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Strengthening policy goals to support dual careers of athletes in a Hungarian region: Opportunities for competence development through education

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Abstract

This study examines the effectiveness of dual career programs for athletes in the Western Transdanubian Region among high school students. The aim of this research is to analyze the possibilities for developing the competencies necessary for a successful dual career and to assess the coherence between policy support and educational development. Using an online questionnaire, a cross-sectional survey was conducted among 596 secondary school students in two cities, distinguishing and comparing sport-oriented and non-sport-oriented institutions. The research examined the practical implementation of dual career guidance programs and the effectiveness of school sport support. The results confirmed that more than half of the respondents had not participated in any formal dual career support program. While sports-oriented schools showed higher levels of support, non-sport-oriented schools showed a significant lack of such programs. Despite the high aspirations of students to continue their sporting careers after high school, and the ambition of a significant number of students to become professional athletes, the majority have not received training or guidance on how to build a dual career. Instead, most relied on their families or themselves. The study concludes by calling for a rethink of the framework for dual career support systems to better align policy with practice.

Keywords: Athlete support, Dual careers, Education policy, High school students, Sport development.

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Transparency: The authors confirm that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

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1. Introduction

This paper focuses on the concept of the dual career program for athletes, a framework designed to support athletes in their educational endeavors while competing at a high level, ensuring that they are well prepared for the labor market once their sporting career ends. The European Commission defines dual careers as a set of requirements for athletes to help them successfully start, develop and complete a high-level sporting career while pursuing studies or professional work as part of a lifelong career path [1]. The first steps towards the development of dual career support systems for athletes in the European Union were outlined in the EU White Paper on Sport [2], a strategy document which stressed the importance of national sports federations and the importance of research at the European level. The most important milestone was the 2011 Decision on the development of European sport, which highlighted dual careers as a priority [3]. A more focused European policy document was published in 2012, entitled "EU Guidelines on Dual Careers for Athletes: Recommended policy actions to support dual careers in elite sport." These guidelines were adopted by the EU Expert Group on Sport Education and Training in September 2012 and, although non-binding, are intended to encourage national policy makers to develop and implement their own guidelines at the national level [1]. Although the European Union has consistently highlighted dual career policies in the subsequent EU work plans for sport (2011-2014, 2014-2017) [4, 5], Hungary has only recently taken the first steps towards integrating these policies.

The 2021 report of the European Parliament's Education and Culture Committee on EU sports policy includes an evaluation of the latest work cycle (2017-2021) and formulates possible further steps until 2024 [6].

The first noteworthy initiative was the TÁMOP 6.1.2 project published in 2014, which translated the initial 36 EU guidelines into Hungarian and assessed the extent to which they had been implemented domestically [7]. In 2016, a comprehensive survey involving athletes aged 10 to 40 was conducted to assess how the dual career concept could be better promoted in Hungary. These efforts have been followed by further research, such as a 2017 study that surveyed 320 athletes from 38 different sports, with an average age of 23. The results highlighted that athletes across the board saw a need for various forms of support, including educational counseling, scholarships, career planning, and flexible learning schedules [8]. Despite these studies and the European Commission's recommendations, support systems in Hungary remain limited, and there are few examples of good practice. Two noteworthy programs in Hungary are the Olympian Life Path Program and the Hungarian Sports Star Scholarship Program. These programs, although beneficial, mainly target a small proportion of elite athletes in higher education, offering financial support, reduced tuition fees, and personalized study arrangements.

The dual career developed with "new, innovative methods" presented by the Hungarian Olympic Committee (MOB) on 2 October 2023 introduced the so-called complex program of dual career developed with "new, innovative methods." This complex program covers the areas of mental support, enhancing sports performance, assisting with learning, and building a second career. Its shortcoming is that it is only for elite athletes studying in higher education.

Research groups dealing with document analysis have also established that, from 2020, studies addressing dual careers have come to the forefront again. The increase and consolidation of the number of publications published in recent years on the topic of dual careers proves this.

Papers were also presented that provide an overview of the current state of dual career research and can serve as a starting point for future research. The results of these investigations can help education and sports policymakers develop better measures to promote the dual career of student-athletes [9]. They also provide a possible framework for the development of national taxonomies. This allows us to identify the characteristics of dual careers and the shortcomings in their support [10].

Many articles report on the importance of adaptation and career competencies, the ups and downs of career development, and the different competencies required at various career stages [11, 12]. Using the results of systematic literature reviews, it is possible to formulate the barriers and drivers of the dual career of athletes. The trends and gaps can be outlined that can shape future research, policies, and management practices to initiate changes [13]. International practical examples can greatly enhance the effectiveness of domestic career-building support systems.

However, the comprehensive structure needs to fully integrate the dual career approach into the national sport system, which is lacking. The shortcomings of the support system for athletes in Hungary indicate the need for a more systematic and sustainable approach, especially for younger athletes in secondary education. As successful examples in Europe show, creating an environment that supports the education and professional development of athletes, while respecting sport-specific needs, is crucial to promoting lifelong success both on and off the field.

The aim of this research is to gather information on the practical functioning of the dual career support system for secondary school athletes in Hungary, with a particular focus on the complexity of existing support schemes. The study also aims to explore the challenges faced by student-athletes and athletes in reconciling their sporting and academic careers, to identify the causes of possible setbacks in one area, to assess the quality of support schemes available, and to explore career aspirations after the completion of secondary school studies. Based on the results, the ultimate aim is to develop a targeted support program for this age group. These research findings could guide the coordination of efforts between key stakeholders, including educational institutions and sports organizations, and the development of an advisory role for coaches and teachers. In addition, the results can provide guidance for the development of training programs and curricula aimed at promoting the skills necessary for athletes to make a successful transition to the labor market. In light of the research findings, there is an opportunity to make recommendations on life management, learning strategies, and career planning, all with the aim of enabling student-athletes to achieve high levels of sporting performance without compromising their academic performance (and vice versa). The study will also make recommendations for improving the quality of secondary education, possibly by broadening the curriculum to better meet the specific challenges of dual-career athletes. By addressing these factors, the research could help to reduce dropout rates in both sport and university studies and increase the effectiveness of cooperation

between the different actors involved in supporting dual careers, such as the Hungarian Olympic Committee (MOB), sports federations, clubs, schools, and families.

