



# DUAL CAREER OF STUDENT-ATHLETES WITH DISABILITIES AS A TOOL FOR SOCIAL INCLUSION

*PARA-LIMITS*

Field Research Activities – FOCUS GROUP

## EXECUTIVE REPORT



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### 1

## PROCESS

***Para-Limits - Dual Career of Student-Athletes with Disabilities as a Tool for Social Inclusion*** project is aimed at enabling high-level sportsmen and women with some kind of disability to successfully complete their sports and university careers without undermining one over the other. The name Para-Limits refers to those high-level athletes, Paralympics included, who seek to break down barriers and showcase their talent without limits.

The O1 and O2 correspond to the research activities of the state of the art, which aim at detecting obstacles, needs and barriers of this group in their sports and academic careers, according to their degree of disability and personal background. This information will serve as a basis for the creation of a guide of good practices and the design and development of the contents and structure of the innovative online curriculum aimed at training expert mentors (O3). Based on this comprehensive curriculum, an interactive online open access course will be designed and developed. Its suitability, both in terms of structure, content and proper functioning, will be analysed through the implementation of a pilot course. The results and information obtained from this experience will serve to improve and adapt the initial proposal (O4). In addition to this, taking into account all the information collected and analysed in the project, as well as the main results of the project, a European handbook will be developed to disseminate the results and make possible the dual career of disabled university sportsmen and women in other territories (O5). Finally, an Observatory on Dual Career, Disability and Sport will be created to evaluate and monitor the development of this topic.

From the list below of intellectual outputs and activities developed in the Para-Limits project, we emphasize in this report the main results emerged from the focus groups applied in the five countries.

## O2. Field research activities (field-work).

- A3. Design and/or selection of the tools to carry out the field research.
- A4. Application of questionnaires.
- A5. Focus groups.
- A6. Field research reports and scientific publication.
- A7. Good practice guide on social inclusion, adapted sport and Dual Career.

Focus group meetings were carried out in each of the countries to evaluate the data and findings collected from the desk work and the questionnaires applied, as well as to convey opinions, points of view from the expert participants. Each partner institution held these meetings in their respective countries at the local level.

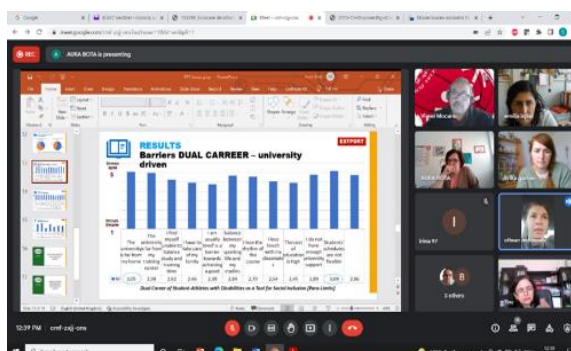
The number of participants varied between 6-10 persons. Expert personnel were selected from the following areas:

- *Adapted sport clubs. (1-2)*
- *Adapted sport federations. (1-2)*
- *NGOs specialized in social inclusion of disabled people. (1-2)*
- *Researchers in inclusive education. (1-2)*

Each participating partner prepared a summary report with the main findings and conclusions of each focus group, as well as a complete transcript of the session. The conclusions should be presented to the other partners at the Transnational Meeting 2.

The procedure followed was to summon the stakeholders to a classroom or virtual room, where they were presented the results of the questions asked in the previous questionnaire, since our focus groups were based on the verification of the results obtained and their confirmation by other subjects (Morgan, 1996). The items of the questionnaire and the results obtained were projected and the attendees were asked about the results of these questions.

The main objective was to obtain the opinion of the stakeholders on the results obtained from the questionnaire, and in this way to have more qualitative and open data on the topic.



The development of the interview was recorded in video or voice for later transcription. And then, as explained above, develop a report with the results. There was no problem in using the video camera since we had the consent of the ethics committee. During the development of the focus group, an attendance list was filled out and all participants signed the informed consent of the project.

## 2

## INTRODUCTION

In this section, data related to the following, are provided:

|   | ITALY   | PORTUGAL   | SPAIN    | ROMANIA   | IRELAND  |
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| <b>Sample size (number of participants)</b> | <b>6</b>  | <b>7</b>   | <b>6</b> | <b>10</b>   | <b>7</b>   |
| <b>Area of expertise</b>                    | sport management, Paralympic sports, inclusive sport activities, sport federations for disabled | technical directors, managers, coaches, researchers in Paralympic Committee and adapted sport federations, researchers staff in university |          | visually Impaired student, physically disabled former student, academic management, special education, Romanian Basketball Federation, winter adapted sports coaching, gymnastics coaching, management of the office for students with disabilities, program coordinator for inclusion NGO Special Olympics Romania, Sport Director – NGO Special Olympics Romania, Public Relations Officer Motivation Romania | Participants were selected through purposive sampling. They represented adapted sports clubs/ federations, the national institute of sport, researchers in para-sport and university sport officers who worked with para-athletes. |
| <b>Type of sampling (how were</b>           | experts of the research group of the  | network of specialists   |          | The experts in the Focus Group were selected based on the numerous  |  |

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| <b>participants selected?)</b>  | University of Rome<br>"Foro Italico"                           |                                      |               | projects that UNEFS implemented mostly in the area of disability sports for physically and intellectually challenged athletes. UNEFS has been involved in educational, sports, health programs dedicated to disabled children and youth as well as awareness campaigns within mainstream schools, academic area, sports clubs, community events etc. |   |
| <b>Dates on which the data collection was carried out</b>               | 11 March 2022  | 11 March 2022                        | 17 March 2022 | 8 April 2022   | 8 March 2022  |
| <b>How the focus group was completed (online, face-to-face or both)</b> | online format via the Jitsi Meet platform, from 18.30 to 20.10 | online format, via the ZOOM Platform | face to face  | from 10.00 – 13.30, via Google meet  | from approximately 19.00 to 20.15, online, through MS Teams |

In this section, the results of the focus groups are presented in synthesis.

The presentation of results, according to the structure of the Focus Groups will be made under the following headings, for each country:

***Question #1: Comment on the results regarding the barriers encountered by the disabled students practicing sports.***

|   | ITALY   | PORTUGAL   | SPAIN  | ROMANIA   | IRELAND |
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| <b>Comment on the results regarding the barriers encountered by the disabled students practicing sports</b> | <p>There is general agreement among participants that contextual factors are particularly relevant for people with disabilities. In this respect, it is widely recognized that official training centres are few and far from home and university. Therefore, the time needed to reach the training centres is one of the main barriers to achieving the perfect balance between study and sport, especially in big cities, where the time needed to achieve these places is considerably longer due to traffic problems.</p> <p>Not being able for student-athletes to be committed to both study and sport, they often have to choose one or the other during their path, above all because "the training centre is a far away from where they live". As contextual factors are linked to local welfare</p> | <p>We will present below the ideas that were pointed out by the interviewees, which appear in descending order of frequency.</p> <p>The compatibility between training and class schedules, losing the rhythm of the course and reconciling schedules. Even for non-disabled athletes in high competition in Portugal, there are many things in common here. However, in athletes with disabilities the difficulties are amplified. Aspects related to the distance from the training place to the universities or home are valued, which is understandable. In this context, the difficulties of transport should also be highlighted. The results are somehow predictable.</p> | <p>The most common barriers in the context for these athletes with disabilities were the inflexible schedules of the universities and the difficulty or distance between the study centre, the usual residence and the training place.</p> <p>The FG experts were satisfied with the results obtained from the questionnaire, as they also understood these answers as the most common for athletes with disabilities.</p> | <p>The opinions standpoints will be reflected in finding proper solutions to fully integrate these persons/target group in European countries, so that the barriers that they experience, on different levels, on a regular basis, should be minimal, both in academics and sport practice.</p> <p>The lack of information is essential for communities to understand and support disabled persons and represents a common barrier for these.</p> <p>Numerous universities in Romania have issues in providing physical, architectural adaptations, so this is a long-term commitment in order for the disabled students to access higher education in a larger extent.</p> <p>Barriers and accessibility have to be unified, as they cannot be treated separately.</p> |         |

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|                        | services which vary from place to place, it is suggested to carry out further statistical surveys to analyse the possible difference between student-athletes belonging to different territories. |  |  | <p>The lack of normativity in applying existing legislation is a major problem in implementing the protection and promoting the rights of the disabled persons.</p> <p>Accessibility covers 2 areas: informational and physical accessibility.</p> <p>Some sports clubs are reluctant to welcome disabled athletes in their training venues often claiming that there is no specific training methodology for the disabled.</p>                     |  |
| <b>Relevant quotes</b> |   |  | <p>"For me, the contribution to this question would be to always look for online modalities as far as possible. With online studies, a solution is given to two of the biggest contextual barriers for athletes with disabilities, such as inflexible schedules and travel".</p> | <p>"There is a combination of barriers encountered – architectural, informational and attitudinal-oriented and all these translates into a vicious circle because for example, if a wheelchair user cannot reach a place because of a staircase, curb etc, or if he cannot use a toilet, then he won't be able to normally function in that area, so he will remain isolated, you won't even see him, get to know him, you won't understand his</p> |  |

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|  |  |  |  | <p>needs or what you can do to help him. In this way, nothing will ever change in terms of accessibility so we will continue to be divided in 2 groups according to the preconceptions: US and THEM. US, that we identify with and THEM, who are “different”, with no things in common with us and that we do not relate to. What all of us should to, is to close this gap between the groups. So, in order to break this circle and change the paradigm it is essential to interact with the disabled. Only this way we can talk about social inclusion.”</p> |  |
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**Question #2: Comment on the results regarding the social barriers encountered by the disabled students practicing sports.**

|   | ITALY  | PORTUGAL   | SPAIN  | ROMANIA  | IRELAND |
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| <b>Comment on the results regarding the social barriers encountered by the disabled students practicing sports.</b> | <p>Experts agree that family cooperation is one of the most important social factors for participation in sport.</p> <p>Those who work with young people point out that they have often had to deal with overprotective parents who are worried about the possibility of injury. In addition, some parents seem to underestimate the real abilities of their children with disabilities. Without parental support it would be impossible for many athletes to participate in sport. In most cases, parents drive the athletes to the training centres and pay financial expenses. Parents are therefore a crucial factor in the success of the dual career path.</p> | <p>The interviewees agree that the results are also expected and are common to high-performance athletes, with and without disabilities. These are difficulties inherent to this type of level of demand. Any of these athletes train long hours a day, go without many weekends, and travel a lot for internships and competitions. As such, this takes time away from family and affective and social relationships.</p> | <p>The answers obtained suggested that the training centres did not meet the necessary conditions to be considered of quality, let alone take into account athletes with disabilities when accessing or using them.</p> <p>Experts gave great importance to the support that these athletes with disabilities receive from their families, since on many occasions the overprotection of family members makes them finally abandon their sports career.</p> <p>They also stressed the importance of the values of sport to these young people with disabilities, not only for health but also for other purposes. And they put a lot of interest in training families in the benefits of sport for athletes with</p> | <p>In Romania there are few models of success in accessing higher education as well as delivering sports training lessons in persons with special needs. Social interactions and social inclusion are still obstacles to overcome in the near future.</p> <p>The models of good practice implemented by local communities are not consistent and therefore education or sport programs cannot be financially sustained on long term.</p> <p>The Romanian Classification of Occupations does not include the qualification in Adapted sports training. The Ministry of Sports has to involve in a more consistent way in supporting the adapted sports within the existing clubs and deliver refreshing</p> |         |

