



A scoping review on the mental health of dual career athletes in sport and education

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ABSTRACT

The societal value of a dual career (DC) in ‘sport and education’ has been widely accepted by policy makers, researchers, and applied practitioners (European Commission, 2012). Nevertheless, balancing the practice and performance requirements of high-performance sports with optimal academic development may be highly demanding as well. DC athletes are not only confronted with the typical challenges of elite sports (e.g., performance pressure, injuries, selection issues) but also those relating to the (higher) education context (e.g., academic pressures, tasks and assignments, moving to new locations). Taking into account these dual demands, scholars have recently started to call attention towards the mental health of DC athletes as well (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019). Such increased attention for DC athletes’ mental health can be situated within a budding mental health discourse in competitive and elite sports, marked by a growing number of position and consensus statements by leading sport organizations (see Vella et al., 2021). Nevertheless, within this mental health discourse, DC athletes have still received relatively limited attention as a specific population of interest, especially within a European context. The aim of this scoping review was therefore to provide a comprehensive overview of current state of the research examining mental health in DC populations. A systematic literature search within Scopus, SPORTDiscuss, PsychInfo, and PubMed yielded 5579 initial hits. Preliminary results after a first round of screening seem to indicate that DC athletes have frequently been used as a convenience population, but that limited studies have specifically focused on the DC context or the impact of DC-related factors on mental health. The most frequently studied mental health outcomes in DC athletes included clinical and sub-clinical symptoms of depression, anxiety, and burnout, as well as a more positive state of wellbeing. Commonly examined determinants for mental health outcomes in DC athletes included demographic (e.g., gender, ethnicity), physiological (e.g., concussion), psychological (e.g., stress), social (e.g., support), or organizational (e.g., support structures) factors. Further findings as well as research and applied implications of this scoping review will be discussed.

KEYWORDS

Mental ill-health; student-athletes; systematic review; well-being