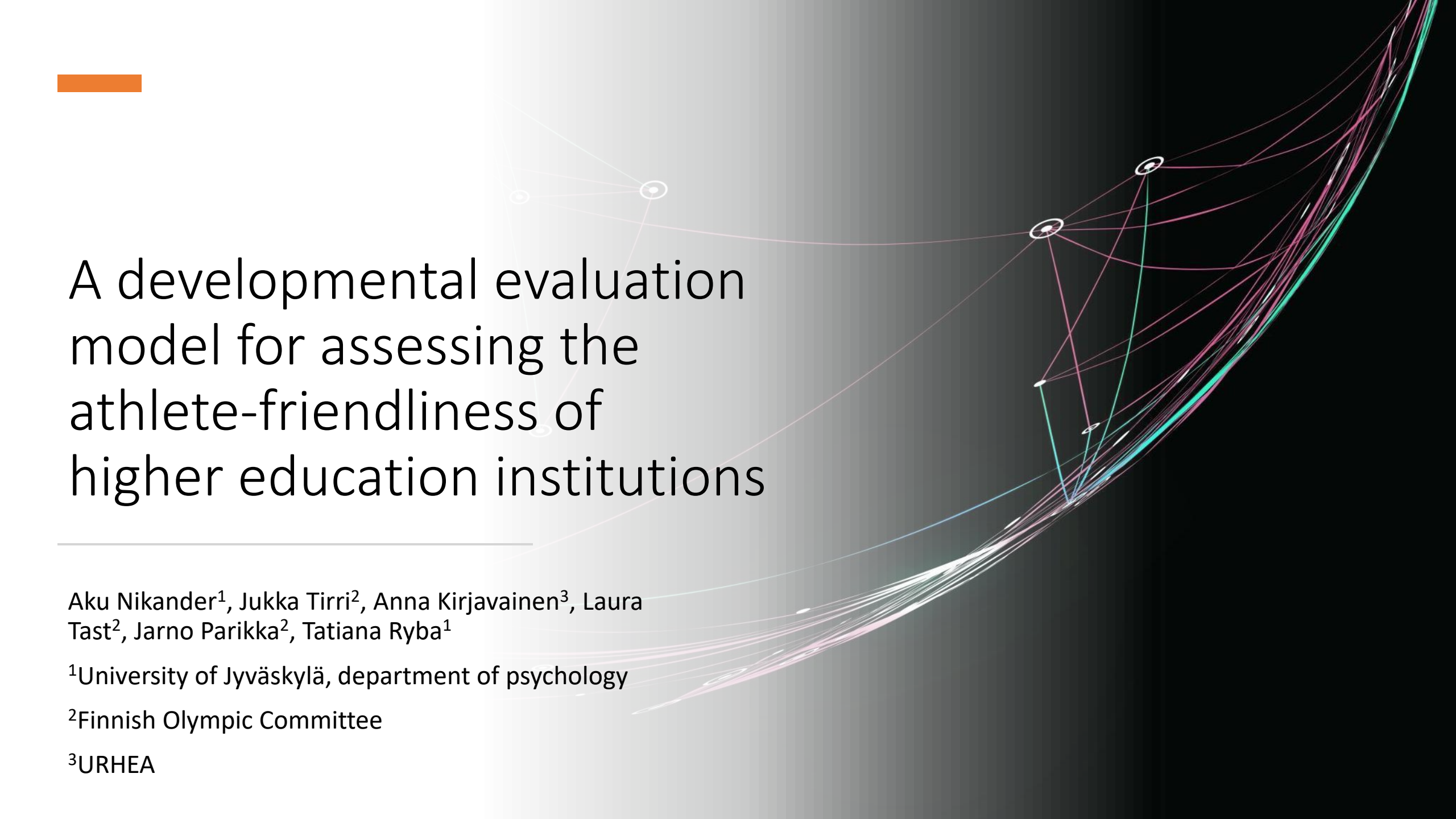




A developmental evaluation model for assessing the athlete-friendliness of higher education institutions

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Background



The holistic development of elite athletes is considered one of the priorities, strategies and policies of sports around the world.