The study focuses on assessing the support mechanisms currently available to secondary school pupils and identifying possible gaps in the system, with a particular focus on differences between types of schools. By highlighting the gaps and differences based on institution type, we aim to identify effective solutions that can improve the dual career pathways of this student demographic. Hypotheses:

- It is assumed that the dual career support system for secondary school students is underdeveloped and less comprehensive than that offered in higher education.
- It is also expected that students enrolled in schools with a specific sports curriculum are more likely to encounter dual-career programs, making these opportunities more apparent and accessible to them than to students in non-sport-focused schools.
- In addition, it is assumed that the majority of high school athletes in the full sample did not participate in any formal dual-career support program.
- Finally, it is assumed that the primary sources of support for student-athletes in managing their academic and sporting careers come from their families and personal efforts, rather than from institutional support programs.

2. Materials and Methods

The research began with a thorough review of national and European documents on dual career systems for athletes. Subsequently, we conducted a multi-cross-sectional study in a selected region of Hungary, focusing on students from secondary schools in Győr and Mosonmagyaróvár (n=596).

Multi-cross-sectional research method was applied, since the goal of this research was to compare the groups of separate sub-samples (i.e., students with and without sports activities) in relation to the research questions investigated. The application of the multi-cross-sectional research method cannot be found in the literature dealing with the topic of dual careers.

Hungarian support systems related to dual careers primarily aim at elite athletes studying in higher education, and these systems are more financial in nature. From this point of view, the high school age group does not receive enough attention, although, according to numerous research results, dropouts in competitive sports are significant in the 14-18 age group. In Hungary, no major research has been conducted on this topic among high school students; therefore, the sample was chosen for this age group. As the first step of the research, the investigation of a smaller region was justified. The institutions involved in the research are under the direction of the Győr Vocational Training Center and the Győr Education Center.

The total sample consists of 596 students, of which 46% are boys and 54% are girls. Forty-four percent of students attend sports schools, while 56% do not attend sports schools. Fifty-two percent of students play sports competitively, 28% play sports as a hobby, and 20% of the sample do not play any sports. Eighty-five percent of sports school students play sports competitively, 16% as a hobby, and 1% do not play sports. Twenty-eight percent of the non-sports school students engage in sports competitively, 38% do it as a hobby, and 34% of the sample does not participate in sports. The sample is not representative. The available national data do not allow for comparison with the sample used in the research.

The methodology included an online survey administered through a custom-designed Google Forms questionnaire. The class teachers arranged the information of the students and their consent to participate in the research. Furthermore, the introductory part of the online questionnaire described the method of data management and the assurance of anonymity.

Students filled out the questionnaire using smartphones, and school leaders and teachers organized and supervised the process to ensure its controlled and systematic execution. The questionnaire was divided into five logical sections (I-V).

- The first phase collected sociodemographic information.
- The second and fourth phases aimed to explore the practical aspects of the dual career system (how it works in reality), providing key information on this topic.
- The third section focuses on the school sport support system in Hungary, providing practical insight into the support available within the sample.
- The fifth phase was based on the content of the Hungarian Olympic Committee's (MOB) 2023 dual career program, using this framework to evaluate the effectiveness of the program in practice, specifically for the sample population.

The research questions were designed to investigate the phenomenon of reconciling education and sports careers in Hungary. Specifically, the practical functioning of the dual career program, the effectiveness of sports support within the Hungarian school system, and the operational efficiency of the MOB's dual career program were explored.

The data collected were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows. Among the statistical methods, descriptive statistics were chosen, which are suitable for presenting the cross-sectional picture, the current state, grouping, and classifying the data, with simpler arithmetic operations on the data to display the results. Distribution ratios were used to present the results.

3. Results and Discussion

From the analysis and evaluation of the available documents, it can be shown that the dual career support system for secondary school students is underdeveloped and significantly less comprehensive than that available in higher education. The results of the research were based on three different samples: the full sample (n=596), a refined sample, and two subsamples of the full sample. The analysis of the full sample revealed that dual career success was a high priority for 56.2% of students, of whom 43.8% were in a sports school and 56.2% were in a non-sport school. Based on their sporting status,

52.2% play sport competitively, while 28% play sport as a hobby, and 19.8% do not play sport at all.

The type of school also has an influence on students' sporting activity (Figure 1): 83.5% of students in schools with a sports section play sport competitively, compared to only 27.8% in schools without a sports section ($\chi^2=197.497$, $p=0.000$). Looking at post-secondary school aspirations, more than half of the respondents plan to continue their studies in higher education, while more than a third are considering looking for a job, with a split between those who envisage themselves in a sport-related or non-sports-related job. Only 7.05% of students would like to become professional athletes. The central question of the research (RQ1) is whether the type of school influences students' career aspirations and the results support this: students from schools with a sports section are more likely to be oriented towards a sports career.

