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**A Practical Guide for
National Governing Bodies:**
Dual Career Support for
High-Performance Athletes

February 2026



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This practical guide for National Governing Bodies has been developed by the Performance Lifeskills Team of the Sport Ireland Institute and the Accreditation for Student-Athlete Support Steering Committee, with strategic input from Performance Directors across Irish High Performance sport.

The contents of this guide and the underpinning reference document (QR code below) has been endorsed by the Sport Ireland High Performance Committee and the Sport Ireland / Student Sport Ireland HP Taskforce.



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GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Dual Career

Dual Career is the integration of athletic training and competition with education or employment, allowing athletes to reach their sporting potential while preparing for active participation in society and the labour market.

Academic Partner

Educational institutions (schools, colleges, universities) collaborating with National Governing Bodies to provide flexible and supportive study arrangements for athletes.

Athlete Support Team

The multidisciplinary group surrounding the athlete, including coaches, sport science & medical staff, performance lifestyle advisors, and academic liaison officers.

Individual Development Plan

A comprehensive planning document addressing sporting, educational, personal, and career objectives, regularly reviewed and updated collaboratively with athletes and support staff.

Safeguarding

Measures taken to protect the health, well-being, and human rights of athletes, ensuring a safe and supportive environment free from abuse or harm.

Data Sharing

The controlled, transparent, and legally compliant exchange of relevant athlete information between the National Governing Bodies and academic partners to coordinate support.



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Introduction

Purpose and Strategic Alignment

The landscape of high-performance sport continues to evolve, with growing recognition that single-focus performance models no longer meet the needs of modern athlete development. Sustaining excellence now depends on balancing performance, education, and wellbeing within a coherent, athlete-centred approach.

These guidelines aim to bridge the gap between research and practice by outlining how National Governing Bodies (NGBs) can embed dual-career principles within strategy, governance, and day-to-day operations. They are designed for strategic leaders, performance directors, coaches, and athlete support personnel who shape the environments in which athletes train, study, and compete.

Dual career systems should not be viewed as peripheral welfare measures but core performance infrastructure. Evidence shows that athletes engaged in structured dual-career pathways develop stronger self-regulation, resilience, and problem-solving skills—qualities that enhance focus, adaptability, performance, and long-term engagement in sport.

Strengthening these systems will enable NGBs to enhance career sustainability, protect talent pathways, and foster positive cultures where performance and personal growth reinforce one another.

Scope and Application

What This Guidance Covers

This document provides a practical framework for NGB policy and action across four main areas:

1. Embedding dual career in governance and strategy
2. Designing flexible high performance programmes
3. Strengthening collaborative ecosystems (particularly with education providers)
4. Coach and staff education on dual-career support

It addresses the need to shift from centralised, standardised training models toward individualised, hybrid support systems that accommodate athletes' personal circumstances, learning preferences, and developmental trajectories.

Relationship with National and International Sport Policy

The framework aligns with the European Union Guidelines on Dual Careers of Athletes, which recognise dual-career support as an investment in human capital rather than a welfare cost. Since 2017, the EU has invested over €25 million through the Erasmus+ Sport programme to fund more than 83 collaborative dual-career projects across Europe (a number of which included the Sport Ireland Institute Lifeskills Team as project partners). This sustained commitment reflects the growing recognition that supporting athletes in education and employment strengthens both sport systems and society. The document draws on successful national and international models¹ and ensures alignment with global best practices for sustainable sport systems.

Applicability Across Athlete Pathway Levels

Dual-career principles apply across the full athlete pathway, from early development through to senior stages. While this guidance focuses on student-athletes who experience the greatest overlap between academic and performance pressures, the same philosophy of balanced development is relevant at every level. Embedding flexibility and dual-career awareness in development programmes helps establish strong cultural foundations, while supporting post-sport readiness becomes essential for senior athletes. NGBs are encouraged to map athlete engagement and identify support gaps across all tiers of their pathway to ensure consistent, coordinated provision throughout an athlete's sporting journey.

Disclaimer

This document is advisory in nature and provides a framework for best practice. It is not prescriptive and respects the autonomy of NGBs to adapt and integrate these principles within their unique sporting contexts, resources, and national legislative environments. The recommendations are intended to enhance, not replace, existing high-performance strategies.

1. UK's Talented Athlete Scholarship Scheme (TASS), Nordic sport high schools, Canadian U Sports and NGB collaboration (Game Plan Programme), New Zealand's Athlete Friendly Tertiary Network (AFTN), France's INSEP and Ambition Bleue systems, and networks in Japan, Hong Kong, Germany, Spain, Switzerland, South Korea.

