

Article

Socio-Professional Implications of Sports Events: A Perspective from Dual-Career Students

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Abstract: Background: The organization of a sports event can be analyzed from the perspective of its impact on the participants, organizers and community. University championships have a sustainable character, with several tournaments being planned over time, receiving increased interest from all stakeholders. Methods: This research aimed to describe aspects regarding the organization and planning of sports events, the academic and professional profiles of student-athletes and the implications of their participation in championships. We used two research methods: one based on geography, and another based on a sociological survey of 139 dual-career students participating in the national university championship of men's football and women's volleyball organized by the University of Oradea (Romania). Results: The research results show that academic studies provide professional competencies, while participation in sports events contributes to students' personal and professional development. The results highlight that dual-career students are more prone to develop their sports careers; therefore, participation in these types of events represents a milestone in their careers. Conclusions: Our study can be considered when organizing these types of sports events and can provide directions for the development of sustainable strategies and programs to support students with dual careers.

Keywords: sports events; dual-career students; academic and professional profile; university championship



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1. Introduction

Sports events are important, taking into account the impact they can have on the community, participants, organizers and local population. The magnitude of these events is attributable to their continuous sequence, their history, the number of tournaments, their reputation, the local or international level of participation, the length of the development period, the number of participants and their characteristics, the temporal sequence, etc.

The relevance of studying sports events is attributable to the importance of the event itself based on its reputation, sustainability and the impact it has on the participants, organizers and community. On the other hand, the participants are equally important, focusing on their profiles and the impacts that their defining characteristics have on the planning and implementation of these types of events. All these aspects can be seen as a starting point for the proper organization and planning of such events in the future. These initiatives and studies ensure the sustainable character of sports championships.

This paper analyzes the national university championship of men's football and women's volleyball organized by the University of Oradea (Romania) from the perspective of its reputation and sustainability and the impact it has on the participants and their socio-professional status development, taking into account their particularities as dual-career students.

Our approach was based on the following research questions: What are the characteristics of student-athletes participating in university championships? What is the role of competitors in the planning, organization and development of sports events? Can a small-scale sports event be analyzed from the perspective of its mutual benefits generated by the event–competitor relationship?

The first research objective focused on investigating various aspects related to the planning and organization of a sports event. Events can be analyzed from the perspective of the impact that the competitors, participants, organizers and the community have, and in this sense, an important aspect is the reputation of the event and its continuity, resulting in its sustainable character. We approached these aspects by using a geographical framework.

We also outline the implications that the event has on the competitors in terms of their dual-career development. In this sense, the profiles of student-athletes participating in the championship are important. Participating in the event represents an opportunity to strengthen performance, to develop a professional career, to expand social networks, and to increase territorial mobility and visibility as athletes. Taking these into consideration, two other research objectives were pursued through a sociological survey: a description of the academic and sports careers of student-athletes participating in the national university championship and the analysis of the implications of participation in sports events.

1.1. Sports Events: Organization and Participants

Effectively organizing a sports event requires paying attention to all details, such as the selection of participants while taking into account their territorial distribution, planning the schedule of competitions, establishing the locations, ensuring human resources and logistics, budgeting, sponsorship, marketing, etc. [1]. In national university championships, the participants are usually dual-career students. Thus, their needs (their academic programs and the frequency of sports training) must be considered when planning the event. Both the territorial distribution of the participants, as well as their level of training/sports performance, give weight to the event itself, contributing to the increase in interest for possible future tournaments. A method that can be used in the organization and planning of sports competitions is cartography, which results in spatial planning [2]. A successful sports event for participants, organizers and the community can be an example of good practice in planning future tournaments. The magnitude of the event and its history generate increased interest from the participants and the community.