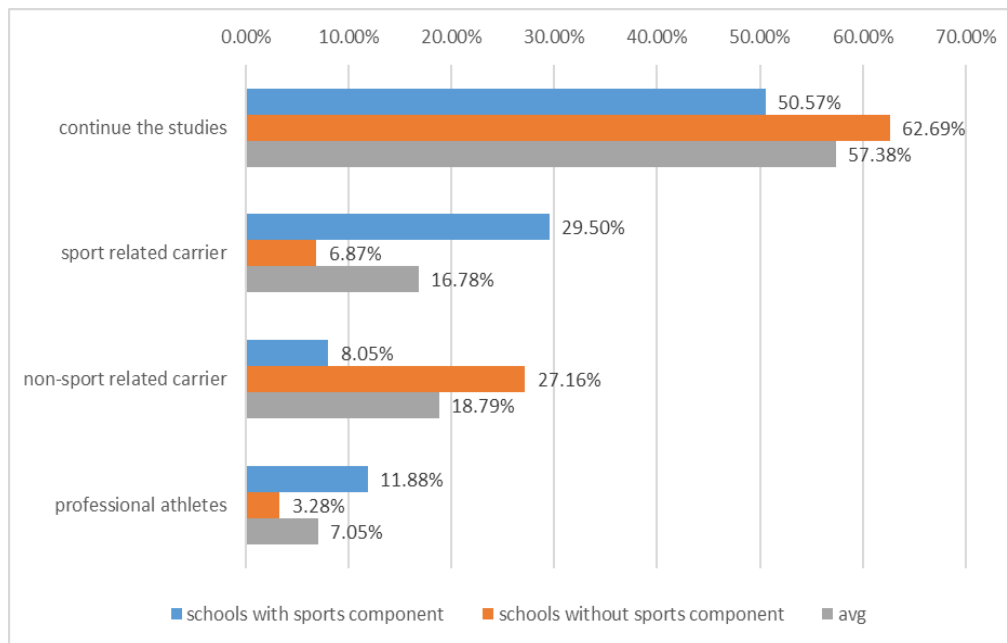


Figure 1.
Career goals by type of school (n=596, in %).

Based on the research results, the differences are statistically significant ($\chi^2=92.461$, $p=0.000$). Students from schools with a sports component have a higher proportion of students who choose a sport-related career (29.50%) and a higher proportion of potential professional athletes (11.88%). In contrast, students from schools without a sports component have a higher intention to continue their studies (62.69%) and a higher proportion of students who choose a career path not related to sports (27.16%).

The results indicate that the type of school has a significant impact on students' career aspirations and how they plan for their future after leaving secondary school. The baseline research question was also analyzed on a refined sample (n=325) focusing on students involved in pursuing dual careers. For this group, three main categories were distinguished: 1) higher education and sport, 2) work and sport, and 3) professional sports careers.

The analysis of the refined sample (Figure 2) also showed similar trends: more than half of the respondents intend to continue playing sports while pursuing higher education, and one-third plan to work while maintaining their status as sportspersons. The differences between the two subsamples were significant ($\chi^2=7.621$, $p=0.022$): a higher proportion of students from schools with a sports component choose to work while retaining their sporting activity (33.2%), while students from schools without a sports component prefer higher education to their sporting activity (65.2%).

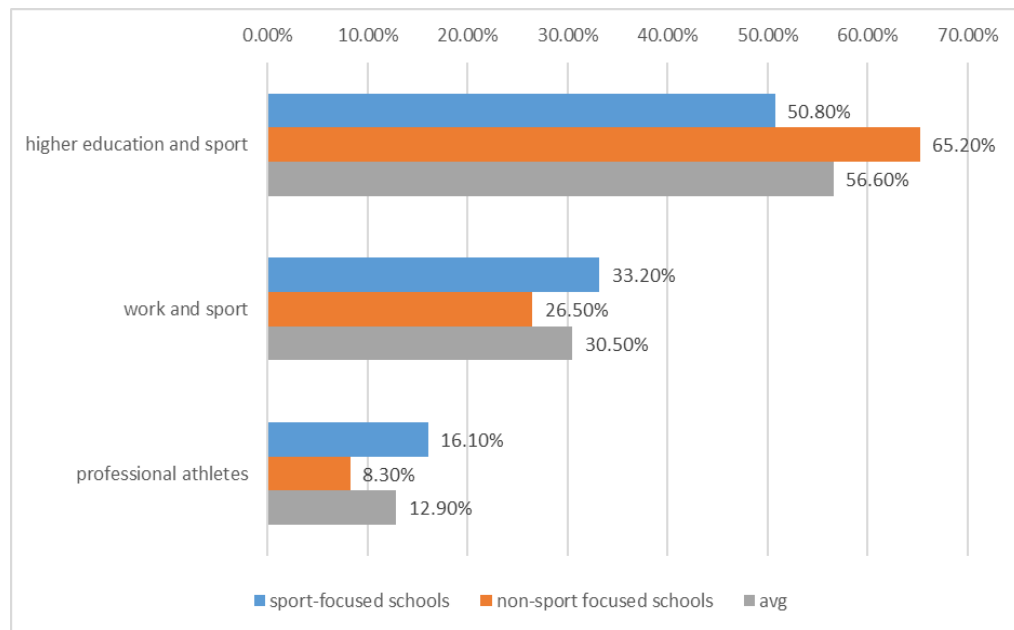


Figure 2.
Refined career goals by type of school (n=325, in %).

The results show that school type continues to have a significant influence on students' career aspirations, especially given the importance of dual career goals. A higher proportion of students from sport-focused schools choose both a career as an employee and a career as a sportsperson, or a career as a professional sportsperson only, than students from non-sport-focused schools. It is noteworthy that a significant proportion of pupils from non-sport-oriented schools express the intention to pursue a career in sport alongside higher education, highlighting the enduring importance of dual career success for this group.

