

**FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH STUDENTS  
OPTING OUT OF A DUAL CAREER FOLLOWING  
THEIR EXPERIENCE AT THE MALTA  
NATIONAL SPORT SCHOOL**

May 2023

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# WHY I CHOSE TO CONDUCT THIS STUDY

- Around four years ago, the school conducted unofficial internal research to find out what the students opted for after leaving the school. Some students continued to further their studies, some opted to start a career, some continued to train regularly, and others switched the sport they practised.
- What struck me the most from this unofficial research was the number of students who opted out of sports after graduating, despite the school's effort to give the students the best experience possible (Personal Communication, 2023).



## **THE SCHOOLS' MISSION**

“inspiring sports excellence  
and academic success”

## **AIM OF THIS STUDY**

- The purpose of this study was to determine the different factors that may have led the students to opt out of sports following their experience at the National Sport School.
- The objective was to strengthen the whole ethos of the National Sport School in the hope of preventing further dropouts while continuing to produce future elite athletes.

# THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What reasons are given by the students for dropping out of sports following their experience at the National Sport School?
2. According to the school's coaches, guidance teachers, and senior management team members, why do post-secondary school students tend to drop out of sports? Are their reasons the same as those given by the students?
3. What steps should the National Sport School take to avoid having students drop out of sports as soon as they finish their secondary education?



# RESEARCH TOOL

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## Qualitative research Method

Eight students (four males and four females) were selected to take part in one-to-one interviews, using open ended

questions to encourage a flexible discussion.

*Finished secondary school in three different years. Graduated between 2017 and 2019 (age range:19-22), coming from team sport and individual sport.*

Focus groups were held with senior management team members and guidance teachers

to explore their perceptions and ideas about the research topic.

Focus groups were also held with coaches to explore if their perceptions and ideas match with the those of the selected ex-students and the senior management team & .

*Open-ended questions were used*



# FINDINGS: STUDENT INTERVIEWS

## Academic success:

All students obtained a minimum of eight O'Levels.

## Themes:

- The students experience at the school.
- The facilities
- The time-table
- Mixed genders
- The academic teachers
- The academic subjects taught in the school
- The homework
- The coaches employed by the school
- Communication between the school coaches and the school administration
- Communication between the school coaches and the club coaches
- Qualities of coaches employed by the school
- The role of the parents and the SMT in the life of the students
- Main challenges faced by the students
- Qualities students who aspire to have a dual career need to have.



# FINDINGS: STUDENT INTERVIEWS

## Main challenges:

- Pressure
- Lack of sleep and time management
- The responsibility of balancing education and training
- Qualities needed to be a student-athlete



# FINDINGS: STUDENT INTERVIEWS

## Main reasons from opting-out:

- Burnout
- The pots-secondary situation
- Injuries
- More importance was given to academics
- A lack of drive that reduced enjoyment
- Friends stopped training
- Not making it with senior team
- Little to no financial help





# FINDINGS: STUDENT INTERVIEWS

## Recommendations for a way forward:

- Main sport sessions change in time and an injury prevention programme
- Tackle the post-secondary situation
- Change in time-table
- Higher focus on the fundamental lessons to understand their purpose better



# FINDINGS: COACHES' FOCUS GROUP

## Reasons why they think that students opt out of dual career:

- The mediocre post-secondary situation (lack of coaches available by the association)
- Prioritizing the academic path
- Lack of sport scheme (at the time)
- They start building new relationships and they lose their focus
- Sport demands are too high nowadays and not many are ready to commit and sacrifice
- Wrong choice of sport at a younger age- related to burnout as well
- Injuries
- Lack of psychological help (especially when under performing with clubs, with having a lot of expectations).
- Lack of a good periodization plan
- Financial sport burden (no funding for training camps- entry to competitions- memberships- freelance coaches- facilities)



# FINDINGS: COACHES' FOCUS GROUP

## Way forward:

- Sport diversification rather than specialization
- Decrease number of academic subjects
- The element of 'fun' should remain in the sessions whilst instilling a sense of discipline
- Building good relationships with the student-athletes
- The involvement of Sport Malta and Malta Olympic Committee
- Educating the parents to understand their children better
- The introduction of 'games' as part of the fundamental programme
- Praised the injury prevention programme and weightlifting as part of the year 7 and year 8 curriculum
- Strengthen the communication between the club coaches and the club coaches
- Altering training sessions when athletes are tired (discussion about rules, tactics, match analysis should be considered. Yoga, mediation, visualization, stretching and relaxation methods could be used as well).