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|  |  |  | <p>disabilities. In the importance of creating healthy habits and routines in these young people. The influence of the family is not always positive, so emphasis should be placed on their education and training.</p> <p>Experts indicate that, at some point in the school life of a young person with a disability, he or she is left aside. And this is not only the family's fault, and they highlight the importance of training Physical Education teachers in both primary and secondary education. There comes a time in the life of these students when they become a "problem" for the teachers, and this is accentuated by the lack of knowledge about their disabilities that can be found in these Physical Education teachers.</p> | <p>courses on this topic, to the coaches/trainers. Social inclusion approach has to be widely tough in mainstream schools starting the secondary school. Special Olympics training and competition system has been widely implemented the Unified Sports Model where in teams include both non-disabled and disable team-mates. Not all Universities dedicate financial means, human resources and know-how in providing a fair chance to education for the disabled. Disabled students and athletes do not need compassion but true partnership based on a mutual respect. Lack of information in using proper means of communication for each disability type is another social barrier. Living with a disability is not a reason for shame because it is not a personal choice. Most of the attitudinal problems or social barriers cause a lack of</p> |  |
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|  |  |  |  | <p>communication, so that each party don't express their needs and wishes. Most of the people with disabilities are afraid to open a topic of discussion for fear of being wrong or misjudged. This results in the fact that you never see the person beyond the disability story and his abilities.</p> <p>The cost of accessibility seems high but it is very small compared to the cost that we actually incur through the lack of accessibility and of spaces and programmes. In fact, this cost, if one were to calculate it, would come from the costs associated with people who remain in isolation and who remain socially assisted, precisely because they cannot function either at school or in sport settings.</p> <p>The budget of the Romanian National Paralympic for internal competitions, represents only 2% of the entire budget. Under these</p> |  |
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|                 |  |  |  | <p>circumstances there are low chances to perform at international level, because you have no opportunity to initiate and practice sport at national level. Grassroot adapted sports is the only way to access high level competitions.</p> <p>From a social point of view the proper approach is to practice sport as a means to improve the state of health, the possibility of school and professional integration.</p>   |  |
| Relevant quotes |  |  | <p>"Of course, in relation to what my colleague said, in my case for example, P, the boy I coach, is thirty-nine years old. At school, maybe he was able to play at recess or whatever, he had never done any sports. And his family has never supported him, Paco has come and told me, they are telling me "what for" "they don't pay you", I said "but let's see, this is for your health, so that you can be independent for as many years as possible, this is for you, this is health", I have always made it clear to</p> | <p>"The physical education and sport system in Romania, in my opinion, is not well organised, and the initiatives of NGOs or of some specialized schools remain isolated and do not reflect the implementation of a national policy in this field."</p> <p>"Many years of implementation of this program-a curriculum of 4 lessons, helped to educate both teachers, professors, educators, students about what disability means and how they should behave with a potential peer with</p> |  |

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|  |  |  | <p>them and then the family always complained "ah, that's why", in short, nonsense, but yes, there is a lack of training in this respect".</p> <p>"I have many colleagues that day by day meet students with educational needs and don't know how to give them possibilities because first they blame it on the fact that there are no resources, "there is a lot of talk about inclusion but it doesn't exist" and that is the reality ...".</p> | <p>disabilities, whether they have physical or intellectual disabilities."</p> |  |
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**Question #3: Comment on the results regarding the individual barriers encountered by the disabled students practicing sports.**

|   | ITALY   | PORTUGAL   | SPAIN  | ROMANIA   | IRELAND |
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| <b>Comment on the results regarding the individual barriers encountered by the disabled students practicing sports.</b> | <p>Experts believe that a high level of motivation is essential to carry on a sporting career with determination and to combine it with study. It is this high level of motivation that enables children with disabilities to overcome the many contextual barriers they encounter in sport and study.</p> <p>Due to their different commitments, athletes sometimes complain about tiredness and fatigue, but they hardly give up sport if they are adequately supported by the sport federation and the family.</p> | <p>All experts agree that the results were also expected. Two also point out that they were concerned that the item “I consider myself an athlete” (76.9%) did not have more points, since they are all high-level athletes and as such it was expected that this result would be even higher.</p> | <p>The experts highlighted the importance that these student-athletes give to sport. It is admirable that even with all the efforts involved, and the lack of resources and support, they continue to see sport as a motivation to move forward.</p> <p>The members of the FG did not want to go deeper into this question either, as they thought that assessing the opinions of the athletes about their individual barriers was redundant. They would have little to contribute since they do not know the reality of each of the athletes.</p> | <p>Social barriers create individual barriers. The lack of early interventions from a motor and psycho-motor point of view is a block road for the disabled children, so that later adolescent and youth may not reach their full potential.</p> <p>Disabled students acknowledge that handling presentations in various subjects is always hard (especially for the visually impaired) because the dedicated computer applications do not always provide the necessary functions, like enlarging the font.</p> <p>Accepting one’s condition brings almost no limitations in performing academic studies and facilitate empowerment and social integration.</p> |         |

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|  |  |  |  | <p>The lack of comprehensive psycho-emotional evaluation and the reluctance to ask for professional help and constant counselling sometimes worsens the health condition and the emotional status of the students-athletes with disabilities.</p> <p>Various programs, like “Sports leaders” are aimed at building self-confidence, self-esteem and courage to exercise their abilities.</p> <p>Struggling every day to demonstrate the academic or physical abilities can often create anxieties and distress.</p> <p>Functioning and disability of an individual occurs in a certain context.</p> <p>Providing a wheelchair suitable for the individual needs is rarely taken care of by the public health system in Romania.</p> <p>Customized mobility equipment for sports, namely sports wheelchairs are costly (thousands of euros) and they are not</p> |  |
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|                 |  |  |  | reimbursed in any way by the state. Therefore, they are considered “a luxury”, being often crossed-off the list.   |  |
| Relevant quotes |  |  | <p>“Look at what sport can do with these people, how important it is and how good they feel for being able to do sport, they feel more important, they feel like sportsmen and women, what I mentioned before, in the end it is above all for their health and at the same time it integrates you. And then, as the doctor said, you can find that your own family doesn't support you to continue with it or you have negative comments”.</p> | <p>“The individual barriers felt are primarily about the barriers we put up, primarily we, typical people and the barriers we can create without realising it.”</p> <p>“I think that individual barriers are somewhat divided between those related to environmental factors and those related to personal factors. This is an approach that the World Health Organization has also taken in the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health. I think it also has something to do with the person's background, the conditions and the information they have about their own disability. If you hear very often in your family environment, at home, that you can't do this or that, it will become a barrier and it will be very difficult to want more from</p> |  |

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|  |  |  |  | <p>yourself, and this is a small example that we met through the mobility caravans that we did across the country. We met a little girl dressed in uniform who was about 7 years old and we got excited thinking she was going to school. But in fact, it was her sister's uniform. The little girl wanted very much to go to school like her sister, only the family felt that having a disability and using a wheelchair she had no business going to school, what was she supposed to do there? And this is a barrier that is transferred to the individual, it is passed on, somehow, from the family, from the immediate family environment, but it becomes an individual barrier and it translates maybe into a personal factor at a certain point, associated with low self-esteem and shame”.</p> |  |
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#### Question #4: How could Universities facilitate the Dual Sports Career (combining studies and high-level sport?)

|   | ITALY   | PORTUGAL  | SPAIN   | ROMANIA   | IRELAND  |
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| <b>How could Universities facilitate the Dual Sports Career (combining studies and high-level sport?)</b> | <p>Enhance useful services for the practice of sports activities for people with disabilities. For example, the necessary changes could be made to the sports areas already provided by universities for students without disabilities.</p> <p>Promote the collection and dissemination of the good practices implemented</p> <p>Raise awareness among university staff of the special educational needs required by student-athletes with disabilities</p> <p>Activate individualised and personalised programmes based on the special educational needs of student-athletes with disabilities</p> <p>Promote forms of distance learning to enable student-athletes to follow lessons and take exams without</p> | <p>Change in social, university and professors' sensitivity. Greater flexibility of institutions and professors. Universities should disseminate, value and recognize the achievements of athletes.</p> <p>Teachers should diversify assessment instruments. Teachers may have extra hours to support these athletes.</p> <p>There is already high competition status and there are special evaluation seasons.</p> | <p>Experts focused their opinions on infrastructures and facilities since they should be easily accessible to athletes with disabilities. In many cases, sports facilities do not take into account the problems of these athletes, and focus simply on athletes without disabilities.</p> <p>The participants again indicated the importance of including online studies for these students, since the flexibility it can offer them would be very advantageous for them.</p> <p>One of the facets they highlight, coincides with the main objective of this project, which is the training of specific Sports Tutors for athletes with disabilities.</p> <p>The basis of this whole process begins with equalizing the support of</p> | <p>People with disabilities are starting to access the vocational (physical education and sport) higher education field as well. Many of the adapted sports practitioners could later become adapted sports coaches, by attending higher education.</p> <p>We hope that both physical and informational access for the disabled students will be supported by financed programs (national and international). We want to improve access and then support these students.</p> <p>Taking over good practices from international universities with more experience in this field is required in order to create a general framework at academic level.</p> <p>Implementing services dedicated to students with disabilities.</p> | <p>Moving from one location to another around a university campus can be an added fatigue factor for athletes with a disability (e.g. CP) and logistical solutions need to be developed.</p> <p>Flexible learning/ Academic flexibility. This includes universities facilitating a blended learning approach for athletes, being flexible with assessment scheduling and timetable scheduling for example.</p> <p>Universities could use the university as a means of targeting students with disabilities (Talent ID) and encouraging them to develop a sporting career and dual career.</p> <p>Personnel in universities who work with athletes with disability need to be educated on the various</p> |

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|  | <p>necessarily having to stay on campus</p> <p>Provide more flexible criteria for identifying student-athletes with disabilities who are eligible for dual career measures.</p> <p>Create a mentoring system to support student-athletes with disabilities during their studies</p> <p>Involve classmates as much as possible in the mentoring system to enhance peer interaction as a key factor for training and learning process.</p> <p>Prioritise the student-athletes' fellow students as possible mentors.</p> |  | <p>athletes without disabilities to those with disabilities.</p> | <p>Creating a digital map for all the university infrastructure and extending the program related to tactile carpets and access abductions.</p> <p>Offering individual recommendations to teachers about students with disabilities (to improve teaching style and interaction with students with disabilities).</p> <p>There should be an accessibility section in each university project. Another solution is to buy services for the disabled students.</p> <p>Making the curriculum and spaces accessible.</p> <p>Making the timetable flexible and finding various ways to accommodate the disabled student-athletes and their schedule.</p> <p>Flexibility and adaptation of the way to communicate with students.</p> <p>Creating interaction between students without disabilities and those with disabilities with the support of NGOs.</p> <p>Working in a multidisciplinary team.</p> | <p>disabilities, needs and on adapted sport in general.</p> <p>Communication should take place with adapted sports federations around scholarship application so they are willing and able to support the process.</p> <p>Students should work with the universities well in advance of the academic semester etc. to plan the modifications that are needed for them regarding their academic scheduling so that a dual career can be facilitated.</p> <p>Universities should provide support to students regarding diet, nutrition, sport science etc.</p> <p>Universities should also have support networks for para-athletes and groups where they meet and discuss issues etc. together.</p> <p>Communication should take place with adapted sports federations around scholarship application so they are willing and able to support the process.</p> <p>Students should work with the universities well in</p> |
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|                 |  |  |   | <p>Sometimes it is difficult to persuade people in management positions to make the spaces accessible only for one or two disabled students.</p> | <p>advance of the academic semester etc to plan the modifications that are needed for them regarding their academic scheduling so that a dual career can be facilitated.</p> <p>Universities should be proactive and engage more with adapted governing bodies of sport and federations. This should be the case in particular regarding notification around new para-athletes who are starting in university.</p> <p>Universities should consider, develop and promote their offering to athletes.</p> <p>Para-events could be part of university sporting competitions. This would help promote the para-sport in an equal manner to able-bodied sport.</p> |
| Relevant quotes |  |  | <p>“One of the problems is that this public law in the white paper on sport for people with disabilities in two thousand eighteen comments that a very high percentage of municipal</p> |  | <p>“...a lot of our competitions are during the academic year and that’s just a big challenge for athletes, both funding wise and also from the perspective of engaging fully in their studies”.</p>  |