The next research question focused on the operational effectiveness of the dual career support programs currently offered in secondary schools. Specifically, we investigated whether there are differences between students in sport-focused and non-sport-focused schools in terms of the emphasis placed on these programs. The research question asked (RQ2) was as follows: Are there differences in the emphasis of training programs between students in sport-centered and non-sport-centered schools? We hypothesized that programs aligned with the Hungarian Olympic Committee's (MOB) 2023 dual career guidance guidelines are underrepresented and less effective in secondary education. The study focused on the key pillars of dual career programs outlined in the MOB framework:

- Personality development (e.g., emotional resilience, self-esteem, self-confidence, communication skills),
- Career guidance and career planning sessions,
- Workshops on mindset, motivation, race readiness and stress management,
- Learning strategies (e.g., attention, memory, independent learning, foreign language competences),
- Preparatory sessions for higher education or vocational training and information on support for athletes.

Hypothesis 2 was that the type of school determines the range of development opportunities available to pupils. Variables were measured on a non-measuring scale, with categories including 'no participation', 'occasional participation' and 'regular participation'. The results of the subsamples are presented in Figure 3.

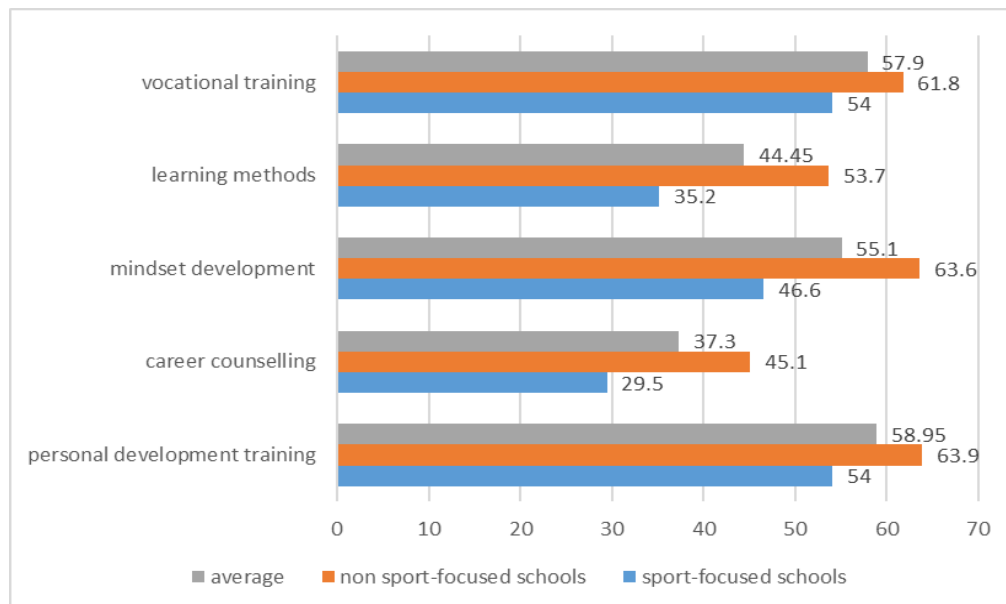


Figure 3.
Proportion of people NOT in training (n=596, in %).

The results for each area of development showed statistically significant differences:

- Personal development training showed significant differences ($\chi^2=8.457$, $p=0.015$). Students in sport-focused schools had lower rates of either no or regular participation in these sessions than their counterparts in non-sport-focused schools. However, the occasional participation rate was higher among sport-focused pupils, probably due to the breadth of topics (covering emotional resilience, self-esteem, and communication skills) that non-sport-focused pupils were exposed to in the regular curriculum.
- Career counseling, further education, and career planning also showed a significant relationship ($\chi^2=31.938$, $p=0.000$). Students with a sports focus were more likely to occasionally participate in these sessions, while students without a sports focus led in the "not participating" and "regular participation" categories.
- Mindset development and stress management showed a significant difference ($\chi^2=19.245$, $p=0.000$), with students who enjoyed sports participating in these casual activities more often than their peers did.
- In terms of learning strategies, the distribution was slightly different, with a significant difference ($\chi^2=21.104$, $p=0.000$). Students with a sports focus participated more regularly in these sessions, which underlines the emphasis on learning skills in the curriculum.
- However, there was no significant difference between occupations in higher education and those in vocational training. Both groups encountered these programs with similar frequency.

The aggregate data showed that nearly half of the respondents did not participate in these sessions, with students who did not have a sports focus being more likely to miss dual career opportunities. This suggests the need for a more structured training system for sport-focused students.

It is important to refine the research approach, as for some students it was not clear which areas the questions were aimed at, probably due to the overlap of topics covered by the usual curricular elements, such as the community education lessons. These findings further highlight the need to investigate whom students rely on for academic and sporting achievement (H4).

When examining the differences between the subsamples (Figure 4), the results show a statistically significant difference in support for both academic ($\chi^2=25.552$, $p=0.000$) and sporting activities ($\chi^2=39.037$, $p=0.000$). Students enrolled in sport-focused schools reported higher levels of family support than their counterparts enrolled in non-sport-focused institutions: 71.3% for academic support versus 56.4% and 77.4% for sport-related support versus 58.8%. In contrast, the 'rely solely on myself' option was more prevalent among students in non-sport-focused schools for both academic (28.1% vs. 16.1%) and sport (25.4% vs. 7.3%) support.