In recognizing the athlete's right to combine sports and education, guidelines on DC of athletes have been published



Specifically for higher education institutions (HEIs), the structured support is crucial to prevent elite athletes from engaging in personal negotiations with the academic staff to secure their educational path.



DC services minimum of quality (European Commission, 2016)

1. Encompassing the inclusion of DC in the institution's vision, strategy and policy
 2. flexible educational programmes, and examinations for athletes through blended and distance learning
 3. tutors and counsellors with a sound knowledge of DC challenges and opportunities
 4. Recognition of informal learning educational credits gathered throughout sports participation
 5. Availability of educational and sports facilities located within a reasonable distance accommodation on campus
 6. Plenty of visibility on traditional media and social media
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Current situation

- The publication of key documents, such as the EU Guidelines on Dual Careers of Athletes (European Commission, 2012), along with more specific guidelines for universities and governing bodies (Abelkans, 2021) **has significantly advanced DC policies and provisions at the HEI level.**
 - One of the major difficulties encountered in the implementation of the recommendations contained in these good practice guidelines is the **differences in education and sport laws, structure and competencies between countries** (Izzicupo et al., 2025)
 - Many European countries still **lack unified and comprehensive frameworks** to fully support dual career development, resulting in **significant variability in the availability and quality of DC services** across the continent (Izzicupo et al., 2025)
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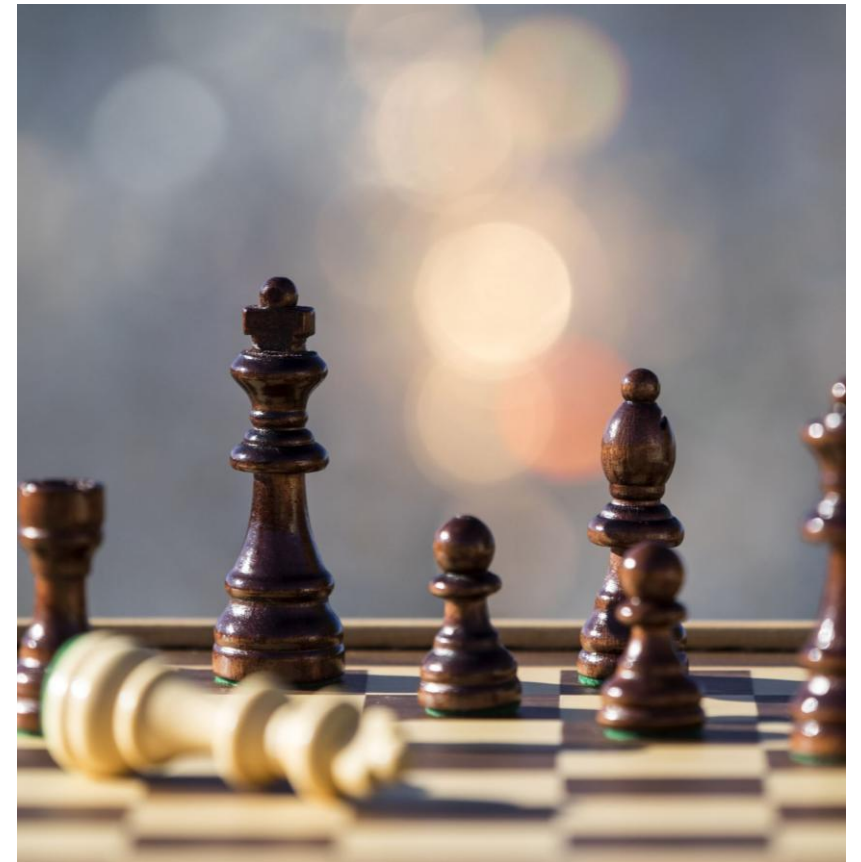