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|  |  |  | <p>sports facilities do not have adaptations, a very high percentage, I do not remember but it was very high, sports and municipal facilities, heated swimming pools, and I am talking about the Region of Murcia".</p> <p>"I believe that the disabled athlete, as is happening with the Paralympic Committee, wants to match what the able-bodied athlete does, that is, to have the same opportunities, to have the medal of an able-bodied athlete and a disabled athlete worth the same, to have the same training possibilities. An Olympic athlete has advantages in a university, why not the Paralympic athlete, the secret of us is neither more nor less than to equalize the possibilities".</p> |  | <p>"...flexible learning..". Having "training times or peer support for people with disabilities..." would create "a community there as well".</p> <p>"Scholarship applications. We're happy to do so. Happy to provide these types of references and support the different applications..."</p> <p>"...the athletes themselves have to get organised in some respects so that the institutions and federations can support them to a better degree..."</p> <p>"And what we do have in the UK is BUPs, which is the British universities and colleges competition, they have para events all the way through that and universities get points for every athlete that competes. So, anyone that can get para-athletes on board really, really quickly and compete at that university competition. They normally come out in the top two just by the fact that they might have five or</p> |
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|  |  |  |  |  | <p>six para athletes competing. So, there's lots of ways of encouraging athletes into universities, but you've got to have the.... you've got to be attractive to them and to their coaches.”</p> |
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**Question #5: How could Sport Institutions (Federations) facilitate the Dual Sports Career (combining studies and high-level sport)?**

|   | ITALY   | PORTUGAL  | SPAIN   | ROMANIA  | IRELAND   |
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| <b>How could Sport Institutions (Federations) facilitate the Dual Sports Career (combining studies and high-level sport)?</b> | <p>Two possible strategies are identified:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- informing the young person and his/her family (while still enrolled in high school) about the dual career support services offered by universities to help him/her make a well aware choice about his/her future outside of sport;</li> <li>- offering counselling services to the university in order to make university sports facilities suitable for people with disabilities.</li> </ul> | <p>Promote awareness-raising actions for higher education students and coaches' courses.</p> <p>Improve university-site transport of home training. Adjust training according to the availability of athletes. Promote the psychological support of athletes (management of anxieties, expectations, goals and tasks).</p> <p>Improve athlete-coach-club communication.</p> <p>More flexibility of clubs.</p> <p>Listen to the athletes and provide them with all the conditions.</p> <p>Dialogue with higher education in the search for solutions.</p> <p>Counting the time of high competition practitioner for retirement purposes.</p> <p>Raise awareness among federations, clubs and higher education.</p> | <p>Most of the federations do not support adapted sports due to lack of knowledge. The experts commented their own experiences with different associations or federations, but the end was the same, the federations are entities that focus on traditional sport and do not know how to deal with the adapted modality. So, like families, training and advice to sports federations is recommended.</p> | <p>The organization of sports structures in our country needs adjustments so that clubs could become more open and inclusive to athletes with limited abilities.</p> <p>Promoting cooperation between sport clubs and NGO's, at local level.</p> <p>Building networks of specialists and communities of good practice.</p> <p>Communication between the Paralympic Committee, the Ministry of sports, the National federations, the organizations, the universities, the athletes, the coaches etc, through common projects and joint efforts to promote sport for students with disabilities.</p> <p>Finding means to financially support dedicated sport training and competitions.</p> <p>Special schools or inclusive centres where children can</p> | <p>Sports federations need to provide training courses to upskill all key stakeholders who work with Para Athletes. These training courses would target coaches and NGB's and help them understand the needs of para-athletes', how they can be best supported in a university setting and how that differs with each disability classification. Provide universities with information as to how they could best support the athletes – i.e. coaching support services required, accommodation requirements, timetable flexibility around competition schedules &amp; training camps, assignments and exams.</p> <p>Sports federations need to establish and develop working relationships with</p> |

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|  |  | <p>Existence of spaces in clubs to study.</p> <p>Develop organizational skills and motivation in athletes.</p> |  | <p>be selected for adapted sports have to be included in this approach.</p> <p>Motivating coaches who have the competence to work with people with disabilities.</p> <p>Promoting long-term strategies and consistent policies by the ministry of resort and national federations by including all the stakeholders with relevant competences in this area.</p> <p>Examples of good practice should be taken from one federation to another.</p> <p>Consulting the organizations of people with disabilities.</p> <p>Material resources and budget allocation.</p> | <p>third level institutes. Communication between relevant parties is key to this. Have multi stakeholder meetings with academic staff, NGB's, coaches and the para athlete. Lay the cards on the table a little earlier, have access to competition schedules and academic timetables to help remove barriers and effectively plan for the year or 4-year cycle.</p> <p>Sports institutions need to provide career advice/mentoring to potential dual career athletes as to which universities to select and which offers the best support structure for their particular needs and progression in the sport. (e.g. are scholarships available, access and proximity to training facilities, access to suitable coaches and training groups in the area, support services provided to athletes on campus, flexibility in terms of study options, timetables, work</p> |
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|  |  |  |  |  | <p>placement opportunities). Sports federations need to have this knowledge but this needs to be disseminated by the universities to the relevant stakeholders.</p> <p>Sports federations should consider developing para competitions at university level to entice more athletes to partake in sport, giving them more opportunities to compete and also from a Talent ID perspective – where individuals deemed with athletic potential could be recruited into high performance sport or teams.</p> <p>Institute of Sports should develop an Employer Network Link, which would provide athletes with work experience opportunities, shadowing/mentoring, flexible work contracts that support the dual career para-athletes.</p> <p>Federations need to advocate more for Para Sports and develop partnerships with NGB's on</p> |
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|  |  |  |  |  | <p>campus, strengthen them within the university and join these partnerships up. Explore supporting athletes in the region who maybe be enrolled as students but may have an ambassador or champion role for the university.</p> <p>Improving communication between stakeholders. Look at programme implementation, oversight and agreement from all parties. Sharing the university experience – expanding the breadth of knowledge, identifying which coaches are employed in the universities.</p> <p>More links with student advisors. Linking in the life skills team. Encouraging the athlete to ask for help. Communication piece needed from university to NGB regarding HP Athlete Policy. Meetings with Universities and Paralympic council or NGB's on how to promote services, share knowledge and</p> |
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|                 |  |  |  |   | experiences, recruitment etc...   |
| Relevant quotes |  |  | <p>"A note regarding what you say about the federations, there is an aid that the COE, what happens is that the federations do not know about it, they give, last year they gave to inclusive sport, aid to the federations themselves, many federations have not applied for them because they have not had the chance to have had any student or interested person. So of course, it promotes, but even last year it was distributed because we as a collective/association were called by the wrestling federation of Murcia, the Spanish squash federation, the federation; why, because they received these aids and they have to carry out a series of activities to promote inclusive sports and many of the other federations do not know about them".</p> | <p>"In order for national federations to be able to allocate budgets, they should get to know people with disabilities better and understand them. At this point I don't think they have enough information".</p> | <p>"Upskilling of stakeholders involved, to develop an understanding of what it takes to support a para athlete"</p> <p>"Federations need to have a knowledge base resource for coaches with regards to ideas, specialist equipment, specialist types of training"</p> <p>"That link between the university and sports federations is so important, shared knowledge, shared experience but also identifying potential students we should be recruiting"</p> <p>"How do they know what's available to them? what are the best courses for them to do? What are the best universities to go to that will support their dual needs"</p> <p>"Athlete friendly employer network where companies would sign up to give flexibility... could be a 20h contract, shadowing, mentoring just to build that</p> |

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|  |  |  |  |  | <p>dual career alongside their athletic one”</p> <p>“signposting advocacy and partnerships with the NGB’s and trying to drive that relationship”</p> <p>“University needs to engage more with the NGB’s in terms of looking for the athletes”</p> <p>“I really try to support the athlete, but I’ve really never met a student advisor through any athlete I have ever coached”</p> |
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## Question #6: Final comments or contributions

|  | ITALY   | PORTUGAL  | SPAIN  | ROMANIA  | IRELAND |
|--|---|---|--|--|---------|
| <b>Final comments or contributions</b> | <p>Three further issues are worthy to mention:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- it is pointed out that in the future it would be important to extend the study to include intellectual disabilities. According to one of the experts, intellectual disabilities are the most common type of disability. Furthermore, the FISDIR (Italian Federation of Sports for the Intellectually and Relationally Disabled) is the Paralympic sports federation with the highest number of members, and in recent years the number of people with intellectual disabilities attending university has increased (particularly high-functioning forms of autism);</li> <li>- according to one of the experts, blind or visually impaired athletes need to be accompanied and</li> </ul> | <p>Promoting research that makes it possible to know the reality of the population with disabilities in Portugal and, in particular, people who attend higher education and practice high competition sports.</p> <p>Research questions: How many students are there in primary and secondary schools and higher education with disabilities? Of these, how many practice sports? Why are there few athletes in higher education? What barriers do you face? Why are athletes who are in high performance not also in higher education? How many people with disabilities play sport? Why do we have a high rate of aging in athletes? Why such a low number of athletes with disabilities?</p> | <p>"I want to add a reflection, for my part I think it is very important that people with disabilities, are in the hands of qualified people, professional sports people and that these people with training have previously had training, some experience, I think the university has a lot to do, for me , I have had the opportunity to speak at the faculty of sport in San Javier, when and I had to talk to colleagues, it is very important to know the group with disabilities, is that we say, it is not that the coach .... in a certain university of sport and so on, yes, but he knows the possibilities that adapted sport has, he knows how a federation works, he has the tools to give that athlete to be able to compete. You know, I think it is very important that we get</p> | <p>UNEFS remains a reliable partner for the future steps we want to take in this area, by assuming the role of encouraging adapted sports for disabled, both from a theoretical point of view, but also by promoting long-term training and competitions for various sport branches – gymnastics, swimming, basketball, football, bocce, skiing, etc. Training future educators/coaches in an inclusive perspective will bring new developments as they will be capable to disseminate this approach to their athletes, colleagues, managers, local community, etc.</p> <p>Each such project/action brings us closer to our goals. This focus group has been a great opportunity to share ideas, approaches and we believe that some of them</p> |         |

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|  | <p>require the presence of specialised staff during training sessions;</p> <p>- a discussion was opened on the possibility that the sports mentor could be the same for all student-athletes, regardless of the presence of disability. It is therefore proposed, as a possible solution, that the sports mentoring service could be the same for all student-athletes, provided that the mentor has the expertise and necessary competence to provide an adequate response to the special needs of the individual student-athlete with a disability.</p> | <p>Promote more awareness-raising actions, more appreciation of these athletes, better recognition of their results, more support for dual careers, by higher education and sports organizations.</p> <p>Develop sports support services at the level of local communities throughout the national territory.</p> <p>Public institutions should provide greater availability of sports facilities for clubs with athletes with disabilities.</p> <p>Funding must be directed towards the athletes' needs, which have to be well known.</p> <p>Fighting stigma in the family, since for the vast majority, access to higher education and the practice of sports is not a priority.</p> <p>Promote dual careers in coach training.</p> <p>The concern of most families and social and health organizations is rehabilitation.</p> | <p>adapted sports and sports for people with disabilities in the hands of sports professionals and that these sports professionals, luckily, we are having more and more students with internships, we are having more and more relationships. When I started with an association like mine, I had not touched a person with a disability because when I was student we did an orientation internship but I am not going to orient myself to a group with a disability, now luckily in the degrees come students in internships spend with us, do aquatic activities, meet autistic people, meet ..., has a very important role the university".</p> | <p>will add value for the outcomes of the project.</p> |  |
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The results presented above are summarised in the following ideas:

#### **ITALY**

The results of the focus group show that they are in line with what has already emerged from the literature review and the analysis of the questionnaires concerning the multiplicity of factors potentially involved in the dual career path, confirming the need to adopt a holistic approach based on the collaboration between different stakeholders (e.g., the family, the university and the sports federation) and capable of implementing actions at different levels.

Within this framework, at least two issues emerge that are particularly significant and worthy of further investigation.

Firstly, there is agreement that the distance of training centres can represent, together with the lack of flexibility in teaching programmes, one of the most significant barriers to achieving an optimal balance between study and sport.

One possible solution that emerged from the focus group is for universities, with the specialist advice of sports federations, to intervene to make university sports venues more accessible to students with disabilities.

In this way, a double objective could be pursued: on the one hand, promoting the practice of sport for all university students with disabilities, and on the other, allowing student-athletes to train, to the maximum extent possible, on campus in the university facilities, thus optimising the time needed to reach ordinary training centres.

There is consensus among the participants in the focus group that course mates represent a valuable resource in the training of student-athletes and that they should therefore be involved in the tutoring system.

In order to cope with any special needs of the student-athlete with disabilities without using additional resources, it was suggested that mentors make use of the specialised mentoring service for students with disabilities.

#### **PORTUGAL**

The experts revealed knowledge and, above all, a lot of experience in the subject under study. Some have, for many years, played an important role in sports organizations, within the scope of sports management and administration (example: Portuguese Institute of Sports and Youth, Paralympic Committee of Portugal, Portuguese Federation of Sport for the Disabled, Clubs), and sports training (e.g. national team and club coaches) and scientific research.

The data obtained seem to us to be very interesting and some of great relevance, as they often reflect the real situation in Portugal, which is something of concern. On the other hand, they point out reflections and suggestions that can be transmitted to political, sports and higher education officials, so that, in the medium and long term, the conditions of high competition athletes with disabilities and, at the same time, higher education students, can be improved.

Promoting research that makes it possible to know the reality of the population with disabilities in Portugal and, in particular, of people who attend higher education and practice high-level sports, and the respective barriers.

Although public funding in Portugal has increased in recent years, sometimes very close to that provided to athletes without disabilities, participation in sports by people with disabilities has not improved, as well as the results of these athletes in international competitions. As such, funding may have to be rethought and/or redirected to the athletes' real needs and barriers and they have to be well known.

Investing in raising awareness and training the population in general, especially in higher education institutions (management bodies, teachers and students), in sports organizations (directors, coaches and athletes from federations and clubs) and in the families of people with disabilities.

## **SPAIN**

“I want to add a reflection, for my part I think it is very important that people with disabilities, are in the hands of qualified people, professional sports people and that these people with training have previously had training, some experience” ... “sport academic staff has an important role regarding the possibilities that adapted sport has, how a federation works or providing the tools to give that athlete to be able to compete”.

Regular student internships carried out in NGO's, adapted sport clubs and others play an important role in defining the professional career of future specialists.

## **ROMANIA**

Romania still has many steps to take in the direction of promoting dual career for student athletes with disabilities.

