studies and sports from the vantage points of motivation, identity, well-being, and future orientation.** The development of these social psychological constructs was investigated in and across contexts of sport and school as well as across time. In addition, the role of gender, sport type, coaches, and parents in shaping these developmental trajectories was also explored.

**Brief description of the key results:**

**Motivation:** The development of motivation was investigated from the perspective of task values that youth athletes have for sports and education. We investigated the stability and change in task value patterns that student athletes show during their first two years in upper secondary sport school and the extent to which these patterns, and changes in them, are associated with students’ future educational and athletic career aspirations. The results demonstrated that about half of the adolescent athletes were motivated in terms of task-values in both domains from the very beginning of upper secondary school, while one-third of them were motivated mainly in sport. One-fifth of the participants were relatively less motivated towards sport than the others. *The task value patterns were highly stable across the two-year period and predicted the students’ future educational and athletic aspirations.* Because task-value patterns seem to be formed already before upper secondary school, future research is needed to discover the role of different social agents, such as parents, coaches, and friends, in the formation of athletes’ motivational patterns. Another key finding was that *the level of sports motivation between athletes who were motivated for both education and sport, and those, who had mainly motivation for sport, were very similar.*

**Identity:**Identity formation of young athletes was investigated using both quantitative and qualitative methods. From a statistical point of view, we were particularly interested in the identity profiles that would emerge from combining the measures of athletic identity and student identity, and to what extent gender, the type of sport, and both athletic and academic achievements would be predictive of a certain profile. The results revealed three different identity profiles at T1 (the autumn term of the first grade): strong athletic and student identity (34%), diffused identity (37%) and sport-oriented identity (29%). *Gender differences were found* as both ‘sport-oriented’ and ‘diffused’ identity profiles were more typical for males than females, whereas ‘strong athletic and student’ identity was more typical for females. Finally, the lower the academic achievement reported by the student, the more likely she/he was to demonstrate ‘sport-oriented’ identity in comparison to the ‘strong athletic and student’ identity.

Qualitatively, the talent identified, pre-elite athletes’ identities were examined through role models and visual and written reflections at T3 (the end of 2nd grade). For role models, the youth athletes selected elite athletes and parents. None of the participants identified career role models outside of sport, illustrating that they *prioritised sport as their primary career identity.* The *role models were gendered* in that young men were more likely to select the most well-known athlete superstars, whereas young women were more explorative in trying to find a role model that matched their needs. The findings indicated that young women engage in more identity exploration, which in turn may potentially enhance their career adaptability. However, the participants chose role models who could have other identities and do other things besides their sport, which can be taken as a healthy indication that *most athletes’ identities were not exclusively enclosed in their sporting ambition*.

The athletes’ identities were further explored through visual methods. The analysis of the participant-created visual representations combined with interviews indicated an identity of a ‘serious’ athlete focused on athletic development and winning was important for all participants; however, some athletes also developed a relational identity in sport and described friendships and fun as important aspects of their sport experience. *Despite the emphasis on sport and athletic excellence, most youth athletes did not construct an exclusive athletic identity* that takes precedence over all other aspects of life and the self. The findings indicate that although concerns about athletes’ identity foreclosure and lack of exploration outside of sport are relevant also in the Finnish context, many pre-elite athletes do develop identities and interests outside of the sport domain.

**Well-being**: we focused on the prevalence and development of burnout (exhaustion, cynicism, and inadequacy) as a measure of student athletes’ well-being. The co-development of sport and school burnout symptoms were investigated across the three years of upper secondary school by using various methodological perspectives. Moreover, an instrument to measure sport burnout in a dual career context was validated. The results showed that *sport and school burnout symptoms increased and became more generalised over time, and school-related exhaustion spilled over into the sport context*, which was evident both in the quantitative findings and in the athletes’ interviews. High individual and parental expectations of success at T1 (the beginning of upper secondary school) was negatively related to burnout in the same domain (e.g., school), but positively related to burnout in the other domain (e.g., sport). Finally, school and sport-related mastery goals protected the student athletes from feelings of inadequacy and cynicism in the same domain, whereas performance goals in school predicted cynicism in school over the first school year. We also examined the role of parenting, i.e., affection and psychological control, as a possible risk or protective factor in the symptoms of school and sport burnout among student athletes. Maternal affection buffered against the increase of school burnout, but only when not combined with simultaneous psychologically controlling mothering. As such, interventions aiming at increasing parental knowledge of beneficial and harmful ways to be involved in athletes’ lives would be useful.

