



Exploring the Opportunities and Forms of Institutional Support for Dual-Career Student-Athletes at Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI)

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ABSTRAK

Mahasiswa-atlet di pendidikan tinggi dituntut menyeimbangkan tanggung jawab akademik yang berat dengan pelatihan intensif dan komitmen olahraga prestasi. Penelitian ini bertujuan mengeksplorasi peluang dan bentuk dukungan institusional yang dialami mahasiswa-atlet di Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI) dalam mengelola peran ganda sebagai mahasiswa dan atlet. Jalur karier ganda ini kerap menimbulkan kendala waktu, konflik peran, dan tekanan psikologis, terutama saat dukungan institusional tidak konsisten. Penelitian ini mengadopsi pendekatan kualitatif untuk memperoleh pemahaman mendalam tentang pengalaman hidup mahasiswa-atlet dalam konteks universitas. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam semi-terstruktur yang melibatkan 15 mahasiswa atlet sarjana dari berbagai disiplin olahraga di UPSI, ditranskripsikan menggunakan Sonix.ai, dan dianalisis secara tematik menggunakan perangkat lunak ATLAS.ti 24. Analisis tematik mengungkapkan dukungan institusional, khususnya fleksibilitas akademik, pemahaman dosen, akses fasilitas, pelatihan dan bimbingan, bantuan keuangan, dan dukungan sebaya, berperan sentral bagi mahasiswa-atlet mempertahankan keterlibatan di kedua bidang. Hasil penelitian mengungkapkan tema utama peluang dan dukungan yang menyoroti pentingnya fleksibilitas akademik, pemahaman dosen, dan dukungan institusional. Kesimpulannya, studi ini mengeksplorasi peluang dan menunjukkan bahwa dukungan institusional yang efektif penting bagi mahasiswa atlet untuk menyeimbangkan komitmen akademik dan atletik. Studi ini memperdalam pemahaman pengalaman mahasiswa-atlet dalam konteks universitas negeri Malaysia serta memberikan implikasi bagi pendidikan tinggi dalam memperkuat dukungan untuk meningkatkan keberhasilan akademik, kesejahteraan, dan pengembangan holistik mahasiswa-atlet.

Kata Kunci: mahasiswa-atlet, dukungan institusional, karir ganda, peluang

ABSTRACT

Student-athletes in higher education are required to balance demanding academic responsibilities with intensive training and competitive sports commitments. This study aims to explore the opportunities and forms of institutional support

experienced by student-athletes at Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI) in managing their dual roles as students and athletes. This dual-career pathway often leads to time constraints, role conflict, and psychological pressure, particularly when institutional support is inconsistent. This study adopts a qualitative approach to obtain an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of student-athletes in the university context. Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 15 undergraduate student-athletes from various sports disciplines at UPSI, transcribed using Sonix.ai, and thematically analyzed using ATLAS.ti 24. The thematic analysis reveals that institutional support, particularly academic flexibility, lecturers' understanding, access to facilities, training and mentoring, financial assistance, and peer support, plays a central role in maintaining engagement in both domains. The findings highlight the importance of academic flexibility, lecturers' understanding, and institutional support. In conclusion, effective institutional support is important for balancing academic and athletic commitments. This study deepens understanding of student-athletes' experiences in a Malaysian public university and provides implications for strengthening support to enhance academic success, well-being, and holistic development.

Keywords: student-athletes, institutional support, dual careers, opportunities



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INTRODUCTION

Student-athletes constitute a distinctive population within higher education institutions, as they are simultaneously required to fulfil academic responsibilities and maintain high levels of athletic performance (Abdullah et al., 2024). While many scholars argue that sports participation results in high academic output among student-athletes, others contend that it decreases academic performance. Alongside attending lectures, completing coursework, and preparing for examinations, student-athletes must also commit to regular training sessions, competitions, and travel schedules (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2023). The convergence of these demands often results in significant time pressure, physical fatigue, and psychological stress, particularly during peak academic and competitive periods (Simons & Bird, 2023). Previous research has consistently shown that inadequate institutional support may lead to academic disengagement, emotional exhaustion, and challenges to overall well-being among student-athletes (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

The capacity of student-athletes to manage these dual responsibilities is closely linked to the availability and quality of institutional support systems. Academic flexibility, understanding from lecturers, effective coordination between academic faculties and sports units, and access to appropriate facilities have been

identified as critical factors in supporting dual-career pathways (Parker et al., 2024). Despite increasing recognition of the educational and developmental value of sport, institutional support for student-athletes is not always applied consistently, resulting in uneven experiences across and within universities as stated by López-Fernández, Rodríguez-Medina, and González-García (2022).