Challenges for student-athlete

- Limited or non-existence provision of assistance/tutorship, curricula requirements, financial support, logistic support, social support, and DC policies (Capranica et al., 2022).
 - A gap between the benefits (e.g., justification for absences, the adaptation of the pace of studies) offered by the universities and the priorities of the students of these benefits (Domingo et al., 2024).
 - Student-athletes needs are not met and the lack of communication available resources (Izzicupo et al., 2025).
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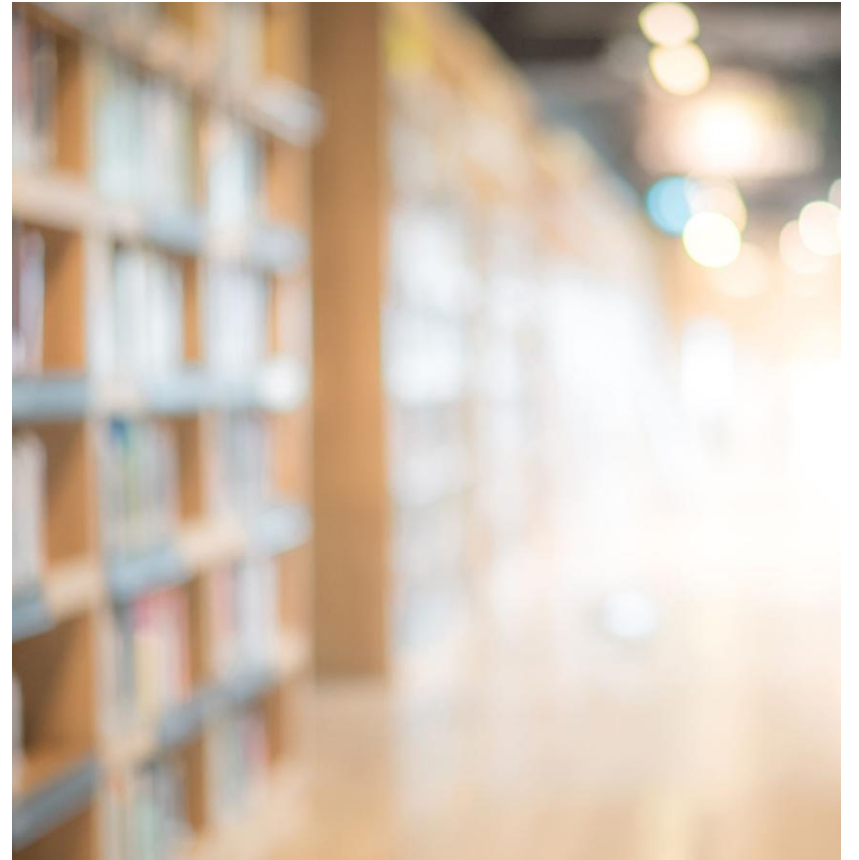
Recommendations (Izzicupo et al., 2025)

- Strengthening collaborations between HEIs, governments, sports organizations, and private entities is critical.
- Supporting the co-creation of tailored solutions, promoting resource sharing, and enhancing the overall quality of DC support systems.
- Long-term investments in digital learning, flexible curricula, and financial support mechanisms to anticipate the evolving needs in a rapidly changing educational landscape