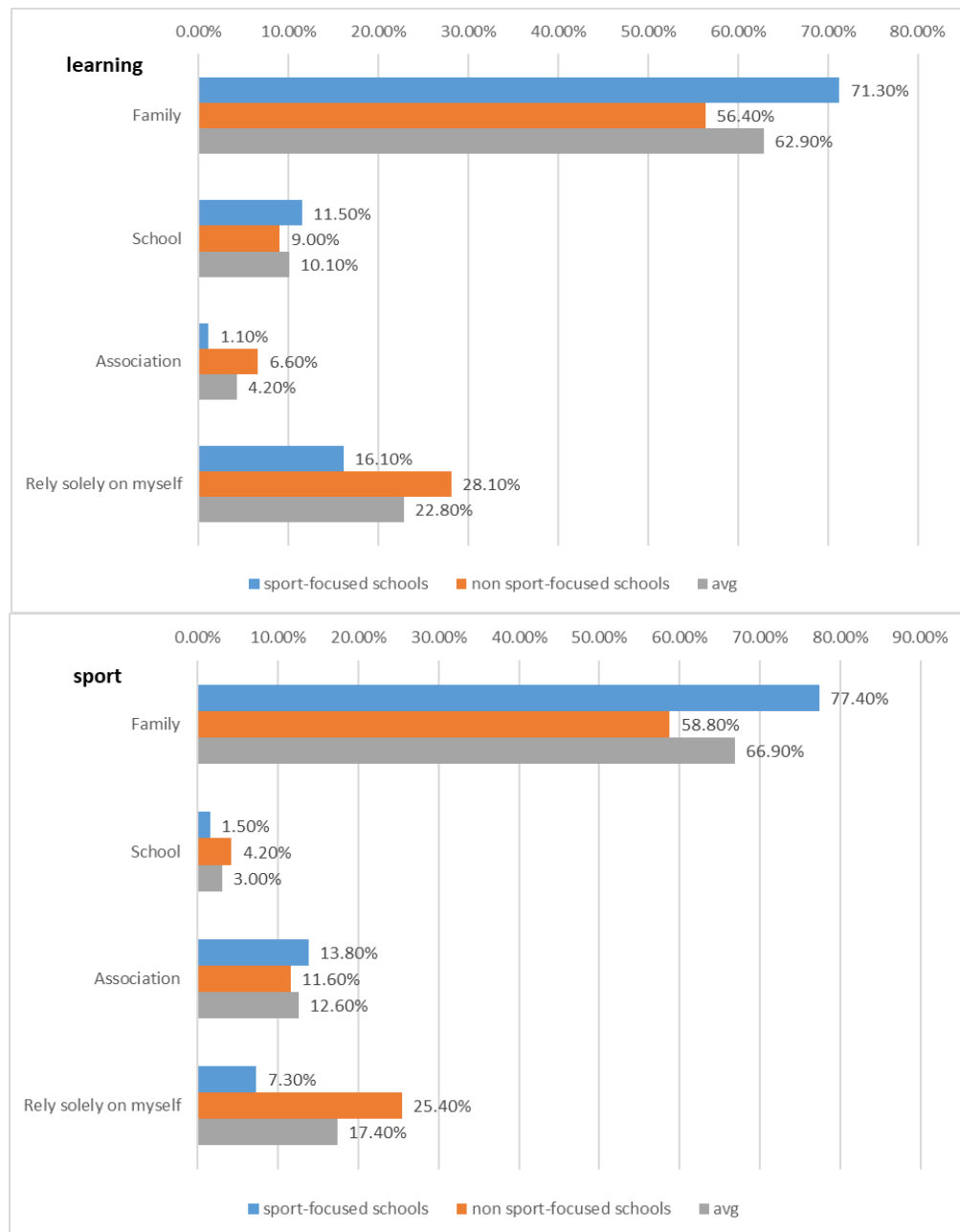


Figure 4.
Primary supporters in learning and sport I (n=596, in %).

In the second analysis (Figure 5), students were asked to select their primary source of support from the categories "association", "sports club", "all coaches in the club", "personal coach" and "autonomy". Here again, the difference was statistically significant, suggesting that the type of school plays a crucial role in determining who is the primary supporter in both academic ($\chi^2=62.001$, $p=0.000$) and sport ($\chi^2=70.520$, $p=0.000$).

These findings underline that the institutional environment significantly shapes the support structures available to students throughout their academic and sporting careers.