This study has demonstrated that structured support mechanisms, such as academic advising and mentoring programmes. Flexible assessment arrangements and coordinated scheduling can significantly enhance student-athletes' academic engagement and overall well-being (Ng, Abdullah & Rahman, 2023). However, much of this research has been conducted in Western contexts. In Malaysia, studies on student-athletes remain relatively limited and have largely adopted quantitative approaches focusing on academic performance, stress, or general satisfaction (Knight et al., 2023). There is a lack of in-depth qualitative understanding of how student-athletes perceive and experience institutional support within local university settings (Gao, & Sun 2024).

Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI) provides a relevant context for examining these issues, given its strong academic orientation alongside active participation in inter-university and national sports competitions (English & Kendall, 2022). Student-athletes at UPSI are required to navigate institutional expectations related to both academic achievement and athletic performance (Harris & Maher, 2023). However, empirical evidence regarding the student-athletes' experience with existing support structures and managing competing demands remains scarce. This study is essential for informing institutional policies and practices that align with the lived realities of student-athletes (Gagné et al., 2023).

Accordingly, this study explores the opportunities and forms of institutional support experienced by student-athletes at UPSI in managing their academic and athletic commitments (Caulfield et al., 2023). By foregrounding student-athletes' voices, the study seeks to contribute nuanced insights into the institutional structures, interpersonal relationships, and opportunities that shape dual-career experiences within a Malaysian public university context (Brown & Papanikolaou, 2022).

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative explanatory research design to explore the opportunities and explain student-athletes' experiences of institutional support within a specific university context. A qualitative approach is appropriate as it allows for an in-depth examination of participants' lived experiences and the meanings they attribute to institutional practices (Hall & Liebenberg, 2024). The explanatory orientation of the design enables the study to move beyond descriptive accounts and examine how and why particular forms of support influence student-athletes' ability to manage dual roles (Kallio et al., 2023). This study was conducted at Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI), a public university in Malaysia recognised for its emphasis on teacher education and active engagement in intervarsity and national-level sports competitions. Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI) provides an institutional environment in which academic expectations and athletic commitments intersect, making it a suitable context for investigating dual-career experiences (De Maio et al., 2025).

Participants

The participants comprised fifteen undergraduate student-athletes enrolled at UPSI. Student-athletes were operationally defined as students who were officially registered with the university and actively represented UPSI in organised sports competitions at inter-university, national, or international levels. The sample size was considered appropriate for qualitative inquiry, as data saturation was achieved, indicating that the sample adequately captured the diversity and complexity of participants' experiences (Ahmed, 2025).

Sampling and Procedure

Purposive sampling was employed to identify participants with direct and relevant experience of balancing academic and athletic commitments (Parker, Perry & Hamm, 2024). Participants were recruited through collaboration with the university's sports units and student-athlete networks. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted face-to-face or online, depending on participants' availability. Before the interviews, participants were provided with an information sheet outlining the purpose of the study, ethical considerations, and

their rights as research participants (Chand, 2025). Written informed consent was obtained from all participants, and ethical approval was secured in accordance with institutional guidelines. However, Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained throughout the research process.

Instrument

Data were collected using a semi-structured interview guide developed based on the research objectives and relevant literature (Ruslin et al., 2022). Semi-structured interviews were selected to allow flexibility in exploring emerging issues while ensuring coverage of key topics related to institutional support and exploring the opportunities. All interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy and completeness of the data.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis supported by ATLAS.ti-24 (Ahmed, 2025). The analysis followed an iterative and reflexive process, beginning with familiarization through repeated reading of transcripts, followed by systematic coding and the identification of patterns across the dataset (Williamson, Rooyen & Dry, 2025). Themes and sub-themes were developed through a process of constant comparison and refinement. To ensure methodological rigour, the study adhered to established criteria of trustworthiness, including credibility, dependability, conformability, and transferability.