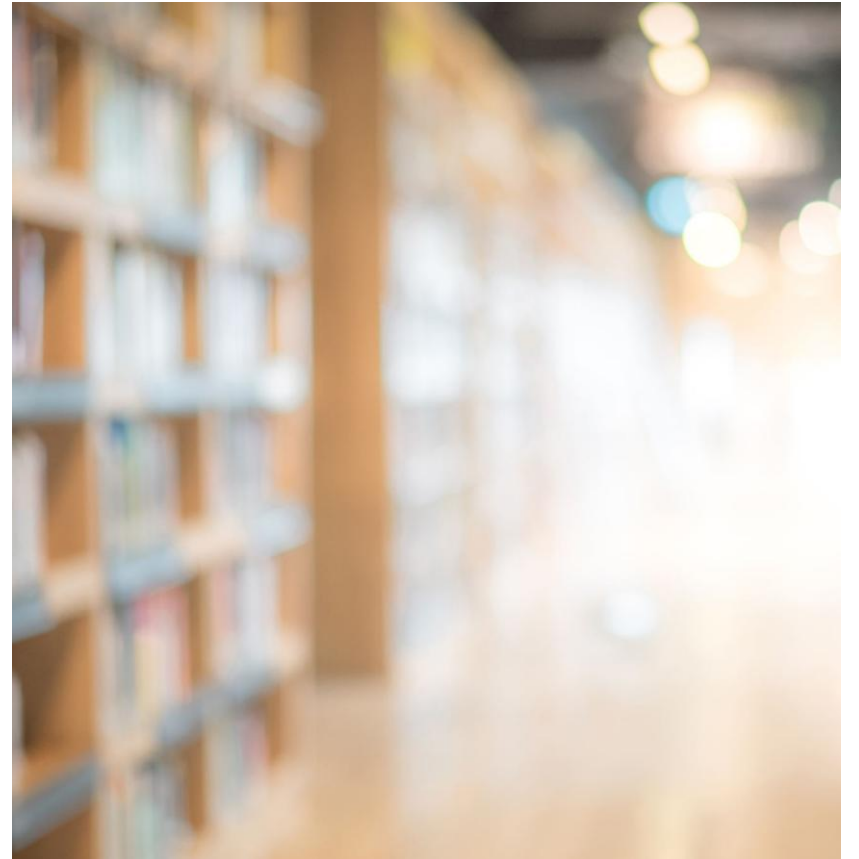
Finnish context

- Structural state funded/supported system at the lower and upper secondary school
- Autonomous higher education institutions
- Local solutions to support athletes
- High equity
- The aim of the study was to develop a model for evaluating higher education institution's athlete friendliness by utilizing developmental evaluation (Patton, 1994).





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1. Developing and implementing national DC guidelines (framework)
 2. Closing the Gap Between Support Systems, Athlete Experiences, and Policy Implementation
 3. There is no monitoring system to assess DC support systems, programmes and how DC policies are implemented at the environmental level (Capranica et al., 2022).



HOW?





Developmental evaluation

- Developmental evaluation is an approach to evaluating organisations or environments **that are complex and in continuous state of change and development** (Patton, 2011).
- Developmental evaluation asks “**what works for whom, and in what circumstances**” (Gamble, 2008, p. 47).

Developmental evaluation

- Purpose: Developmental purpose (not only improvement)
- Innovation niche (focus on innovation and system change)
- Complexity perspective (system thinking, contextual and cultural sensitivity)
- Utilization focus
- Implementation: Participatory (users involved)
- Evaluator as co-creator (evaluation perspective, evaluative thinking, timely feedback)



Methodology

- Holistic Ecological Approach (HEA) and previous DC research
- Case study approach (*“formal generalization is overvalued as a source of scientific development, whereas “the force of example” is underestimated” (Flyvbjerg, 2006)*)
- Thick description (strategy, resources, staff, curriculum etc.)
- Multiple sources of data (focus groups, observations, and documents)
- Reflexive thematic analysis
- 1 pilot environment to test the model

Evaluation areas

Support for studies (i.e., sufficient individual study counselling, knowledge of the support services and defined point of contact, knowledge of the DC team, peer support, transparency of course descriptions, well-being)

Flexible study paths (i.e., time and place independent courses, flexible examination, sports as a reason for extending study time, assist to find athlete-friendly internship)