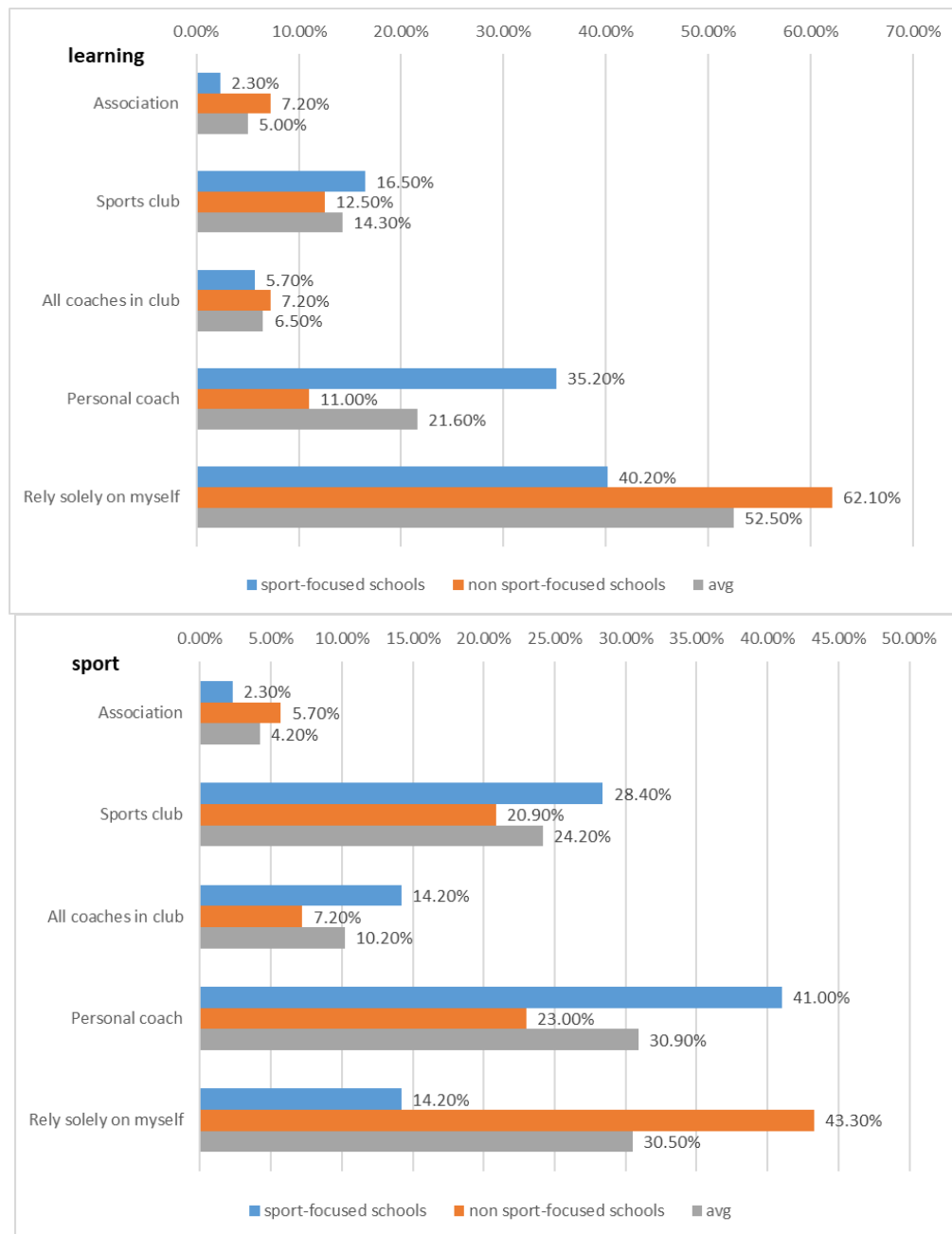


Figure 5.
Primary supporters of learning and sport, from the "active in sport" side (n=596, in %).

In terms of academic support, the largest proportion of responses fell into the "I can only rely on myself" category (52.5%), with significant differences between students from sport-focused schools (40.2%) and students from non-sport-focused institutions (62.1%). For sport-related support, this autonomy was less pronounced (30.5%), although it was still significantly higher among students who did not prefer sports (43.3%) than their sport-preferring peers (14.2%). The role of personal coaches was significantly stronger in the area of sports, where 30.9% of students cited them as their primary supporters, and was even higher among students who preferred sports (41%) than among students who did not prefer sports (23%). In the area of study, the support of personal coaches was less prominent (21.6%).

A similar pattern emerged regarding the role of sports clubs: 14.3% of students identified clubs as their main source of study support, while for sports-related support, the figure was 24.2%. This support was again more prevalent among students who played sports. The role of all coaches and sports clubs showed a similar distribution, with 6.5% of students acknowledging their influence in studies and 10.2% in sports. However, further research is needed to clarify the types of associations that non-athletic students referred to when identifying sources of support.

The analysis of support within schools (Figure 6) showed significant differences in both academic ($\chi^2=51.304$, $p=0.000$) and sports ($\chi^2=69.902$, $p=0.000$) support to students, further highlighting the differences between school types.