RESULT

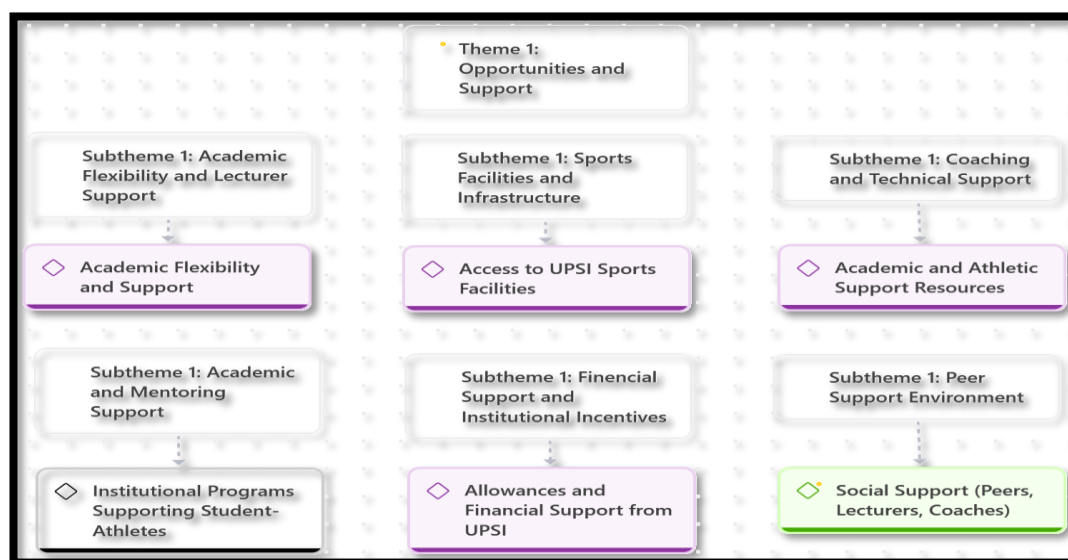
Analysis of the interview data resulted in the identification of overarching themes reflecting student-athletes' lived experiences in managing their academic and athletic commitments. This study focuses on Theme 1: Opportunities and Support, which captures the various forms of institutional and interpersonal support that facilitated participants' ability to balance dual roles. The diversity of participants in terms of academic programmes, sports disciplines, and competitive experience strengthened the analysis by allowing the identification of both shared patterns and contextual variations.

Theme-1: Opportunities and Support

The results of Theme-1 highlight the various forms of opportunities and support experienced by student-athletes at Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI)

that facilitated their ability to balance academic responsibilities and athletic commitments. The Theme-1 encompasses multiple interconnected sub-themes, including academic flexibility and lecturer support, sports facilities and infrastructure, coaching and technical support, mentoring and academic guidance, financial assistance, and peer support. Collectively, these forms of support were perceived as enabling factors that reduced pressure, enhanced motivation, and supported persistence among student-athletes. Illustrate the network view generated using ATLAS.ti, showing Theme-1 of Opportunities and Support that are associated with sub-themes derived from the interview data in figure 4.1.

Figure 4.1. Theme-1 of Opportunities and Support associated with sub-themes derived from the interview



Academic Flexibility and Lecturer Support

The results of Academic flexibility and the lecturer show that understanding emerged as the most significant form of institutional support. Participants consistently described that the flexibility in attendance requirements, assignment deadlines, and assessment arrangements during competition periods helped them manage academic responsibilities more effectively. Open communication with lecturers and recognition of student-athlete status contributed to a more supportive academic environment. Once the participant explained that in an interview:

“Biasanya kalau ada kejohanan, saya akan beritahu pensyarah awal-awal. Ada yang bagi lanjutan masa untuk hantar tugasan”. (Usually, when there is a competition, I inform the lecturer in advance. Some of them give extensions for submitting assignments.) (Subject 2).

Another participant shared that:

“Pensyarah yang faham situasi atlet memang banyak membantu, terutama bila jadual latihan padat”. (Lecturers who understand the situation of athletes are very helpful, especially when the training schedule is tight.) (Subject 5).

The results show that overall, academic flexibility and lecturer support were perceived as enabling factors that helped student-athletes maintain academic engagement while fulfilling athletic commitments.

Sports Facilities and Infrastructure

This study's results revealed that Access to on-campus sports facilities was viewed as a practical form of support that facilitated effective time management. Participants highlighted that proximity to training facilities reduced travel time and allowed better integration of academic and training schedules. One participant noted:

“Bila kemudahan latihan ada dalam kampus, senang untuk susun masa antara kelas dan latihan”. (When training facilities are available on campus, it is easier to arrange the time between classes and training.) (Subject 6).