Competence gained through athletic career, and sport-related studies (i.e., acknowledgement of competence and knowledge gained through sport, availability of sport-related studies or DC courses, facilitation of self-reflection)

Actions related to transitions (i.e., co-operation with upper secondary school level, diverse admission paths to university, support for transition to working life)

Communication and co-operation with Olympic committee and sport academy (i.e., availability of the quality features across the HEI and commitment, communication of athlete-friendliness to stakeholders, level of cooperation with the sports academy, educational activities of the DC team)

Sport support (e.g., expert services, sport facilities, recognition and rewards of success in sport)

Stages of developmental evaluation (Finnish model)



Focus groups; management (N = 7), teachers (N=5), study counselors (N=7), stakeholders from sport and work life (N=5), student-athletes (N=5)

Audition team; higher education experts, sport stakeholders (e.g., coaches), evaluation experts, athletes

Results (strengths and developmental areas)

Evaluation area	Strengths	Developmental areas
Support for studies	DC support team personnel had close contacts and relationships inside the HEI among the staff members; sometimes even the management of the HEI assisted in arranging things.	Disseminating DC knowledge for the staff of the HEI; recognizing student–athletes at the beginning of their studies; creating information channels for student–athletes about the support systems
Flexibility of the studies	Consent form between the sports academy and the HEI providing advantages for student–athletes (e.g., assistance from a DC team); online studies, versatile flexible examination possibilities	Recording common principles and operating models for the development of flexible study arrangements; categorization under which level athletes would have more support

Results (strengths and developmental areas)

Evaluation areas	strengths	Developmental areas
Competence gained through athletic career'	Existence of DC courses designated for student-athletes; the possibility of gaining credits via individual competencies gained from sports	Disseminating information about these DC courses.
Actions related to transition	Cooperation between the sports academy and the HEI; multiple admission possibilities (e.g., being an successful athlete); well-developed career guidance services	Disseminating the career stories of DC athletes and developing mentoring services
Communication with Sports Academy and National Olympic Committee	Close and regular cooperation between the HEI and sports academy; PDCA model (plan, do, check, act)	Dissemination of quality features inside the HEI
Sport support	Services for daily training (e.g., gyms, indoor halls; accessibility of both the HEI and training facilities	HEI could increase the visibility of athletes in the HEI.

Discussion

- Although no systematic national DC support or guidelines were set in Finland, the processes were initiated bottom-up and locally → Integration of DC recommendations (European Commission, 2012;2016) at the national level by creating a framework for HEIs.
- Student-athletes had relevant support from their sporting and academic entourage, which helped them overcome DC-related challenges and plan tailored solutions (Storm et al., 2021; Linner et al., 2019).
- The collaboration between the Sports Academy and HEI was also a key factor in ensuring that the resources met the needs of the student-athletes in both sports and education (Abelkans et al., 2021).



Practical implications (some)

- Acknowledgement of the athlete friendly higher education institutions (nationally and internationally?)
- Takes into account institutional and athletes perspectives
- Dissemination of the information about the support services for student-athletes and staff (report).
- Efficient allocation of the resources
- Activates the management of the HEI
- Developmental ideas tied to the strategic level and to quality processes
- Strengthening collaborations between HEIs, sports organizations, and private entities
- Developmental processes initiated during the evaluation

Where are we now?

- Since 2023, applications from 20 HEIs for the evaluation
 - 6 universities and 14 universities of applied sciences
- 14 recognized Elite Athlete Friendly Universities (Audits 2023-2025)
- Autumn 2025-2026
 - 6 more audits have been decided.
- First network gathering of Elite Athlete Friendly Universities in Tampere 19.9.2025.

Future perspective

- Mobility of the athletes (e.g., camps, playing abroad)
- Pursuing excellence (guiding by example)
- Co-operation and networking between HEIs (sharing best practices)
- Innovative ecology (i.e., utilizing research to support sports)



Thank you for your attention !

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