Profile universities have to become reliable partners for the future steps we want to take in this area, by assuming the role of encouraging adapted sports for disabled, both from a theoretical point of view, but also by promoting long-term training and competitions for various sport branches – gymnastics, swimming, basketball, football, bocce, skiing, etc.

Training future educators/coaches in an inclusive perspective will bring new developments as they will be capable to disseminate this approach to their athletes, colleagues, managers, local community, etc.

The sports career at a certain moment stops and then the educational / training part intervenes. Universities need to support each other because students with disabilities need us and we need them.

Teamwork between different organizations can change things for the better.

Dual career ensures a double visibility for athletes with disabilities: academic representation and sports performance.

This focus group has been a great opportunity to share ideas, approaches and we believe that some of them will add value for the outcomes of the project.

## **IRELAND**

Constant and effective communication between both the university and sport federations is needed. Collaborative working relationships need to be established and developed between all stakeholders.

Student advisors for the athletes need to work in conjunction with national governing bodies of sport (NGB's), Sports Federations and Coaching Staff.

University personnel from the Physical education and sport faculties working with the athletes need to be educated on parasport, classification systems, the needs of the athlete with a disability etc. Sports federations have a role to play here in assisting with this up-skilling.

Flexible learning and academic flexibility need to be provided for the athlete with a disability in the university setting.

Universities need to provide logistical solutions to assist day-to-day functions for the athlete with the disability, e.g. transport around the university campus, transport to and from shopping etc.

Support services, e.g. nutrition, sports science, life skills support workshops developing management, communication and negotiation skills etc, need to be established and provided for the athlete to help them successfully navigate the dual career pathway.

Students have a key role to play in developing their dual career. They need to engage with the university and federation and need to be organised and plan in advance.

Both universities and federations need to educate para athletes at an earlier age (15-18yr olds) so they make the right decisions regarding third-level education.

Sports federations and universities need to provide more opportunities for para athletes to compete and take part in sport.

### **LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY AND FUTURE RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES**

One of the limitations of the focus group was the reduced number of academic staffs in some of the countries involved.

Another aspect that would have brought relevant information is related to the absence of managing staff from the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Sports or other similar authorities who have responsibilities in changing policies for the better.

We believe that future surveys or focus groups will have to include more students or former students with sport experience.

Future research should focus on what services are currently available to athletes with a disability in the university setting and what the uptake of these services is like. Research should investigate if these services are provided or lacking in the university setting. It is also worth investigating what is the expected role of the student advisor/mentor in facilitating the dual career of para athletes from the university perspective, but also from the athlete/coach/NGB's perspective.

It would be important to extend the study to include intellectual disabilities. According to the experts, intellectual disabilities are the most common type of disability and provide the greatest number of athletes worldwide.



# DUAL CAREER OF STUDENT-ATHLETES WITH DISABILITIES AS A TOOL FOR SOCIAL INCLUSION

*PARA-LIMITS*

**Field Research Activities – FOCUS GROUP**

COUNTRY

**PORTUGAL**

ORGANISATION

**Instituto Politécnico de Viseu**



Co-funded by the  
Erasmus+ Programme  
of the European Union

# 1

## INTRODUCTION

The number of participants was 7 people (4 men and 3 women).

Participants were invited and develop their professional activities in the following areas:

| Participant Number | Organisation  | Role  |
|--------------------|---|---|
| 1                  | Adapted Sports Federation                               | technical director  |
| 2                  | Portugal Paralympic committee                           | Manager   |
| 3                  | Portuguese Institute of Youth and Sport<br>- University | Manager<br>- Researcher (working with athletes with disability) |
| 4                  | Adapted sport clubs                                     | Manager   |
| 5                  | Adapted Sports Federation                               | National coach  |
| 6                  | University  | Researcher (working with athletes with disability)              |
| 7                  | Adapted sport clubs                                     | Coach   |

The focus group took place on March 11, 2022, in Online format, via the ZOOM Platform.

Link:

<https://videoconf->

<colibri.zoom.us/j/88043323364?pwd=YjVNTStKMFIpMHpmMkRQTWVJaTZhdz09>

2

## RESULTS

### Question #1 - Comment on the results presented on the barriers in the context.

We will present below the ideas that were pointed out by the interviewees, which appear in descending order of frequency.

- The results are nothing new. These are the difficulties. The compatibility between training and class schedules, losing the rhythm of the course and reconciling schedules.

Even for non-disabled athletes in high competition in Portugal, there are many things in common here. However, in athletes with disabilities the difficulties are amplified (4)

- aspects related to the distance from the training place to the universities or home are valued, which is understandable. In this context, the difficulties of transport should also be highlighted (3).

### Question #2 - Comment on the results presented on the social barriers.

The interviewees agree that the results are also expected and are common to high-performance athletes, with and without disabilities. These are difficulties inherent to this type of level of demand. Any of these athletes train long hours a day, go without many weekends, and travel a lot for internships and competitions. As such, this takes time away from family and affective and social relationships.

### Question #3 - Comment on the results presented on the individual barriers.

All interviewees agree that the results were also expected. Two also point out that they were concerned that the item “I consider myself an athlete” (76.9%) did not have more points, since they are all high-level athletes and as such it was expected that this result would be even higher.

### Question #4 --How could Universities facilitate the Dual Sports Career (combining studies and high-level sport)?

We will present below the ideas that were pointed out by the interviewees, which appear in descending order of frequency.

- Change in social, university and professors' sensitivity (3);
- Greater flexibility of institutions and professors (2);
- Universities should publicize, value and recognize the achievements of athletes (2);
- Teachers should diversify assessment instruments;
- Teachers may have extra hours to support these athletes;
- There is already high competition status and there are special evaluation seasons.

### **Question #5 - How could Sports Institutions (Federations) facilitate the Dual Sports Career (combining studies and high level sport)?**

We will present below the ideas that were pointed out by the interviewees, which appear in descending order of frequency.

- Promote awareness-raising actions for higher education students and coaches' courses (2);
- Improve university-site transport of home training (2);
- Adjust training according to the availability of athletes (2);
- Promote the psychological support of athletes (management of anxieties, expectations, goals and tasks)(2);
- Improve athlete-coach-club communication (2);
- More flexibility of clubs (2);
- Listen to the athletes and provide them with all the conditions (2);
- Dialogue with higher education in the search for solutions;
- Counting the time of high competition practitioner for retirement purposes;
- Raise awareness among federations, clubs and higher education;
- Existence of spaces in clubs to study;
- Develop organizational skills and motivation in athletes.

### **Question #6 - Final comments or contributions**

Finally, the interviewees were challenged to make their final comments and to present several contributions that could improve the panorama of the situation in Portugal, with regard to the dual career of the high competition athlete/higher education student with disabilities.

- Promoting research that makes it possible to know the reality of the population with disabilities in Portugal and, in particular, people who attend higher education and practice high competition sports (3)

Example questions: How many students are there in primary and secondary schools and higher education with disabilities? Of these, how many practice sports? Why are there few athletes in higher education? What barriers do you face? Why are athletes who are in high performance not also in higher education? How many people with disabilities play sport? Why do we have a high rate of aging in athletes? Why such a low number of athletes with disabilities?

- Challenge higher education institutions to carry out such investigations (2).
- Promote more awareness-raising actions, more appreciation of these athletes, better recognition of their results, more support for dual careers, by higher education and sports organizations.
- Develop sports support services at the level of local communities throughout the national territory.
- Public institutions should provide greater availability of sports facilities for clubs with athletes with disabilities.
- Funding must be directed towards the athletes' needs, which have to be well known.
- Fighting stigma in the family, since for the vast majority, access to higher education and the practice of sports is not a priority.
- Promote dual careers in coach training.
- Invest in raising awareness and training the general population.
- The concern of most families and social and health organizations is rehabilitation
- Do not expose athletes too much to the media, particularly during major international competitions.

## 3

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Adherence to this study was very good. Indeed, we found a lot of openness and availability on the part of the people contacted, despite one having committed and not being able to attend because she was involved in an international competition, where she worked as a selector and coach of the Portugal team.

The biggest difficulty was finding a date and time that was compatible for everyone.

The interviewees revealed knowledge and, above all, a lot of experience in the subject under study. Some have, for many years, played an important role in sports organizations, within the scope of sports management and administration (example: Portuguese Institute of Sports and Youth, Paralympic Committee of Portugal, Portuguese Federation of Sport for the Disabled, Clubs), and sports training (e.g. national team and club coaches) and scientific research. One of them was responsible for the Portuguese delegation to several editions of the Paralympic games several times.

The interview took place in the context of a positive environment and the commitment and interest shown by the respondents was visible. The data obtained seem to us to be very interesting and some of great relevance, as they often reflect the real situation in Portugal, which is something of concern. On the other hand, they point out reflections and suggestions that can be transmitted to political, sports and higher education officials, so that, in the medium and long term, the conditions of high competition athletes with disabilities and, at the same time, higher education students, can be improved. substantially improved.

Among the data obtained, we would like to highlight some aspects that seem to us to be core and urgent:

- Promoting research that makes it possible to know the reality of the population with disabilities in Portugal and, in particular, of people who attend higher education and practice high-level sports, and the respective barriers;
- Although public funding in Portugal has increased in recent years, sometimes very close to that provided to athletes without disabilities, participation in sports by people with disabilities has not improved, as well as the results of these athletes in international competitions. As such, funding may have to be rethought and/or redirected to the athletes' real needs and barriers and they have to be well known;

- Investing in raising awareness and training the population in general, especially in higher education institutions (management bodies, teachers and students), in sports organizations (directors, coaches and athletes from federations and clubs) and in the families of people with disabilities.



DUAL CAREER OF STUDENT-ATHLETES WITH DISABILITIES  
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## 1

## PROCESS

***Para-Limits - Dual Career of Student-Athletes with Disabilities as a Tool for Social Inclusion*** project is aimed at enabling high-level sportsmen and women with some kind of disability to successfully complete their sports and university careers without undermining one over the other. The name Para-Limits refers to those high level athletes, Paralympics included, who seek to break down barriers and showcase their talent without limits.

The O1 and O2 correspond to the research activities of the state of the art, which aim at detecting obstacles, needs and barriers of this group in their sports and academic careers, according to their degree of disability and personal background. This information will serve as a basis for the creation of a guide of good practices and the design and development of the contents and structure of the innovative online curriculum aimed at training expert mentors (O3). Based on this comprehensive curriculum, an interactive online open access course will be designed and developed. Its suitability, both in terms of structure, content and proper functioning, will be analysed through the implementation of a pilot course. The results and information obtained from this experience will serve to improve and adapt the initial proposal (O4). In addition to this, taking into account all the information collected and analysed in the project, as well as the main results of the project, a European handbook will be developed to disseminate the results and make possible the dual career of disabled university sportsmen and women in other territories (O5). Finally, an Observatory on Dual Career, Disability and Sport will be created to evaluate and monitor the development of this topic.

The list of intellectual outputs and activities to be developed in the Para-Limits project are the following:

O2. Field research activities (field-work).

- A3. Design and/or selection of the tools to carry out the field research.
- A4. Application of questionnaires.
- **A5. Focus groups.**
- A6. Field research reports and scientific publication.
- A7. Good practice guide on social inclusion, adapted sport and Dual Career.

Focus group meetings will be carry out to evaluate the data and findings collected from the desk work and the questionnaires applied. Each partner institution will hold these meetings in their respective countries at the local level.

The number of participants should be between 6-8 people. Expert personnel should be selected from the following areas:

- *Adapted sport clubs. (1-2)*

- *Adapted sport federations. (1-2)*
- *NGOs specialized in social inclusion of disabled people. (1-2)*
- *Researchers in inclusive education. (1-2)*

Each participating partner must prepare a summary report with the main findings and conclusions of each focus group, as well as a complete transcript of the session. The conclusions should be presented to the other partners at the Transnational Meeting 2.

The procedure to follow will be to summon the stakeholders to a classroom or room and present them with the results of the questions asked in the previous questionnaire, since our focus group is based on the verification of the results obtained and their confirmation by other subjects (Morgan, 1996). The questions of the questionnaire and the results obtained will be projected (the analyses made in the previous report of the questionnaires can be used), and the attendees will be asked about the results of these questions.

The main objective is to obtain the opinion of the stakeholders on the results obtained from the questionnaire, and in this way to have more qualitative and open data on the topic.



The development of the interview should be recorded in video or voice for later transcription. And then, as explained above, develop a report with the results. There would be no problem in using the video camera since we have the consent of the ethics committee. During the development of the focus group, an attendance list should be filled out and all participants should sign the informed consent of the project.