While some limitations related to shared facilities and access times were noted. Overall, access to sports facilities was viewed as a practical opportunity that contributed to effective time management and reduced physical and mental strain among student-athletes.

Coaching and Technical Support

The results of coaching and technical support explained that Coaches played a central role in shaping student-athletes' experiences. Participants valued coaches who demonstrated understanding of academic commitments and adjusted training expectations accordingly. One participant shared:

“Coach memang faham bila saya ada peperiksaan. Dia tak tekan sangat masa tu”. (The coach really understands when I have exams. He does not put much pressure during that time.) (Subject 9)

Overall, coaching support was perceived as a critical factor that either facilitated or constrained student-athletes' ability to balance academic and athletic responsibilities.

Academic and Mentoring Support

The results show that Informal mentoring from academic advisors, senior students, and peers was identified as an important source of guidance, particularly for students in lower semesters. One participant explained:

“Senior banyak tolong bagi nasihat macam mana nak susun jadual antara belajar dan latihan”. (Seniors really help by giving advice on how to manage the schedules between studying and training.) (Subject 4).

Participants indicated that such support helped them develop coping strategies, manage stress, and make informed decisions regarding academic planning. Although mentoring support was not always formalized, its presence was perceived as beneficial in enhancing academic confidence.

Financial Support and Institutional Incentives

The results of Financial support and institutional incentives helped and motivated student-athletes by reducing their financial burden. Allowances and sponsorships made it easier for them to focus on studies and sports. One participant shared:

“Elaun yang dapat tu memang bantu, sekurang-kurangnya tak perlu fikir sangat pasal duit”. (The allowance really helps, at least I do not have to worry too much about money.) (Subject 11)

However, some participants noted that financial support was often linked to performance expectations, which occasionally increased pressure. Overall, financial support functioned as both a practical aid and a motivational factor that enabled student-athletes to focus more effectively on their academic and athletic roles.

Peer Support Environment

This study's results revealed that Peer support environment from teammates and fellow student-athletes emerged as a vital social dimension. Shared experiences fostered a sense of solidarity and mutual understanding, which helped participants cope with stress and maintain motivation during demanding periods. One participant stated:

“Kawan-kawan atlet memang faham situasi masing-masing, jadi senang nak sokong satu sama lain”. (Fellow athlete friends understand each other’s situation, so it is easier to support one another.) (Subject 7)

So, Peer support helped participants cope with stress, maintain motivation, and feel less isolated. This supportive environment was perceived as particularly valuable during periods of high academic and athletic demands.

DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that institutional opportunities and support play a critical role in enabling student-athletes at UPSI to manage their dual academic and athletic responsibilities. Academic flexibility, lecturer understanding, accessible facilities, coaching support, financial assistance, and peer encouragement collectively contributed to students’ capacity to remain engaged in both domains. Interpreted through Self-Determination Theory, these forms of support can be seen as fulfilling student-athletes’ basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Academic flexibility enhanced autonomy, while coaching guidance and peer support reinforced competence and relatedness, thereby strengthening motivation and persistence. From a Human Capital Theory perspective, institutional support represents an investment in students’ long-term academic, social, and professional development. By facilitating continuity in education alongside athletic participation, the university contributes to the accumulation of skills and experiences that extend beyond graduation.

The findings also highlight the relevance of role strain and role conflict perspectives, as inconsistent or informal support mechanisms may exacerbate stress and uncertainty. While individual acts of flexibility were highly valued, reliance on personal discretion may result in uneven experiences among student-athletes.

CONCLUSION

This study provides empirical evidence of the importance of institutional support in shaping the dual-career experiences of student-athletes at Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris UPSI. The findings underscore the need for more structured and consistent support mechanisms that recognise student-athletes as a distinct group with specific academic and athletic demands. At a practical level, universities

are encouraged to develop clear guidelines that promote academic flexibility while maintaining academic integrity. At a theoretical level, the study extends existing literature by demonstrating the applicability of motivational and role-based theories within a Malaysian public university context. Overall, strengthening institutional support for student-athletes has the potential to enhance academic success, athletic performance, and holistic student well-being.

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