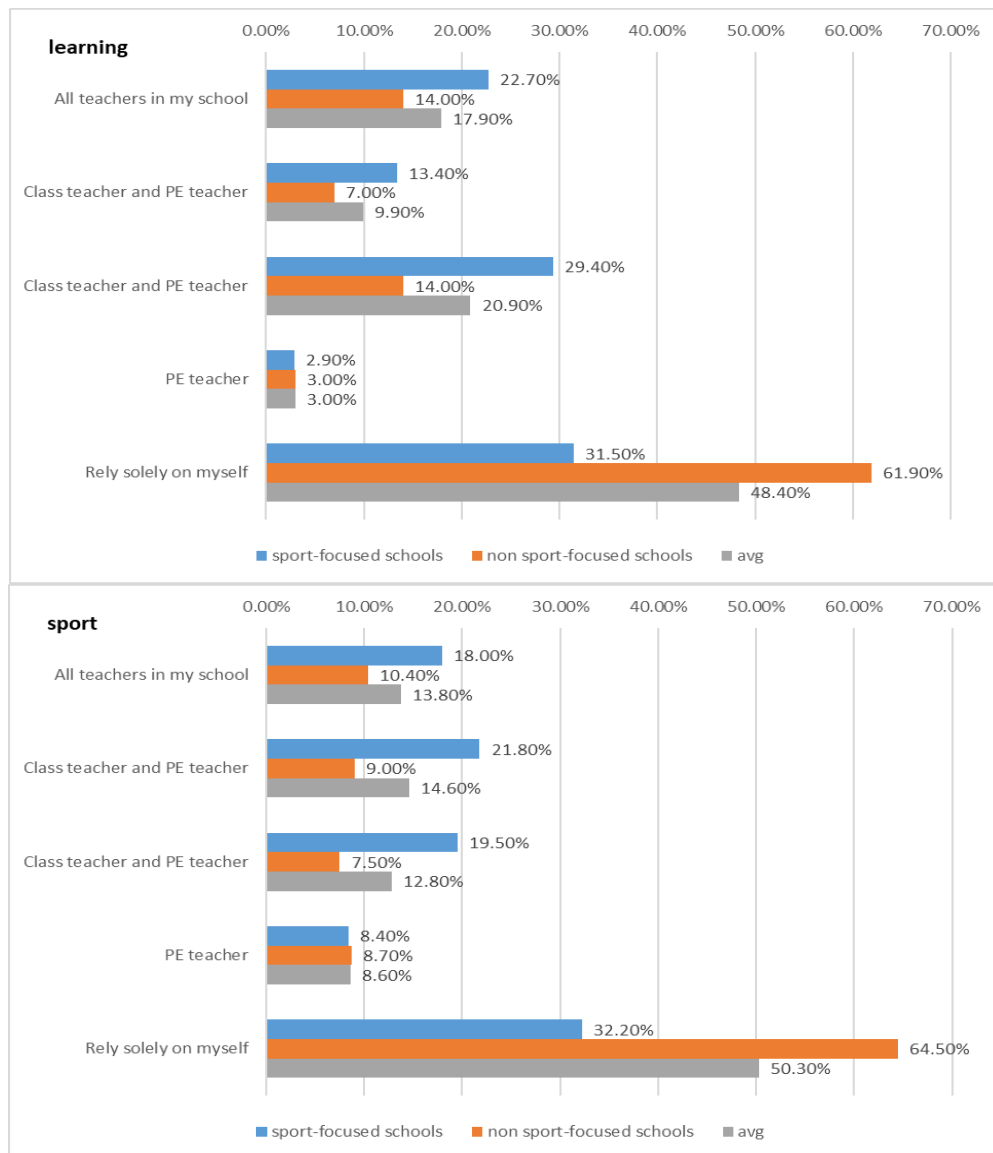


Figure 6.
Primary supporters of learning and sport, school side (n=596, in %).

A significant proportion of responding secondary school students rely solely on themselves for both their studies and their sporting activities (48.4% for studies and 50.3% for sport). Looking at alternative support options, the role of the class teacher is prominent in providing academic support (20.9%), especially in sports schools (29.4% compared to 14% in non-sports schools). The second most frequently cited resource is the category "all teachers in my school," with an average of 17.9% (22.7% in PE schools and 14% in non-PE schools). Joint support from the class teacher and PE teacher is also significant (9.9%), while the independent role of the PE teacher is similar in both subsamples (3%).

As expected, the role of PE teachers in sport is increasing (8.6% on average), but students in sport experience higher support than their non-sport peers. When looking at the reference groups (Figure 7), significant differences are observed between academic ($\text{Khi}^2=42.922$, $p=0.000$) and sport support ($\text{Khi}^2=97.087$, $p=0.000$). The whole family is most often identified as a source of support, both for studies (34.9%) and sport (37.6%), with a higher proportion of support among sport students (43.3% vs. 28.4% for studies, 50.6% vs. 27.5% for sport). Parents alone are also significant contributors to support (24.8% for studies, 24.3% for sport), with sub-samples showing similar distributions.