## 2

## INTRODUCTION

The focus group in Ireland for the Para-Limits project took place on 8<sup>th</sup> of March from approximately 19.00 to 20.15. The session was held online through MS Teams and all participants completed and returned the informed consent form prior to the focus group meeting. Participants were selected through purposive sampling. They were chosen so that we had a representation of key personnel who worked in para-sport and with athletes with a disability in Ireland. They represented adapted sports clubs/ federations, the national institute of sport, researchers in para-sport and university sport officers who worked with para-athletes. In total, there were 7 participants (4 male and 3 female). The details of the participants are provided in the table below.

| Participant Number | Organisation                | Role   |
|--------------------|-----------------------------|--|
| 1                  | University                  | Sports Officer (working with student-athletes with disability) |
| 2                  | University                  | Researcher (working with athletes with disability)             |
| 3                  | Adapted Sports Federation   | High Performance   |
| 4                  | Adapted Sports Federation   | High Performance   |
| 5                  | Adapted Sports Federation   | High Performance   |
| 6                  | National Institute of Sport | Athlete Support Officer  |
| 7                  | Adapted Sports Federation   | Coach  |

### 3

## RESULTS

### Question #1: HOW CAN UNIVERSITY FACILITATE DUAL CAREER?

| Main Findings  | Representative Quotations   |
|--|---|
| <p>Moving from one location to another around a university campus can be an added fatigue factor for athletes with a disability (e.g. CP) and logistical solutions need to be developed.</p> <p>Organising diet and nutrition can be an issue for athletes when in university and a logistical solution needs to be developed (para-athlete may find it difficult to travel to shops and return with food etc)</p> | <p>"...challenge for them (para-athletes) is their ability to walk from building to building ..." (P2)</p> <p>"So I think if we're looking for solutions if we could even think about the logistics of tackling that added fatigued they might be experiencing." (P2)</p> <p>"...so it's even organizing some kind of support to get their shopping delivered or support them in getting from A to B to get their shopping because it may be a distance for them..." (P1)</p> |
| <p>Flexible learning/ Academic flexibility. This includes universities facilitating a blended learning approach for athletes, being flexible with assessment scheduling and timetable scheduling for example.</p>  | <p>"A lot of athletes that I work with would do a degree over six years, so they'll be a part time student..." (P7)</p> <p>"...a lot of our competitions are during the academic year and that's just a big challenge for athletes, both funding wise and also from the perspective of engaging fully in their studies." (P3)</p> <p>"...flexible learning.." (P5)</p>  |
| <p>Communication with the students regarding the value of taking a flexible learning approach should take place.</p>   | <p>"Move your assignments round from a performance perspective, it it's not a like a bad mark against you or cross. It's actually there to help facilitate the performance of the sport and I'm not sure universities tell the student athletes this enough." (P7)</p>  |
| <p>Universities could use the university as a means of targeting students with disabilities (Talent ID) and encouraging them to develop a sporting career and dual career.</p>   | <p>There should be "more group meetings bringing together students with disabilities who have an interest in sport". (P1)</p> <p>"...linking in with disability services in our institutions is very important..." (P1)</p>   |

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| Universities should provide support to students regarding diet, nutrition, sport science etc. Universities should also have support networks for para-athletes and groups where they meet and discuss issues etc together.     | Having “training times or peer support for people with disabilities...” would create “a community there as well”. (P2)   |
| Education re Para-sport. Personnel in universities who work with athletes with disability need to be educated on the various disabilities, needs and on adapted sport in general.  | “But I think if we can increase the skill level and the understanding of the practitioners that are actually touch points for athletes across the board, I think that's a key area..” (P6)   |
| Communication should take place with adapted sports federations around scholarship application so they are willing and able to support the process.  | “Scholarship applications. We’re happy to do so. Happy to provide these type of references and support the different applications...” (P3)   |
| Consideration needs to be given to supporting and developing athletes who have high level of needs from a disability perspective in the university setting.  | “...I’d like for athletes with higher needs to be considered in college. I wonder is their enough recognition of these athletes and support for these athletes also...” (P3)   |
| Students should work with the universities well in advance of the academic semester etc to plan the modifications that are needed for them regarding their academic scheduling so that a dual career can be facilitated.       | Students can “maybe put the cards on the table for an earlier stage. So athletes can look at the options and see what might be the best option and then bring their sports in depending on what level it’s at, bring the coaches in as part of that nearly as partners within the academics”. (P5)   |
| Students need to be organised so that universities and federations can support them effectively. Essentially students need some ownership here as well in order for them to have a dual career.                                | “...the athletes themselves have to get organised in some respects so that the institutions and federations can support them to a better degree...” (P5)   |
| Universities should be proactive and engage more with adapted governing bodies of sport and federations. This should be the case in particular regarding notification around new para-athletes who are starting in university. | “And I think from our point of view in the university, we need to engage more with the NGBS (national governing bodies of sport)..... That there could be some kind of a better relationship there to say somebody is coming in and we'd like to introduce you or to see how you could meet and chat and you know, see how making that transition into third level might work a little bit better as well.” (P1) |
| Universities should consider, develop and promote their offering to athletes   | “I think universities need to really think about the Para sport offer.....And so it's universities making themselves really  |

|  |  |
|--|--|
| regarding para-sport (e.g. scholarships, coaching etc.)  | attractive to athletes in terms of scholarships, facilities, coaching and all the support services that they that they can offer.” (P7)  |
| Para-events could be part of university sporting competitions. This would help promote the para-sport in an equal manner to able-bodied sport. | “And what we do have in the UK is BUPPS, which is the British universities and colleges competition, they have para events all the way through that and universities get points for every athlete that competes. So anyone that can get para athletes on board really, really quickly and compete at that university competition. They normally come out in the top two just by the fact that they might have five or six para athletes competing. So there's lots of ways of encouraging athletes into universities, but you've got to have the.... you've got to be attractive to them and to their coaches.” (P7) |

## Question #2: HOW CAN SPORTS FEDERATIONS/INSTITUTIONS FACILITATE THE DUAL CAREER?

| Main Findings   | Representative Quotations   |
|---|---|
| Sports federations need to provide training courses to upskill all key stakeholders who work with Para-Athletes. These training courses would target coaches and NGB's and help them understand the needs of para-athletes', how they can be best supported in a university setting and how that differs with each disability classification. Provide universities with information as to how they could best support the athletes – i.e. coaching support services required, accommodation requirements, timetable flexibility around competition schedules & training camps, assignments and exams. | <p>'Upskilling of stakeholders involved, to develop an understanding of what it takes to support a para athlete' (P6)</p> <p>'Increasing the skill level and understanding with the practitioners who are actually touch points for the athletes' (P6)</p> <p>'Bring in TASS trainers to work with coaches but also in 3<sup>rd</sup> level with those mentors' (P6)</p> <p>'Federations need to have a knowledge base resource for coaches with regards to ideas, specialist equipment, specialist types of training' (P2)</p> |
| Sports federations need to establish and develop working relationships with third level institutes. Communication between relevant parties is key to this. Have multi stakeholder meetings with academic staff, NGB's, coaches and the para athlete. Lay the cards on the table a little earlier, have access to competition schedules and academic timetables to help remove barriers and effectively plan for the year or 4 year cycle.   | <p>'Getting a number of 3<sup>rd</sup> level mentors, getting NGB's together and coaches and athletes into a room' (P5)</p> <p>'That link between the university and sports federations is so important, shared knowledge, shared experience but also identifying potential students we should be recruiting' (P1)</p>  |
| Sports institutions need to provide career advice/mentoring to potential dual career athletes as to which universities to select and which offers the best support structure for their particular needs and progression in the sport. (e.g. are scholarships available, access and proximity to training facilities, access to suitable coaches and training groups in the area, support services provided to athletes on campus, flexibility in terms of study options, timetables, work placement   | <p>.....'How do they know what's available to them? what are the best courses for them to do? What are the best universities to go to that will support their dual needs' (P5)</p>  |

|  |  |
|--|--|
| opportunities). Sports federations need to have this knowledge but this needs to be disseminated by the universities to the relevant stakeholders.   |  |
| Additional support or workshops for para-athletes who come to the sport perhaps at a later stage of their life and some may not have come through any junior performance pathways where key skills such as resilience, skill acquisition have not being refined.   | 'If you do something like Talent ID, it is often the first time athletes with potential engage with sport which means they have a really low training age and understanding of being an athlete.....they'll reach quite a high level competition arguably before they have the wider holistic skills to deal with that and they would not have typically had a junior competition pathway where skills like resilience are learned' (P4) |
| Sports federations should consider developing para competitions at university level to entice more athletes to partake in sport, giving them more opportunities to compete and also from a Talent ID perspective – where individuals deemed with athletic potential could be recruited into high performance sport or teams. |  |
| Institute of Sports should develop an Employer Network Link, which would provide athletes with work experience opportunities, shadowing/mentoring, flexible work contracts that support the dual career para-athletes.   | ....'Athlete friendly employer network where companies would sign up to give flexibility.....could be a 20h contract, shadowing, mentoring just to build that dual career alongside their athletic one' (P6)   |
| Education – federations need to educate para athletes at an earlier age (15-18yr olds) so they make the right decisions re: 3 <sup>rd</sup> level education. Teaching them how to develop better management, communication and negotiating skills and encouraging them to access support services in university.             | <p>.....'before they get to 3<sup>rd</sup> level, what can be done? In terms of understanding the courses, what they're actually taking on, flexibility to slow track to do a degree over 6 or 8 years' (P6)</p> <p>....'how can we get a better form of blended learning and maybe put the cards on the table at an earlier stage, so athletes can look at the options and see what might be the best option (P5)</p>                   |

|   |   |
|---|---|
|   | <p>Better skill set to manage that high performance environment (P6)</p> <p>..... The athletes' and coaches that do engage have a much more seamless journey through the academics (P5)</p>                 |
| <p>Federations need to advocate more for Para Sports and develop partnerships with NGB's on campus, strengthen them within the university and join these partnerships up. Explore supporting athletes in the region who maybe be enrolled as students but may have an ambassador or champion role for the university.</p>                     | <p>...signposting advocacy and partnerships with the NGB's and trying to drive that relationship (P4)</p>   |
| <p>Improving communication between stakeholders. Look at programme implementation, oversight and agreement from all parties. Sharing the university experience – expanding the breadth of knowledge, identifying which coaches are employed in the universities.</p>  | <p>.....what relationships can the sports themselves build with 3<sup>rd</sup> level institutions? (P5)</p> <p>University needs to engage more with the NGB's in terms of looking for the athletes (P1)</p> |
| <p>More links with student advisors. Linking in the life skills team. Encouraging the athlete to ask for help. Communication piece needed from university to NGB regarding HP Athlete Policy. Meetings with Universities and Paralympic council or NGB's on how to promote services, share knowledge and experiences, recruitment etc....</p> | <p>'I really try to support the athlete, but I've really never met a student advisor through any athlete I have ever coached (P5)</p>   |

## 4

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The key findings and conclusions from the Irish focus group on how universities and sport institutions/ federations can facilitate dual careers for athletes with a disability are as follows:

1. Constant and effective communication between both the university and sport federations is needed. Collaborative working relationships need to be established and developed between all stakeholders.
2. Student advisors for the athletes need to work in conjunction with national governing bodies of sport (NGB's), Sports Federations and Coaching Staff
3. University personnel working with the athletes need to be educated on para-sport, classification systems, the needs of the athlete with a disability etc. Sports federations have a role to play here in assisting with this up-skilling.
4. Flexible learning and academic flexibility needs to be provided for the athlete with a disability in the university setting.
5. Universities need to provide logistical solutions to assist day-to-day functions for the athlete with the disability, e.g. transport around the university campus, transport to and from shopping etc.
6. Support services, e.g. nutrition, sports science, life skills support workshops developing management, communication and negotiation skills etc, need to be established and provided for the athlete to help them successfully navigate the dual career pathway.
7. Students have a key role to play in developing their dual career. They need to engage with the university and federation and need to be organised and plan in advance.
8. Universities need to develop their para-sport offerings and support structures and communicate these to the federations.
9. Both universities and federations need to educate para athletes at an earlier age (15-18yr olds) so they make the right decisions regarding third-level education.

10. Sports federations and universities need to provide more opportunities for para athletes to compete and take part in sport.

Future research should focus on what services are currently available to athletes with a disability in the university setting and what the uptake of these services is like. Research should investigate if there services are provided or lacking in the university setting. It is also worth investigating what is the expected role of the student advisor/mentor in facilitating the dual career of para athletes from the university perspective but also from the athlete/coach/NGB's perspective.

Finally, the sample used for our focus group was well representative of the key stakeholders in adapted sport in Ireland. However, a limitation was that only one university was represented in the meeting. Additional university personnel who work with athletes with a disability would have provided additional information and insight on good practices etc within the university setting regarding the dual career of athletes.