Context and Rationale

Understanding the Performance Value of Dual Career Support

Dual-career can be viewed as a foundation for sustainable high-performance. Evidence consistently shows that athletes who combine education or vocational development with sport, perform better over time.

They demonstrate stronger psychological well-being, greater resilience, and an improved ability to manage transitions within and beyond sport. Maintaining balance acts as a protective factor, reducing stress and supporting recovery during periods of injury, competition pressure, and performance fluctuations.

‘Evidence consistently shows that athletes who combine education or vocational development with sport, perform better over time.’

‘A well-supported dual-career system therefore strengthens both immediate performance and long-term athlete welfare.’

These benefits arise through three reinforcing mechanisms: enhanced mental health, improved life and self-management skills, and greater readiness for post-sport transitions. A well-supported dual-career system, therefore, strengthens both immediate performance and long-term athlete welfare.

Despite these advantages, many student-athletes face persistent barriers that force unnecessary trade-offs between academic and sporting goals. The most common include:

➤ **Scheduling Conflicts** – Academic calendars and attendance requirements often clash with training and competition schedules, leaving athletes to choose between performance and progression

➤ **Geographic Displacement** - Centralised training models can require relocation, disrupting education and family support networks

➤ **Financial Pressure** - Limited funding for integrated athlete-student needs leads to difficult decisions around tuition, travel, and equipment

➤ **Cultural Resistance** - Within some performance environments, education is still seen as a distraction. Athletes may hide their academic engagement, and coaches may lack the training to support it effectively

Through coordinated planning and clear communication, NGBs and Higher Education Institutions (HEI) can collaborate to remove the barriers that undermine athlete development and performance.

Culture of Performance and Inclusion

Creating Athlete-Centred and Education-Compatible Environments

NGBs are encouraged to foster cultures in which education and performance strengthen one another, rather than compete. An athlete-centred approach recognises that development is individual, and that academic engagement enhances focus, motivation, and long-term commitment to sport.

NGB Checklist 1:

NGBs should familiarise themselves with the detailed components of the Sport Ireland Institute ASAS Programme, where HEIs' dual-career support programmes are state-accredited.

Sport Ireland Institute's Accreditation for Student-Athlete Support (ASAS) framework provides a shared national reference for building these environments. It outlines the standards and principles that guide collaboration between NGBs, HEIs, and other partners to ensure consistent, athlete-focused support.

Programmes should enable adaptable training and study arrangements. Partnerships with education providers should formalise mutual commitments through clear structures, such as ASAS-aligned agreements. Athletes should also be equipped with time-management and goal-setting skills that allow them to succeed in both domains.

Culture is shaped by the daily actions and language of leaders, coaches, and staff. Normalising education within high-performance environments builds trust and reinforces that learning supports excellence. Recognising coaches who promote balance, developing staff awareness, and framing education as a source of resilience and transferable skills help embed dual-career principles into Ireland's high-performance system.

NGB Checklist 2:

NGBs should consider how they formally reference education and the dual career of athletes as a right within their high-performance programmes, embedding this recognition in governance documents, policies, and procedures.

Section 2: Decision-Making Framework



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Governance, Oversight, and Decision-Making

Effective coordination relies on clear accountability for planning, delivering, and evaluating dual-career activity within the NGB. Oversight may sit with a dedicated coordinator or be embedded within existing athlete-support functions, but responsibilities must be explicit, policies integrated into strategic and performance plans, and reporting lines transparent. Strong governance depends on understanding athletes and partnerships—identifying those engaged in education or work, mapping institutional relationships, and assessing available support services. This insight ensures consistent delivery and guides the strategic investment of time, staff, and resources.

NGB Checklist 3:

Consider nominating a member of the High-Performance programme to take responsibility for dual-career coordination on behalf of the programme, liaising with HEIs supporting their student-athletes and with the Sport Ireland Institute.

Decisions should be guided by four core principles:

- **Fairness** – Ensuring equitable access to opportunity
- **Safety** – Protecting physical and mental wellbeing through sound safeguarding practice
- **Feasibility** – Confirming that arrangements are practical and sustainable for both athlete and organisation
- **Performance Impact** – Focusing on how support enhances long-term development rather than short-term outcomes

Applying these principles will enable NGBs to make balanced, transparent decisions that uphold both athlete welfare and the integrity of performance.