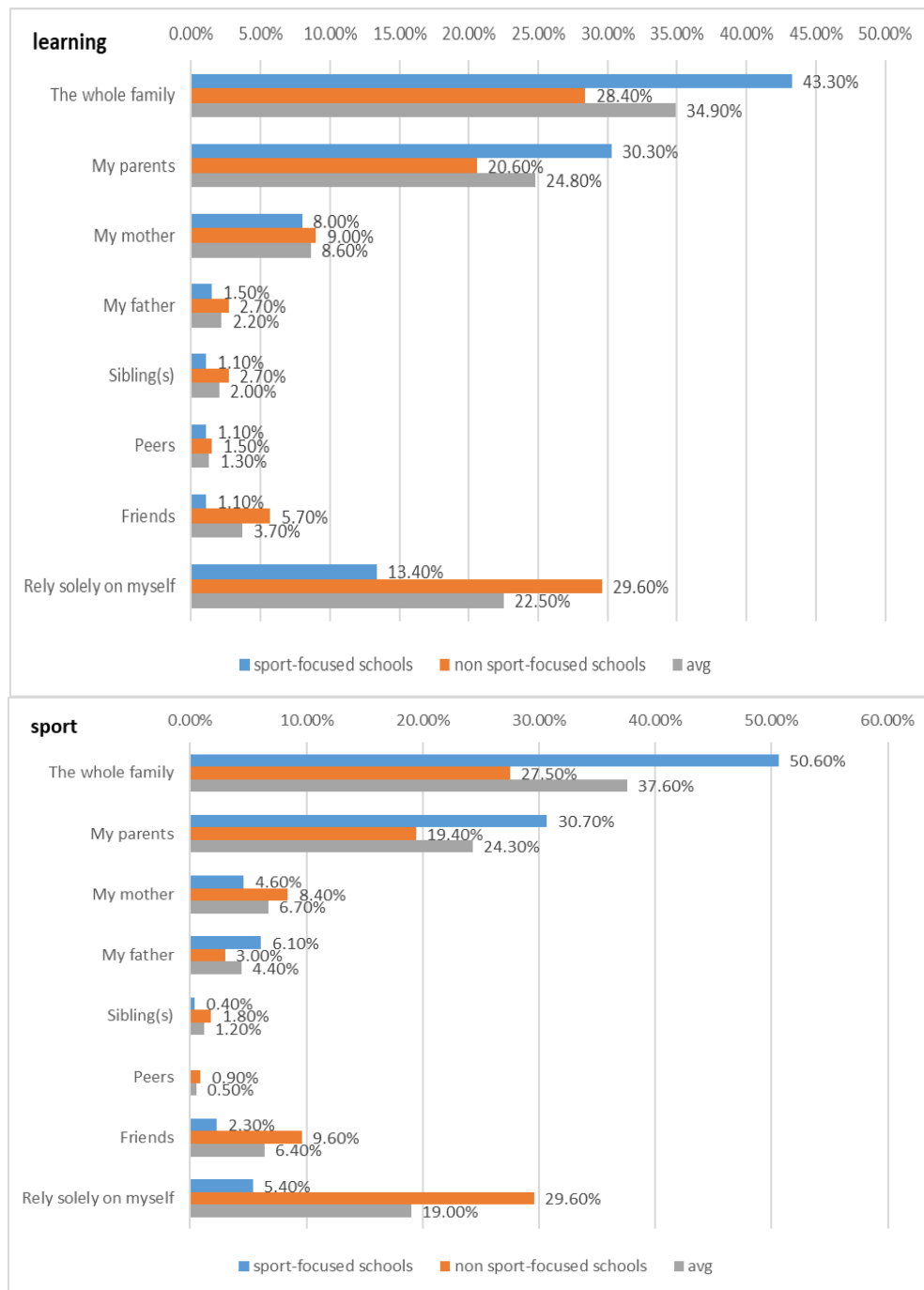


Figure 7.
Primary supporters by reference groups in learning and sport, family and close human relationships (n=596, in %).

Overall, the role of the family is unquestionable, but it is also striking that there are many who rely solely on themselves to achieve academic and sporting success.

Hypothesis 1: It is assumed that the dual career support system available to secondary school students is underdeveloped and less comprehensive than that offered in higher education. Result: The analysis confirmed this hypothesis. More than 50% of the students indicated that they had not participated in programs aimed at increasing their dual career success. The opportunity and frequency of participation in dual career programs were significantly lower in secondary schools than in higher education. This suggests that dual-career support systems in secondary schools are indeed less developed and less comprehensive than in higher education, especially in non-sport-oriented schools.

Hypothesis 2: It is also expected that students enrolled in schools with a sport-focused curriculum will be more likely to encounter dual career promotion programs, making these opportunities more obvious and accessible to them compared to students in non-sport-focused schools. Result: this hypothesis is also supported. Pupils from sport-oriented schools had greater access to training programs to support dual career success. These students were more likely to have participated in career counseling and learning strategies sessions, although fewer participated in personal development and performance optimization sessions. In contrast, non-sport-focused students were much less likely to have participated in any dual career support programs, particularly in areas such as personal development and stress management ($\chi^2=8.457$, $p=0.015$). Opportunities were more visible and accessible in sport-focused schools.

Hypothesis 3: It is assumed that the majority of high school athletes in the full sample have not participated in any formal dual career support program. Result: The results confirmed this hypothesis. Overall, more than half of the students reported that they had not participated in any activities that could enhance their dual career success. This finding was particularly striking among non-athlete students, further confirming that formal dual career support programs are largely absent from the educational experiences of the majority of high school athletes.

Hypothesis 4: We expect that the primary sources of support for student-athletes in managing their academic and sports careers will come from their families and personal efforts, rather than from institutional support programs. Result: this hypothesis was confirmed. The majority of students (62.9%) identified their family as the primary source of support for their academic efforts, and 66.9% identified family as the main source of support for their sporting efforts. Only 10.1% identified school as a source of academic support, and 3% reported receiving sports-related support from school. In addition, a significant proportion of students (22.8% for academic and 17.4% for sports) relied solely on themselves to succeed, highlighting the minimal role of institutional support in dual career management. Students from sport-focused schools reported significantly greater family support than students from non-sport-focused schools.

4. Conclusions

In Hungary, the DC support system is clearly one-sided. The significant majority of currently available grants are tailored to students studying in higher education. Each of the three outstanding grants supports elite university sports (Olympic Life Path Program; Hungarian Sportsillag Scholarship Program, MOB 2023 DC program).

The core curriculum of secondary schools includes subjects whose content serves the development of competencies necessary for the realization of a dual career. In addition, the Public Education Type Sports School Framework Curriculum also contains subjects that can help in the development of the necessary competencies. However, this helpful background was not clearly reflected in the students' answers [14, 15].

Formal dual career support programs are needed; their content aspects need to be established with preliminary surveys and careful planning [9, 10].

A large body of literature confirms the need for a social network to realize dual careers. Its background includes the family, the school and the sports institution [16]. The role of parents is clearly the most important [8, 17].

The impact of policy could be enhanced by the method that the National Association of Sports Schools (SIOSZ) receives financial resources from the annual regular grants. This resource could be used to develop competency development materials necessary for supporting dual careers. These teaching materials could be included in the core curriculum of sports schools. Training programs, events, and lectures that convey the knowledge necessary for career building to students would receive assistance and financial support in their organization and implementation.

In conclusion, the results of this study support the importance of our objectives. Regardless of the type of school, it would be extremely useful for secondary school students to implement a competence development program aligned with the development areas outlined by the Hungarian Olympic Committee (MOB) in order to support dual careers. It is essential to further emphasize and raise awareness among students of the practical benefits of such a program in achieving academic and sporting success. There is also a need for better coordination between the different categories of support - family, school, and sport stakeholders. In addition, the role of associations and sports clubs should be strengthened so that they are more actively involved in the dual career support system. The proposed changes are expected to have a positive impact on the number of high school students who succeed in both higher education and sporting careers, and on their future success in the labor market.

Some limitations have to be mentioned. One of them is that the sample represents a narrower Hungarian region. Therefore, the conclusions cannot be generalized nationwide. However, trends can be seen from them. A further limitation is that this research did not address the possible differences between certain sports.

The current study provides an important initial insight into what DC support options currently exist in Hungary. Furthermore, it shows what quality these grants appear to have and how adolescent students can build their dual careers. The possibilities differ within the country; therefore, in the future, the sample could be expanded to other regions, either by comparing the western and eastern parts of the country or the capital and the countryside.

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