DUAL CAREER OF STUDENT-ATHLETES WITH  
DISABILITIES AS A TOOL FOR SOCIAL INCLUSION

*PARA-LIMITS*

Field Research Activities – FOCUS GROUP

COUNTRY

ITALY

ORGANISATION

University of Rome “Foro Italico”



Co-funded by the  
Erasmus+ Programme  
of the European Union

1

## INTRODUCTION

The focus group sample consists of 6 experts in the field recruited from the network of experts of the research group of the University of Rome "Foro Italico":

- 1) Professor Alessandro Bortolotti, Didactics and Special Pedagogy, Coordinator of the Master's Degree Course in Management of Sport Activities and President of the University Sport Committee at the University of Bologna
- 2) Dr. Andrea Cesolini, secretary general of the FISPIC (Italian Federation of Paralympic Sports for the Visually Impaired and Blind)
- 3) Professor Antonio Ferraro, member of the National Observatory for the Condition of Persons with Disabilities at the Ministry of Disabilities and expert in inclusive sports activities
- 4) Dr. Mara Pacioni, Head of the Sports Activities Office of the FSSI (Italy Deaf Sports Federation)
- 5) Dr. Nico Italian Federation of Deaf Sport la Pintus, President of the Filippide project, association for the promotion of sporting activities and member of FISDIR (Italian Federation of Sports for athletes with intellectual and relational disabilities)
- 6) Dr. Stefania Tessari, President of ARES Sports Association, member of FISPEP (Italian Federation of Paralympic and Experimental Sports).

The focus group took place online on Friday 11 March 2022 from 18.30 to 20.10 via the Jitsi Meet platform.

After a brief presentation of the participants, the moderator briefly described the Paralimits Project and the data that emerged from the analysis of the questionnaires administered to student-athletes with disabilities.

## 2

## RESULTS

**1 - Comment on the results presented on the barriers in the context.**

There is general agreement among participants that contextual factors are particularly relevant for people with disabilities.

In this respect, it is widely recognized that official training centres are few and far from home and university. Therefore, the time needed to reach the training centres is one of the main barriers to achieving the perfect balance between study and sport, especially in big cities, where the time needed to achieve these places is considerably longer due to traffic problems.

An expert claims that lack of time is a major problem for student-athletes with disabilities. Not being able for student-athletes to be committed to both study and sport, they often have to choose one or the other during their path, above all because "the training centre is a far away from where they live".

As contextual factors are linked to local welfare services which vary from place to place, it is suggested to carry out further statistical surveys to analyse the possible difference between student-athletes belonging to different territories.

**2 - Comment on the results presented on the social barriers.**

Experts agree that family cooperation is one of the most important social factors for participation in sport.

Those who work with young people point out that they have often had to deal with overprotective parents who are worried about the possibility of injury. In addition, some parents seem to underestimate the real abilities of their children with disabilities.

At the same time, it turns out that without parental support it would be impossible for many athletes to participate in sport. In most cases, parents drive the athletes to the

training centres and pay financial expenses. Parents are therefore a crucial factor in the success of the dual career path.

### ***3 - Comment on the results presented on the individual barriers.***

Experts believe that a high level of motivation is essential to carry on a sporting career with determination and to combine it with study.

One of the experts claims that it is this high level of motivation that enables children with disabilities to overcome the many contextual barriers they encounter in sport and study.

According to their experience, due to their different commitments, athletes sometimes complain about tiredness and fatigue, but they hardly give up sport if they are adequately supported by the sport federation and the family.

Concerning the item "I think people in exercise clothes look funny", some experts think that it is difficult to make a comment because it could have been misinterpreted by student-athletes.

### ***4 - How can university facilitate dual career?***

Several actions are suggested to facilitate the university path for student-athletes with disabilities:

- Enhance useful services for the practice of sports activities for people with disabilities. For example, the necessary changes could be made to the sports areas already provided by universities for students without disabilities.
- Promote the collection and dissemination of the good practices implemented
- Raise awareness among university staff of the special educational needs required by student-athletes with disabilities
- Activate individualised and personalised programmes based on the special educational needs of student-athletes with disabilities

- Promote forms of distance learning to enable student-athletes to follow lessons and take exams without necessarily having to stay on campus
- Provide more flexible criteria for identifying student-athletes with disabilities who are eligible for dual career measures.
- Create a mentoring system to support student-athletes with disabilities during their studies
- Involve classmates as much as possible in the mentoring system to enhance peer interaction as a key factor for training and learning process.
- Prioritise the student-athlete's fellow students as possible mentors
- 

### ***5 - How can sports organizations facilitate dual career?***

Two possible strategies are identified:

- Informing the young person and his/her family (while still enrolled in high school) about the dual career support services offered by universities to help him/her make a well aware choice about his/her future outside of sport
- Offering counselling services to the university in order to make university sports facilities suitable for people with disabilities.

### ***6 – Final contributions and feedback***

Three further issues worthy of note emerge.

Firstly, it is pointed out that in the future it would be important to extend the study to include intellectual disabilities. According to one of the experts, intellectual disabilities are the most common type of disability. Furthermore, the FISDIR (Italian Federation of Sports for the Intellectually and Relationally Disabled) is the Paralympic sports federation with the highest number of members, and in recent years the number of people with intellectual disabilities attending university has increased (particularly high-functioning forms of autism).

Secondly, further factors relevant to sports practice emerge. According to one of the experts, blind or visually impaired athletes need to be accompanied and require the presence of specialised staff during training sessions.

Thirdly, a discussion was opened on the possibility that the sports mentor could be the same for all student-athletes, regardless of the presence of disability.

Initially, conflicting positions emerge on this issue.

On the one hand, it is emphasised that the choice of a single sports mentor capable of facilitating the path of all student-athletes is more in line with an inclusive culture (now well established in Italian schools) based on the enhancement (and not on separation and stereotyping) of differences; on the other hand, it is emphasised the need for specific responses according to the different type of disability (for example, the mentor who follows a boy with hearing disabilities must be specialised in sign language).

It is therefore proposed, as a possible solution, that the sports mentoring service could be the same for all student-athletes, provided that the mentor has the expertise and necessary competence to provide an adequate response to the special needs of the individual student-athlete with a disability.

To this end, the possibility for the sports mentor to make use of the specialised mentoring service for students with disabilities (already active in Italian universities) to meet the specific needs of the disabled student-athlete is also highlighted.

### 3

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Generally speaking, the results of the focus group show that they are in line with what has already emerged from the literature review and the analysis of the questionnaires concerning the multiplicity of factors potentially involved in the dual career path, confirming the need to adopt a holistic approach based on the collaboration between different stakeholders (e.g., the family, the university and the sports federation) and capable of implementing actions at different levels.

Within this framework, at least two issues emerge that are particularly significant and worthy of further investigation.

Firstly, there is agreement that the distance of training centres can represent, together with the lack of flexibility in teaching programmes, one of the most significant barriers to achieving an optimal balance between study and sport.

One possible solution that emerged from the focus group is for universities, with the specialist advice of sports federations, to intervene to make university sports venues more accessible to students with disabilities.

In this way, a double objective could be pursued: on the one hand, promoting the practice of sport for all university students with disabilities, and on the other, allowing student-athletes to train, to the maximum extent possible, on campus in the university facilities, thus optimising the time needed to reach ordinary training centres.

However, further, and more in-depth investigations are needed to test the actual feasibility of this proposal. It is necessary to verify how many student-athletes (and to what extent) could benefit from it, considering that, in addition to accessible and adequate spaces, the presence of specialised personnel could be indispensable both for the needs related to certain types of disabilities and, more generally, for the correct execution of training sessions.

Another issue that is undoubtedly worthy of further investigation concerns the possible role of classmates in the tutoring system of the student-athlete with disabilities.

There is consensus among the participants in the focus group that course mates represent a valuable resource in the training of student-athletes and that they should therefore be involved in the tutoring system.

In addition, in line with what was presented within the Paralimits project, it was suggested that course mates could optimally play the role of mentors in the future, provided they are properly trained.

In order to cope with any special needs of the student-athlete with disabilities without using additional resources, it was suggested that mentors make use of the specialised mentoring service for students with disabilities.





DUAL CAREER OF STUDENT-ATHLETES WITH DISABILITIES AS A TOOL  
FOR SOCIAL INCLUSION

*PARA-LIMITS*

Field Research Activities – FOCUS GROUP

COUNTRY

ROMANIA

ORGANISATION

National University of Physical Education and Sports Bucharest



Co-funded by the  
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### 1

## PROCESS

*Para-Limits - Dual Career of Student-Athletes with Disabilities as a Tool for Social Inclusion* project is aimed at enabling high-level sportsmen and women with some kind of disability to successfully complete their sports and university careers without undermining one over the other. The name Para-Limits refers to those high-level athletes, Paralympics included, who seek to break down barriers and showcase their talent without limits.

The O1 and O2 correspond to the research activities of the state of the art, which aim at detecting obstacles, needs and barriers of this group in their sports and academic careers, according to their degree of disability and personal background. This information will serve as a basis for the creation of a guide of good practices and the design and development of the contents and structure of the innovative online curriculum aimed at training expert mentors (O3). Based on this comprehensive curriculum, an interactive online open access course will be designed and developed. Its suitability, both in terms of structure, content and proper functioning, will be analysed through the implementation of a pilot course. The results and information obtained from this experience will serve to improve and adapt the initial proposal (O4). In addition to this, taking into account all the information collected and analysed in the project, as well as the main results of the project, a European handbook will be developed to disseminate the results and make possible the dual career of disabled university sportsmen and women in

other territories (O5). Finally, an Observatory on Dual Career, Disability and Sport will be created to evaluate and monitor the development of this topic.

The list of intellectual outputs and activities to be developed in the Para-Limits project are the following:

O2. Field research activities (field-work).

- A3. Design and/or selection of the tools to carry out the field research.
- A4. Application of questionnaires.
- A5. Focus groups.
- A6. Field research reports and scientific publication.
- A7. Good practice guide on social inclusion, adapted sport and Dual Career.

Focus group meetings will be carried out to evaluate the data and findings collected from the desk work and the questionnaires applied. Each partner institution will hold these meetings in their respective countries at the local level.

The number of participants should be between 6-8 people. Expert personnel should be selected from the following areas:

- *Adapted sport clubs. (1-2)*
- *Adapted sport federations. (1-2)*
- *NGOs specialized in social inclusion of disabled people. (1-2)*
- *Researchers in inclusive education. (1-2)*

Each participating partner must prepare a summary report with the main findings and conclusions of each focus group, as well as a complete transcript of the session. The conclusions should be presented to the other partners at the Transnational Meeting 2.

The procedure to follow will be to summon the stakeholders to a classroom or room and present them with the results of the questions asked in the previous questionnaire, since our focus group is based on the verification of the results obtained and their confirmation by other subjects (Morgan, 1996). The questions of the questionnaire and the results obtained will be projected (the analyses made in the previous report of the questionnaires can be used), and the attendees will be asked about the results of these questions.

The main objective is to obtain the opinion of the stakeholders on the results obtained from the questionnaire, and in this way to have more qualitative and open data on the topic.

## 2

## INTRODUCTION

In this section, data related to the following should be provided:

- Sample size (number of participants).
- Type of sampling (how were participants selected?).
- Dates on which the data collection was carried out.
- How the focus group was completed (online, face-to-face or both).

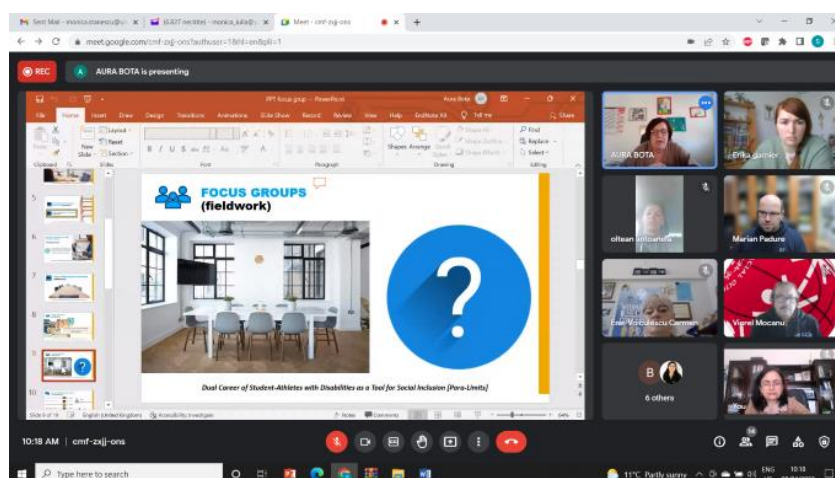
UNEFS Focus Group was carried out on April 08 2022 via Google Meet, starting at 10 am, ending at 13.30 pm.