Strategic Priorities

When cooperation is built on mutual respect and a clear sense of purpose, the athlete remains at the centre of decision-making, and flexibility can be achieved without compromising performance standards.

Collaborative systems between NGBs and education providers are essential to help athletes combine academic and sporting commitments in a consistent and coordinated way. Formal agreements that define mutual responsibilities create clarity for all parties and ensure that flexibility can be managed without compromising performance objectives. Designated liaison contacts within both organisations further support effective communication and reduce the risk of scheduling conflicts.

NGB Checklist 4:

NGBs should consider developing formal agreements with HEIs to support their high-performance athletes.

Dual-career athletes balance demanding schedules that place pressure on both physical and mental wellbeing. Integrating proactive care within performance programmes helps sustain consistency and focus. Regular access to sport psychology or mental health support, tailored recovery and nutrition advice, and structured guidance on planning and rest all contribute to athlete resilience and readiness.

Building transferable skills—such as communication, decision-making, and personal organisation—should be considered a core element of athlete development. When embedded in performance programmes, these competencies enhance independence and prepare athletes for transitions both within and beyond sport.

Alignment across coaches, academic partners, families, and athletes is essential for maintaining coherent support systems. Effective communication, regular updates, and a shared understanding of expectations help ensure all parties work toward the same objectives.

Section 3: Implementation and Review

Operational Guidance

The ASAS framework provides a common reference point for partnerships between HEIs and NGBs. It defines the minimum standards and shared expectations for supporting student-athletes, offering a transparent basis for dialogue and alignment.

NGBs are encouraged to use the ASAS framework as the foundation for their formal agreements with education partners. These agreements should outline mutual commitments, including athlete identification and verification, coordination of training and academic schedules, and clearly defined channels for communication and problem resolution. Establishing dedicated liaison roles within both the NGB and the HEI supports efficient coordination and ensures accountability on both sides.

'By anchoring partnerships in the ASAS standards, NGBs and HEIs can create predictable, athlete-centred systems that balance academic progress with high-performance demands, while strengthening Ireland's national approach to dual-career support.'

Practical collaboration may also include the joint development of educational supports, shared access to facilities, or coordinated wellbeing initiatives. By anchoring partnerships in the ASAS standards, NGBs and HEIs can create predictable, athlete-centred systems that balance academic progress with high-performance demands, while strengthening Ireland's national approach to dual-career support.

Individual Development Plans and Calendar Coordination

Athlete ownership is a defining feature of effective Individual Development Plans (IDPs). Encouraging athletes to take responsibility for updating their plan and communicating emerging pressures promotes accountability, strengthens planning skills, and reinforces the self-management principles that underpin both academic and sporting success.

IDPs form the foundation of effective dual-career implementation. Each plan should integrate an athlete's sporting, academic, and personal goals within a coherent framework. The process encourages athletes, coaches, and academic partners to identify key milestones, anticipate challenges, and agree on appropriate supports in advance.

Calendar coordination—aligning academic deadlines, examinations, and training or competition periods—is central to minimising scheduling conflicts and reducing stress during key performance phases. NGBs and HEIs should collaborate to share key dates early in the season and establish clear procedures for flexibility when clashes occur. This collaboration helps maintain academic progress without compromising preparation for major events.

NGB Checklist 5:

NGBs and HEIs should collaborate to develop an IDP for each athlete on an annual basis.

Coach Education and Capacity Building

Coaches play a pivotal role in shaping the athlete experience and have significant influence over how dual-career commitments are managed in daily practice. Building their awareness and capability is essential. Dual-career principles should be embedded in all coach education pathways—from initial qualifications to ongoing professional development.

NGB Checklist 6:

Dual-career principles should be integrated into all coach education pathways.

Continuing Professional Development (CPD) programmes should cover practical strategies such as managing flexible schedules, supporting athletes during exam periods, and maintaining communication with HEIs. Joint training opportunities between NGBs and education partners can strengthen shared understanding and promote consistent practice across institutions.

‘By validating coaches who enable athletes to succeed in both domains, leaders contribute directly to long-term retention, athlete welfare, and performance outcomes. This top-down recognition is essential for aligning coaching practice with athlete-centred values.’

As the drivers of culture, performance programme leaders in NGBs are accountable for recognising and rewarding dual-career support within coach performance reviews. By validating coaches who enable athletes to succeed in both domains, leaders contribute directly to long-term retention, athlete welfare, and performance outcomes. This top-down recognition is essential for aligning coaching practice with athlete-centred values.