# FINDINGS: SENIOR MANAGEMENT TEAM AND GUIDANCE TEAM

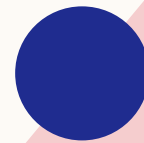
## Themes:

- Monitoring of the students through the myschool portal
- The exit policy
- Early specialization
- Lack of support at post secondary institutions (online lessons- strengthen sport schemes- delayed assignment due dates)
- The importance of time management and the role of the sport psychologist
- Communication with the parents
- Changes made to the curriculum
- The selection process
- Strengthening the relationships between school coaches and clubs
- Changing the school vision and mission

# CHANGING THE SCHOOL VISION AND MISSION

Towards the end of the discussion, the SMT members emphasised that the school is working towards changing its vision and mission, choosing to focus on sports rather than academic subjects and, thus, live up to its name: National Sports School.

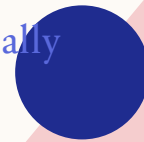
Although nothing is yet cast in stone, the school is insisting on getting the necessary approval from the Education Department to decrease the number of academic subjects.



# LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

To get a full understanding of why students opt to drop out from sports following their experience at the National Sport School, one would need to interview every single dropout student.

At times, especially when speaking about negative experiences, the participants felt uncomfortable sharing their real feelings. Their body language was enough to indicate that the participants were feeling uncomfortable, especially when delicate topics arose.



# IMPROVEMENTS MADE SINCE THE STUDENTS GRADUATED FROM THE SCHOOL

Specialised lessons previously called Tutorials, specifically including: Media, Psychology, Nutrition and Physiology are now recognised as the equivalent of one O'level. This means that by attending 80% of the main sport practical sessions and sitting for a theoretical exam to assess knowledge related to their main sport and also sitting for a theoretical exam assessing one's knowledge of the aforementioned categories, the students leave the school with an O'Level in hand.

*This was not available to the students during their time in the school.*

# THE IMPROVEMENTS MADE SINCE THE STUDENTS GRADUATED FROM THE SCHOOL

- Change in time-table specifically to make the main sport time more convenient.
- Academic requirements to enter the school have lowered and there was also the introduction of the 'wild card'.
- The selection process.
- The injury prevention programme and weightlifting.
- Continuous development programmes for coaches.



# PROPOSALS

- Possibly enrol students in the school at an older age. (in year 9)
- Have Stronger relationships with post-secondary institutions
- Stop looking at sport from an ‘amateur’ perspective.
- Need better and more qualified coaches. Who is going to take responsibility?
- An open invitation to club coaches to visit 2-3 times a year to see how the coaches work with their players in the morning.
- Have more support from teachers, parents, peers towards student-athletes.
- Shift from Sport Specialisation to Sport Diversification.
- The introduction of the exit policy.
- Higher stipend for student-athletes.
- The need for a sixth form National Sport School.

# FUTURE RESEARCH

Three years ago, The National Sport School conducted an unofficial internal exercise to find out how many of the school graduates continued to pursue a sport dual career.

This exercise was carried out with the students who left the school between 2016 and 2020. I strongly recommend continuing this exercise every year and possibly follow up again, up to three years after leaving the school.

This could give immediate feedback to the school, whether the changes which occurred to the syllabus so far, are leaving positive effects.



# CONCLUSION

I conducted this study to help strengthen the school ethos and bring it in line with its philosophy of “inspiring sports excellence and academic success”.

I am a firm believer that no dream is too big and that with the right support (holistic approach), always by keeping the student-athletes at the heart of every decision we, as educators could help them achieve whatever they want in life.

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**THANK YOU**