The Focus Group sample included 10 experts in the area of higher education, as well as in the area of adapted sports for disabled persons, from different Romanian regions:

| No. | Name                                | Position  |
|-----|-------------------------------------|---|
| 1   | Professor Monica Stanescu           | Vice-rector UNEFS, expert in special education                                  |
| 2   | Professor Alina Moanta              | Dean UNEFS, vice-president of the Romanian Basketball Federation                |
| 3   | Professor Carmen Voiculescu Ene     | Expert in winter adapted sports   |
| 4   | Associate professor Antonela Oltean | Trainer in adapted gymnastics   |
| 5   | Lecturer Marian Padure              | Coordinator of the Office for students with disabilities from University Babes- |

|    |                     |  |
|----|---------------------|--|
|    |                     | Bolyai from Cluj-Napoca  |
| 6  | Emilia Ispas        | Program Coordinator for Inclusion – NGO Special Olympics Romania |
| 7  | Viorel Mocanu       | Sport Director – NGO Special Olympics Romania                    |
| 8  | Erika Garnier       | Public Relations Officer Motivation Romania                      |
| 9  | Irina Toroican      | Visually Impaired Student – Ovidius University from Constanta    |
| 10 | Professor Aura Bota | Facilitator of the Focus Group                                   |

The experts in the Focus Group were selected based on the numerous projects that UNEFS implemented mostly in the area of disability sports for physically and intellectually challenged athletes. Our University has been involved in educational, sports, health programs dedicated to disabled children and youth as well as awareness campaigns within mainstream schools, academic area, sports clubs, community events etc.



The participants were instructed to address all the 6 questions, if possible, having in mind to limit each intervention up to 2 minutes 30 seconds. The participants were invited to make a short presentation of themselves, in connection to the topic analysed in the Focus Group, within the context of the Para-limits Project.

### 3

## RESULTS

In this section the results of the focus group should be presented. To do so, both a qualitative approach (open questions, highlighting the main findings) and using graphs whenever possible for a better understanding.

The presentation of results, according to the structure of the Focus Group, should be made under the following headings:

*Question #1: Comment on the barriers encountered by the disabled students practicing sports.*

Due to the long-time experience in domains like academic studies, social inclusion and/or adapted sports, the opinions, standpoints will be reflected in finding proper solutions to fully integrate these persons/target group in European countries, so that the barriers that they experience, on different levels, on a regular basis, should be minimal, both in academics and sport practice.

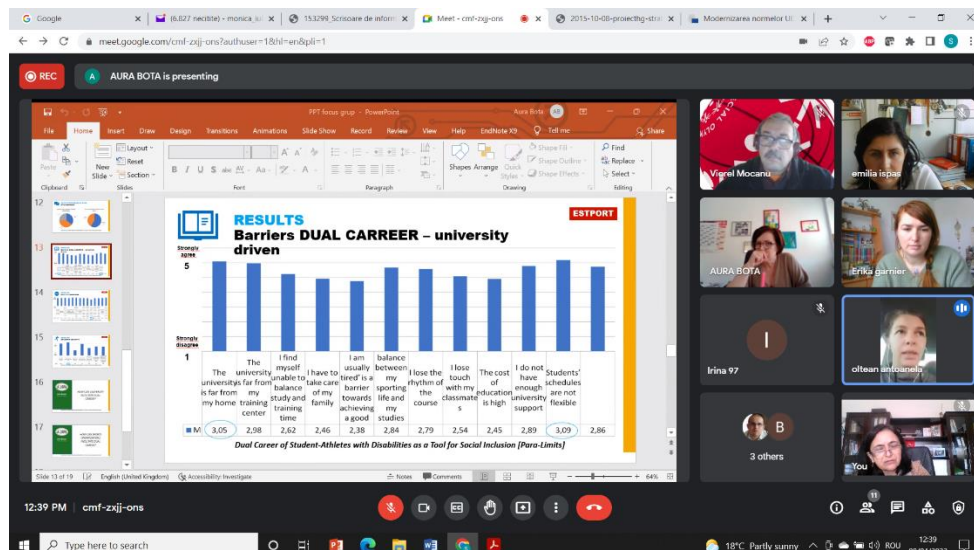
Our experience in mainstream schools, in terms of delivering awareness lessons/programs on inclusion gave us the possibility to explore the access of mentally challenged youth and children to education. We found out that disabled persons encounter multiple barriers, starting with perception errors that often peers, teachers, colleagues acknowledge, then the parents of the non-disabled children are sometimes judgemental in relation with the disabled kids, because they are afraid of the interactions between their children and the disabled.

The lack of information is essential for communities to understand and support disabled persons.

Numerous universities in Romania have issues in providing physical, architectural adaptations, so this is a long-term commitment in order for the disabled students to access higher education in a larger extent.

Barriers and accessibility have to be unified, as they cannot be treated separately.

The lack of normative in applying existing legislation is a major problem in implementing the protection and promoting the rights of the disabled persons.



Accessibility covers 2 areas: informational and physical accessibility.

“There is a combination of barriers encountered – architectural, informational and attitudinal-oriented and all these translates into a vicious circle because for example, if a wheelchair user cannot reach a place because of a staircase, curb etc, or if he cannot use a toilet, then he won't be able to normally function in that area, so he will remain isolated, you won't even see him, get to know him, you won't understand his needs or what you can do to help him. In this way, nothing will ever change in terms of accessibility so we will continue to be divided in 2 groups according to the preconceptions: US and THEM. US, that we identify with and THEM, who are “different”, with no things in common with us and

that we do not relate to. What all of us should to, is to close this gap between the groups. So, in order to break this circle and change the paradigm it is essential to interact with the disabled. Only this way we can talk about social inclusion.”

Numerous misjudgements or preconceptions reduced reaching the full potential of disabled persons in multiple areas: education, sports practice, employment etc.

Some sports clubs are reluctant to welcome disabled athletes in their training venues often claiming that there is no specific training methodology for the disabled. This statement is far from the truth.

### *Question #2: Comment on the social barriers encountered by the disabled students practicing sports.*

In Romania there are few models of success in accessing higher education as well as delivering sports training lessons in persons with special needs. Social interactions and social inclusion are still obstacles to overcome in the near future.

The models of good practice implemented by local communities are not consistent and therefore education or sport programs cannot be financially sustained on long term.

The Romanian Classification of Occupations does not include the qualification in adapted sports training.

The Ministry of Sports has to involve in a more consistent way in supporting the adapted sports within the existing clubs and deliver refreshing courses on this topic, to the coaches/trainers.

“The physical education and sport system in Romania, in my opinion, is not well organised, and the initiatives of NGOs or of some specialized schools remain isolated and do not reflect the implementation of a national policy in this field.”

Social inclusion approach has to be widely tough in mainstream schools starting the secondary school; “Many years of implementation of this program-a curriculum of 4 lessons, helped to educate both teachers, professors, educators, students about what disability means and how they should behave with a potential peer with disabilities, whether they have physical or intellectual disabilities.”

Special Olympics training and competition system has been widely implemented the Unified Sports Model where in teams include both non-disabled and disable team-mates.

Peers and parents play a decisive role in embracing an open, friendly, tolerant approach because evidence shows that some of them think “that disability is contagious”.

Not all universities dedicate financial means, human resources and know-how in providing a fair chance to education for the disabled.

Disabled students and athletes do not need compassion but true partnership based on a mutual respect.

Lack of information in using proper means of communication for each disability type is another social barrier.

Being reluctant to ask for help in the academic tasks is sometimes an impediment for adapting oneself within the university studies.

Living with a disability is not a reason for shame because it is not a personal choice.

Most of the attitudinal problems or social barriers cause a lack of communication, so that each party does not express its needs and wishes or interests.

Most of the people with disabilities are afraid to open a topic of discussion for fear of being wrong or misjudged. This results in the fact that you never see the person beyond the disability story and his abilities.

Specialists have noticed the lack of representation of people with disabilities in the collective mental. The power of example, a benchmark of someone disabled who has succeeded in his education or work makes it easier to manage the situations because you already have the solutions to various specific needs which have been fulfilled by others, in the same situations.

The cost of accessibility seems high but it is very small compared to the cost that we actually incur through the lack of accessibility and of spaces and programmes. In fact, this cost, if one were to calculate it, would come from the costs associated with people who remain in isolation and who remain socially assisted, precisely because they cannot function either at school or at work or in other spaces, and then, for these people, there are support costs that come from the community.

The self-representation in advocating their rights is an important trend promoted by different programs, like "Leaders through sport", implemented by Special Olympics.

The budget of the Romanian National Paralympic for internal competitions, represents 2% of the entire budget. Under these circumstances there are low chances to perform at international level, because you have no opportunity to initiate and practice sport at national level. Grassroot adapted sports is the only way to access high level competitions.

From a social point of view the proper approach is to practice sport as a means to improve the state of health, the possibility of school and professional integration.

*Question #3: Comment on the individual barriers encountered by the disabled students practicing sports.*

Social barriers create individual barriers.

The lack of early interventions from a motor and psycho-motor point of view is an important block road for the disabled children, so that later, adolescent and youth may not reach their full potential.

Disabled students acknowledge that handling presentations in various subjects in their examinations is always hard (especially for the visually impaired) because the dedicated computer applications do not always provide the necessary functions, like enlarging the font.

Accepting one's condition brings almost no limitations in performing academic studies and facilitate empowerment and social integration.

"The individual barriers felt are primarily about the barriers we put up, primarily we, typical people and the barriers we can create without realising it."

It is always a challenge for coaches to find and develop the potential and resources of each student-athlete.

The lack of comprehensive psycho-emotional evaluation and the reluctance to ask for professional help and constant counselling sometimes worsens the health condition and the emotional status of the students-athletes with disabilities.

Various programs, like "Sports leaders" are aimed at building self-confidence, self-esteem and courage to exercise their abilities.

Struggling every day to demonstrate the academic or physical abilities can often create anxieties and distress.

Functioning and disability of an individual occurs in a certain context.

"I think that individual barriers are somewhat divided between those related to environmental factors and those related to personal factors. This is an approach that the World Health Organization has also taken in the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health. I think it also has something to do with the person's background, the conditions and the information they have about their own disability. If you hear very often in your family environment, at home, that you can't do this or that, it will become a barrier and it will be very difficult to want more from

yourself, and this is a small example that we met through the Mobility caravans that we organized across the country. We met a little girl dressed in uniform who was about 7 years old and we got excited thinking she was going to school. But in fact, it was her sister's uniform. The little girl wanted very much to go to school, like her sister, only the family felt that having a disability and using a wheelchair prevented her to go to school..... what was she supposed to do there? And this is a barrier that is transferred to the individual, it is passed on, somehow, from the family, from the immediate family environment, but it becomes an individual barrier and it translates maybe into a personal factor at a certain point, associated with low self-esteem and shame.”

Providing a wheelchair suitable for the individual needs is rarely taken care by the public health system in Romania.

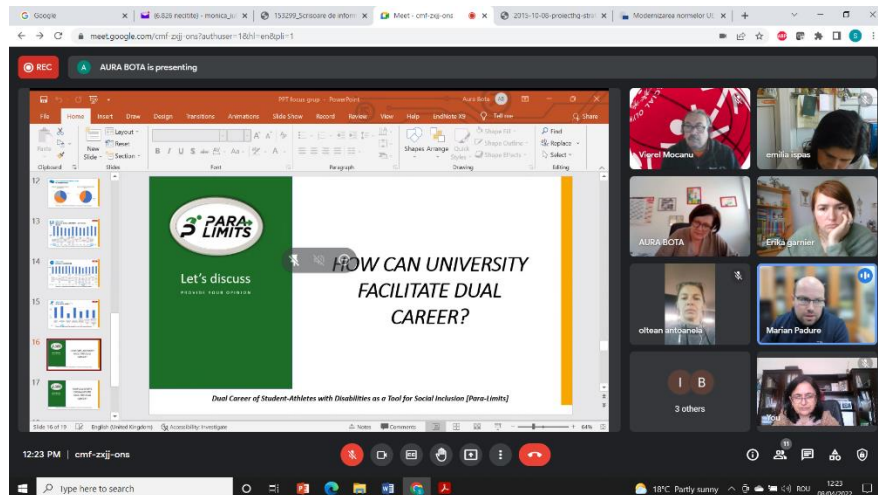
Customized mobility equipment for sports, namely sports wheelchairs are costly (thousands of euros) and they are not reimbursed in any way by the state. Therefore, they are considered “a luxury”, being often crossed-off the list.

#### *Question #4: How could Universities facilitate the Dual Sports Career (combining studies and high-level sport?)*

People with disabilities are starting to access the vocational (physical education and sport) higher education field as well. The adaptations required are primarily of a methodological nature so as to facilitate their access to information on the basis of which to acquire the skills necessary for this field. But we still have many steps to take. Many of the adapted sports practitioners could later become adapted sports coaches, by attending higher education.

We hope that both physical and informational access for the disabled students will be supported by financed programs (national and international). We want to improve access and then support these students.

Taking over good practices from international universities with more experience in this field is required in order to create a general framework at academic level.