Communication Standards and Coordination

Effective dual-career delivery relies on structured, transparent communication between NGBs and HEIs. Clear processes for sharing information, confirming athlete status, and resolving conflicts foster consistency and trust. Providing academic partners with competition schedules, maintaining up-to-date contact lists, and appointing designated liaisons within each organisation strengthen coordination. When issues arise, escalation procedures should prioritise early, proportionate resolution through open dialogue between the athlete, coach, and academic liaison. Sustaining a culture of communication grounded in respect and shared purpose enables NGBs and HEIs to act as genuine collaborators, ensuring athlete welfare and academic progress remain central to decision-making.

Monitoring and Evaluation

NGBs are encouraged to monitor a concise set of indicators—such as athlete retention, training and competition availability, academic and sporting progression, and overall satisfaction—to assess how effectively their programmes support balanced development. Monitoring should actively inform decision-making rather than function as a separate exercise. Regular review and reporting to boards and partners maintain visibility of dual-career activity within strategic planning, while feedback from athletes, coaches, and education partners highlights programme strengths and areas for improvement.

Embedding continuous improvement within governance and daily practice keeps the framework relevant and credible. By applying new evidence, sharing learning across programmes, and responding to feedback, NGBs can enhance both athlete welfare and performance outcomes, creating a system that evolves with the changing realities of athletes, education, and sport.

NGB Checklist 7:

Dual-career support provision should be monitored and reported to boards as a key indicator of high-performance programme health.

This document condenses the detailed guidance produced by the Sport Ireland Institute's Dual Career Lead, Dr Jeff Gomez, and the ASAS Steering Committee. The full text is available here:



National Governing Body (NGB) Dual-Career Support Checklist

CATEGORY	ACTION ITEM	STATUS
Governance & Strategy	Vision and Mission: Explicitly incorporate a commitment to holistic athlete development and dual-career support within the organisation’s vision and mission statements.	
	Dedicated Oversight: Appoint a dedicated High-Performance staff member with explicit responsibility for dual-career coordination, liaising with HEIs and the Sport Ireland Institute.	
	Define Key Performance Indicators (KPIs): Establish measurable targets, such as the proportion of athletes engaged in education, academic achievement rates, and athlete satisfaction scores.	
	Athlete Voice: Formally include current or recently retired dual-career athletes in governance bodies or advisory groups.	
	Policy Framework: Formally reference dual career as a "right" within the NGB’s governance documents, policies, and procedures (e.g., an Athlete Rights Charter)	
Operational Support	Individual Development Plans (IDPs): Ensure that every athlete has a living IDP, developed collaboratively with HEIs, which integrates sporting, academic, personal, and career goals.	
	Calendar Coordination: Proactively align training and competition schedules with academic calendars, including examinations and deadlines, well in advance.	
	Wellness Integration: Provide regular access to sport psychology, mental health support, and recovery guidance, tailored to the specific pressures of dual-career athletes.	
	Skill Development: Embed transferable skills training—such as time management, leadership, and communication—directly into annual high-performance plans.	

National Governing Body (NGB) Dual-Career Support Checklist

CATEGORY	ACTION ITEM	STATUS
Collaborative Ecosystems	Formal Agreements: Familiarise yourself with the Sport Ireland Institute ASAS standards and establish written agreements with HEIs to support high-performance athletes.	
	Designated Liaisons: Appoint dedicated liaison contacts within both the NGB and the educational partner to facilitate communication and collaboration.	
	Flexible Training Models: Utilise hybrid, decentralised, or technology-supported training approaches to accommodate personal circumstances and location.	
	Career Mentorship: Establish formal networking and work-experience programmes that connect athletes with commercial partners and professional mentors.	
Capacity Building	Coach Education: Integrate dual-career principles and athlete development theory throughout all coach education pathways.	
	Continuing Professional Development (CPD) Provision: Provide CPDs for staff on managing flexible schedules and maintaining effective communication with education partners.	
	Staff Recognition: Recognise and reward coaches who actively promote dual-career balance, incorporating this support into their performance reviews.	
Monitoring & Review	Data Collection: Systematically monitor key indicators—such as athlete retention and academic progression—and report these to the Board as a core measure of high-performance programme effectiveness.	
	Feedback Loops: Conduct regular reviews with athletes, coaches, and education partners to identify programme strengths, and areas for improvement.	
	Evidence-Based Practice: Utilise current research, including findings from EU-funded projects, to continuously refine dual-career support interventions.	



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