**Future orientation:** Athletes’ future orientation was explored through interviews and additional participant-led tasks (visual representations of “dream days”, “letters from the future”). At T2, we found that participants’ future orientation was characterised by a short timespan and when they described their “dream days”, the dominant representation was a holiday. In addition, sport dream days focused on winning and ordinary days involving meeting friends, schoolwork and training emerged. The findings on the dominant theme of a holiday were treated as an indicator of an adolescent athlete’s present overload and a lack of time for reflection. The many demands the youth athletes face in their everyday life in sport and education are likely to contribute to the condensed time perspective, where the content of futuring remains tied to the release from the pressure the student athletes are currently facing. Since psychological studies generally emphasise the importance of a developed future perspective for career development and adaptability, developing interventions to assist student athletes in this process is a key practical recommendation stemming from the findings.

**Coaches’ role:** The coaches’ beliefs, attitudes and practices surrounding the athletes’ dual careers were explored with ice hockey coaches (N=10) and athletics coaches (N=15) in semi-structured interviews. The coaches in athletics generally considered dual career almost a ‘non-issue’, as they indicated that their athletes generally achieved good or excellent school results. No formal structures were put in place to address the athletes’ dual careers, but some individual coaches described strategies they used to support athletes in their schoolwork (e.g., educating the athletes on the need for planning and time management in busy periods with exams, telling them to focus on exams and skip training, if necessary). However, all athletics coaches emphasised the importance and feasibility of education alongside the athletic career, many of them reflecting on their own successful dual career pursuits.

The coaches in ice hockey were more concerned about school dropouts and unsuccessful dual careers, indicating that it is potentially an issue in ice hockey. Similar to athletics, the ice hockey coaches emphasised that athletes need to obtain an education, but they could only give few examples of how they supported the athletes’ dual careers in practice. Developmental discussions with athletes were mentioned as a context where schoolwork was also discussed; other than that, some coaches required the athletes to do their schoolwork while on the bus when going to away games. The findings from both athletics and ice hockey indicate that coaches would benefit from integrating dual career considerations to coach education because, at present, they lack the practical applications of how dual career issues could be addressed.

**Description on how the results can be utilised  
1) From the perspective of the sports and physical activity sector. Can the results be utilised from the perspective of the**[**effectiveness targets**](http://budjetti.vm.fi/indox/download.jsp;jsessionid=BE362ED49FC53A4A252A6DE84D99E3BE?lang=fi&file=/2013/tae/hallituksenEsitys/YksityiskohtaisetPerustelut/29/90/90.pdf)**set for the sports department?**The study’s novel findings can be used to inform policy on ethical and responsible elite sport. The results indicate that sport and school are intricately interconnected in young athletes’ lives and in order to construct a sustainable dual career, talent identified athletes require particular types of support within their home, at school, and in their sport contexts (e.g., assisting adolescents in formulating mastery goals in both sport and school to support learning and well-being, as well as encouraging the exploration of interests to broaden their vocational future). Moreover, the fact that young athletes’ task-value patterns are formed already at the beginning of upper secondary education, and associated with their subsequent plans and professional aspirations, suggests that the National Sport Policy should target dual career development environments of athletes in basic education.

**2) From the perspective of other branches of administration (such as the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, the Ministry of Transport and Communications, the Ministry of the Environment, etc.)**The results can be used by health care professionals at upper secondary sport schools for early detection and prevention of sport and school burnout among student athletes. Although the majority (60%) of student athletes in this study were classified as well functioning at the beginning of upper secondary, 28% of the athletes demonstrated mild sport burnout while 2.7% showed symptoms of severe burnout, suggesting that student athletes should be supported during their transition to upper secondary education. Furthermore, attention should be given to the stress levels that student athletes experience in school. Well-being interventions for student athletes and more efficient collaboration between schools, sport clubs/coaches, and parents ought be generated to allow the sport-education systems to be more holistic and sustainable.

**3) From the perspective of practical actors (such as municipalities, organisations, other end users, etc.)**The findings of this study may be useful for academic counsellors and teachers working with student athletes for informing them about the psycho-social challenges and processes that are especially relevant to this population.

The research can also be used to better coach education with the aim of incorporating dual career as a topic to be included in the formal coach education courses.