Implementing services dedicated to students with disabilities. We are expanding in this regard. For example, we are now trying to create a digital map with all the university spaces and we want to extend the program related to tactile carpets and access abductions. We offer individual recommendations to teachers about students with disabilities (to improve teaching style and interaction with students with disabilities).

There should be an accessibility section in each university project. Another solution is to buy services for the disabled students.

Making the curriculum and premises accessible.

Making the timetable flexible and finding various ways to accommodate the disabled student-athletes and their schedule.

Flexibility and adaptation of the communication means with sensory impaired students.

Creating interaction between students without disabilities and those with disabilities with the support of NGOs.

Working in a multidisciplinary team.

Sometimes it is difficult to persuade people in management positions to make the premises accessible only for one or two disabled students.

*Question #5: How could Sport Institutions (Federations) facilitate the Dual Sports Career (combining studies and high-level sport)?*

The organization of sports structures in our country needs adjustments so that the clubs could become more open and inclusive for athletes with limited abilities.

Promoting cooperation between sport clubs and NGO's, at local level.

Building networks of specialists and communities of good practice.

Communication between the Paralympic Committee, the Ministry of sports, the National federations, the organizations, the universities, the athletes, the coaches etc, through common projects and joint efforts to promote sport for students with disabilities.

Finding means to financially support dedicated sport training and competitions.

Special schools or inclusive centres where children can be selected for adapted sports have to be included in this approach.

Motivating coaches who have the competence to work with people with disabilities.

Promoting long-term strategies and consistent policies by the ministry of resort and national federations, by including all the stakeholders with relevant competences in this area.

“In order for national federations to be able to allocate budgets, they should get to know people with disabilities better and understand them. At this point I don't think they have enough information”.

There must be collaborations between institutions.

Examples of good practice should be taken from one federation to another.

Consulting the organizations of people with disabilities.

Material resources and budget allocation.

#### Question #6: Final comments or contributions

UNEFS remains a reliable partner for the future steps we want to take in this area, by assuming the role of encouraging adapted sports for disabled, both from a theoretical point of view, but also by promoting long-term training and competitions for various sport branches – gymnastics, swimming, basketball, football, bocce, skiing, etc. Training future educators/coaches in an inclusive perspective will bring new developments as they will be capable to disseminate this approach to their athletes, colleagues, managers, local community, etc.

Each such project/action brings us closer to our goals.

This focus group has been a great opportunity to share ideas, approaches and we believe that some of them will add value for the outcomes of the project.

## 4

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Romania still has many steps to take in the direction of promoting dual career for student athletes with disabilities.

The sports career at a certain moment stops and then the educational / training part intervenes. Universities need to support each other because students with disabilities need us and we need them.

Teamwork between different organizations can change things for the better.

Dual career ensures a double visibility for athletes with disabilities: academic representation and sports performance.



DUAL CAREER OF STUDENT-ATHLETES WITH  
DISABILITIES AS A TOOL FOR SOCIAL INCLUSION

*PARA-LIMITS*

Field Research Activities – FOCUS GROUP

COUNTRY

**SPAIN**

ORGANISATION

**UNIVERSIDAD CATOLICA SAN ANTONIO DE  
MURCIA (UCAM)**



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1

## INTRODUCTION

The Focus Group (FG) of the Erasmus+ Paralimits project took place on March 17th. The main objective was to compare the results obtained in the questionnaires with the opinion of the experts in the subject, in a qualitative way. The following is a qualitative analysis of the data obtained through this methodology. The FG consisted of an introduction, where the methodology to be followed was explained to the experts, in addition to giving them an informed consent and a list of participation.

The FG consisted of 6 questions. The first 3 questions were already answered in the questionnaire given to the student-athletes who part of the project were, and the experts' opinion was sought on the results and answers obtained. In the last 3 questions, the experts were asked in an open-ended manner for their opinion on several issues that will now be indicated.



## 2

## RESULTS

**Question 1: "Comment on the results presented on the barriers in the context".**

Comparing the results with non-disabled athletes, practically the same results were obtained. The most common barriers in the context for these athletes with disabilities were the inflexible schedules of the universities and the difficulty or distance between the study centre, the usual residence and the training place.

The FG experts were satisfied with the results obtained from the questionnaire, as they also understood these answers as the most common for athletes with disabilities.

*Subject 2: It is logical that "the university is far from my home" is a barrier when 80% are physical, it is a problem the displacement.*

*Subject 4: "For me, the contribution to this question would be to always look for online modalities as far as possible. With online studies, a solution is given to two of the biggest contextual barriers for athletes with disabilities, such as inflexible schedules and travel".*

## **2nd Question: "Comment on the results presented on the social barriers".**

Regarding the social barriers, the respondents were very interested in the quality of the training centres as well as in the schedules and adaptation to their special needs. The answers obtained suggested that the training centres did not meet the necessary conditions to be considered of quality, let alone take into account athletes with disabilities when accessing or using them.

The experts invited to the FG agreed with these opinions of the athletes but focused their attention on other responses. They gave great importance to the support that these athletes with disabilities receive from their families, since on many occasions the overprotection of family members makes them finally abandon their sports career.

*Subject 4: "...that this is beneficial for their son, you know what the family is saying and "Subject 3" correct me that I have said it, the family many times you have to take the problem away from them since they look at the young person's sports career in a suspicious way, the problems they have, which are not few, take away the fear that what they are doing is overprotection."*

*Subject 2: "But it is true that it is easier to find a person with fifty years with a disability who has not touched the sport than a ten-year-old with a disability who has not started now, luckily parents now ... young people that we carry with our association respond before to take their kids to do sports and this is changing in the sense that society also sees".*

They also stressed the importance of the values of sport to these young people with disabilities, not only for health but also for other purposes. And they put a lot of interest in training families in the benefits of sport for athletes with disabilities. In the importance of creating healthy habits and routines in these young people.

*Subject 1: "some families don't care if I weigh two hundred kilos or two hundred and eighty, or that I have a healthy lifestyle, or that the environment through sport instils in them habits that are not normal for them to apply. showering every day, showering after training, we parents consider all these things useless because they are not going to achieve anything".*

The influence of the family is not always positive, so emphasis should be placed on their education and training, as an example the opinion of one of the experts regarding one of his athletes.

*Subject 5: Of course, in relation to what my colleague said, in my case for example, P, the boy I coach, is thirty-nine years old. At school, maybe he was able to play at recess or whatever, he had never done any sports. And his family has never supported him, Paco has come and told me, they are telling me "what for" "they don't pay you", I said "but let's see, this is for your health, so that you can be independent for as many years as possible, this is for you, this is health", I have always made it clear to them and*

*then the family always complained "ah, that's why", in short, nonsense, but yes, there is a lack of training in this respect.*

Continuing with the same reflection, experts indicate that, at some point in the school life of a young person with a disability, he or she is left aside. And this is not only the family's fault, and they highlight the importance of training Physical Education Teachers in both primary and secondary education. There comes a time in the life of these students when they become a "problem" for the teachers, and this is accentuated by the lack of knowledge about their disabilities that can be found in these Physical Education teachers.

*Subject 2: Physical education teachers have a lot to do with it, that is, there is a chain in which the person with a disability is still seen as isolated, I have colleagues of mine who are teachers in high schools and they call me and tell me "hey, what should I do with this kid, I don't know what to do with him" and we are talking about a person.*

*Subject 2: I hallucinate with... high schools, I don't work in a high school because I work in an association, I have many colleagues that day by day meet students with educational needs and don't know how to give them possibilities because first they blame it on the fact that there are no resources, "there is a lot of talk about inclusion but it doesn't exist" and that is the reality, if you have forty students and you have three with disabilities, what do you do, first say "I have no resources", I take them away, they don't cross school, they don't do anything, they don't do anything, they don't do anything at all. And at the end of the year, what has this student done, at the end of the year, we are not encouraging them to do sports and that is the basis where we can start working so that it*

*does not happen like with your student who is forty years old and finds that he has not pushed, if we have teachers with resources, motivated, they shake hands with them and introduce them to sports and they know the adapted sports because another thing is that adapted sports are not known, not even the federations themselves know about adapted sports.*

*Subject 4: To provide all primary and secondary school teachers with sufficient knowledge, infrastructures I do not lose because that depends on other problems, with sufficient knowledge, so that when they have a problem, they are not pending, they know how to face them, "I can't", "look you, you have tools that we are giving you, which, small tips that you contribute with little effort, because obviously you put ... that is another important thing to write down there, hey.*

### **3rd Question: "Comment on the results presented on the individual barriers".**

The experts highlighted the importance that these student-athletes give to sport. It is admirable that even with all the efforts involved, and the lack of resources and support, they continue to see sport as a motivation to move forward.

*Subject 5: Look at what sport can do with these people, how important it is and how good they feel for being able to do sport, they feel more important, they feel like sportsmen and women, what I mentioned before, in the end it is above all for their health and at the same time it integrates you. And then, as the doctor said, you can find that your own family doesn't support you to continue with it or you have negative comments.*

The members of the FG did not want to go deeper into this question either, as they thought that assessing the opinions of the athletes about their individual barriers was redundant. They would have little to contribute since they do not know the reality of each of the athletes.

**4th Question: How could Universities facilitate the Dual Sports Career  
(combining studies and high-level sport)?**

In relation to this topic, the experts were very categorical, and focused their opinions on infrastructures and facilities since they should be easily accessible to athletes with disabilities. In many cases, sports facilities do not take into account the problems of these athletes, and focus simply on athletes without disabilities.

*Subject 2: One of the problems is that this public law in the white paper on sport for people with disabilities in two thousand eighteen comments that a very high percentage of municipal sports facilities do not have adaptations, a very high percentage, I do not remember but it was very high, sports and municipal facilities, heated swimming pools, and I am talking about the Region of Murcia.*

The participants again indicated the importance of including online studies for these students, since the flexibility it can offer them would be very advantageous for them. One of the facets they highlight, coincides with the main objective of this project, which is the training of specific Sports Tutors for athletes with disabilities.

*Subject 4: I would say one thing on a daily basis at the curricular level, first to appoint independently a teaching body; one, two, three, based on the demand that has a very special dedication to this group".*

Although for our experts, the basis of this whole process begins with equalizing the support of athletes without disabilities to those with disabilities.

*Subject 2: I believe that the disabled athlete, as is happening with the Paralympic Committee, wants to match what the able-bodied athlete does, that is, to have the same opportunities, to have the medal of an able-bodied athlete and a disabled athlete worth the same, to have the same training possibilities. An Olympic athlete has advantages in a university, why not the Paralympic athlete, the secret of us is neither more nor less than to equalize the possibilities.*

*Subject 4: So that the university can equalize the handicap so that everyone starts on an equal footing.*

### **Question 5: How could Sports Institutions (Federations) facilitate the Dual Sports Career (combining studies and high level sport)?**

In this question there was a great consensus in the experts' answers, since they believe that most federations do not support adapted sports due to lack of knowledge. The

experts commented their own experiences with different associations or federations, but the end was the same, the federations are entities that focus on traditional sport and do not know how to deal with the adapted modality. So, like families, training and advice to sports federations is recommended.

*Subject 2: A note regarding what you say about the federations, there is an aid that the COE, what happens is that the federations do not know about it, they give, last year they gave to inclusive sport, aid to the federations themselves, many federations have not applied for them because they have not had the chance to have had any student or interested person. So of course, it promotes, but even last year it was distributed because we as a collective/association were called by the wrestling federation of Murcia, the Spanish squash federation, the federation; why, because they received these aids and they have to carry out a series of activities to promote inclusive sports and many of the other federations do not know about them.*

*Subject 1: then, the federations are the only ones that can take care of adapted sport from the bottom to the top, what happens, of course, is that there will come an age limit where they will lose them, if you are lucky and they are medalists, they will become independent. I base more than anything in the intellectual that is what I know, all end or janitor in a pavilion.*

## 6. Final comments or contributions

*Subject 2: I want to add a reflection, for my part I think it is very important that people with disabilities, are in the hands of qualified people, professional sports people and that these people with training have previously had training, some experience, I think the university has a lot to do, for me , I have had the opportunity to speak at the faculty of sport in San Javier, when and I had to talk to colleagues, it is very important to know the group with disabilities, is that we say, it is not that the coach .... in a certain university of sport and so on, yes, but he knows the possibilities that adapted sport has, he knows how a federation works, he has the tools to give that athlete to be able to compete. You know, I think it is very important that we get adapted sports and sports for people with disabilities in the hands of sports professionals and that these sports professionals, luckily, we are having more and more students with internships, we are having more and more relationships. When I started with an association like mine, I had not touched a person with a disability because when I was student we did an orientation internship but I am not going to orient myself to a group with a disability, now luckily in the degrees come students in internships spend with us, do aquatic activities, meet autistic people, meet ..., has a very important role the university.*