Most studies that look at the impact of sports events tend to focus on large-scale events, particularly looking at their economic effects [3,4]. Such events have a high level of reputation and continuity, and the effects are reflected both directly, on aspects related to infrastructure development and spatial planning, and indirectly, from the perspective of ensuring the international visibility of the host city, the competitiveness and attractiveness of tourist destinations, the creation of new jobs, the development of local entrepreneurship, the increase in local attachment and the promotion of cultural values. Most of the time, studies highlight the positive effects of these kinds of mega-events, in contrast to the negative ones, which particularly relate to the costs generated by the organization of such a large event, the construction of the infrastructure and urban crowding [4]. It is difficult to measure the long-term effects of sports events, and this requires a complex approach that evaluates all the structures involved. Gratton and Preuss [4] propose tracking the planned, unplanned, positive, negative, tangible and intangible effects of the structures created post-event. These structures resulting from the organization of sports events have a sustainable character due to their significant impact on the community, on tourism, on the economy and industry, and on how future events will be organized. However, there are few studies that focus on smaller sports events, such as university championships [5–7]. The profiles of both spectators and athletes participating in these sports events are rather different from those who participate in large-scale events. Additionally, the event itself has a smaller reach if we take into account the network built around it and the stakeholders involved. If smaller sports events aim to develop and increase their reputation and visibility, have a certain

continuity due to the organization of several tournaments and thus generate longer-term effects at the regional level, one of the priorities of its strategy should relate to the growth and consolidation of the network of stakeholders. The complexity of this network has implications for social, personal and economic relationships [8]. Therefore, small-scale events contribute to the strategic development of the region [7]. Anyhow, studies show that small sports events organized in cities at the local level tend to have an important impact on the community, economy and local tourism [5,9]. This category also includes university championships. According to Getz [10], sports events fall into the category of those planned for the purpose of competition, leisure and socialization. Sports activities include, on the one hand, recreational ones (participation of individuals in various sports activities during traveling) and, on the other hand, sports competitions (sports events) entailing spectators and amateur or professional athletes.

Athletes are directly involved in the sports competition, so they are part of the network built around the event. The size of the event itself is significant in clarifying the role of the athletes. In the case of small events, namely, those in which it is possible for the athletes to outnumber the spectators, where the media interest is limited or where there are fewer economic effects [11], the focus is especially on sports competitors. At the same time, another important aspect is that sports events can be a source of social capital and community networks [12]. Thus, student-athletes can identify new contacts and directions for personal and professional development.

1.2. Dual-Career Students: Opportunities and Challenges

A dual career encompasses two important sectors of students' lives: a sports career combined with the pursuit of an academic or work path [13,14]. Therefore, student-athletes represent a distinct social group with particular needs that must be addressed. Several studies have focused on investigating this topic [15–19]. In the case of this social category, it is necessary to develop sustainable government policies that ensure the proper combination of the sports system, the educational system and the labor market to reduce all of the risks to talented student-athletes, especially those arising when they have to make the decision to give up a certain career path.

An optimal dual career is a challenge for students, and it is frequently associated with difficulties in managing both sports and academic paths in parallel, together with different aspects of private life [20,21]. A dual career also encompasses a challenging transition process (junior-to-senior, post-athletic career, and a higher level in sports or education) [17]. The transitions that take place in a sports career are often determined by, generate or overlap with transitions in other areas of life (academic transitions, psycho-social changes or professional changes). The sports career is shaped by interactions between all levels of development and transitions from one level to another [14]. Therefore, for some transitions, a certain coping strategy can be established, whereas, for others, it is more difficult. Student-athletes need to acquire and develop competencies to successfully prepare for and pursue a dual career in sports and education [22]. On the other hand, a dual career combining sports and studies has proven to be an adequate solution to balance sports with other spheres of students' lives [20] and provides benefits for them in terms of social and psychological as well as academic development.

A dual career is always associated with certain benefits; however, it also has some serious costs. The idea is to ensure a balance between them, because it is precisely this balance that has a decisive impact on their motivation, namely, the decision to give up a dual career. Research stresses that internal/personal resources and characteristics, external support (from family, peers and coaches) and coping strategies are some of the most important key factors for an optimal dual-career balance [17,23]. Time, energy and self-management play a major role in the sports–education balance [17,20]. At the same time, the social pressure that these students feel puts them in the situation of needing to find coping strategies. Government policies, as well as different organizations and stakeholders,

must support student-athletes in the implementation of coping strategies and ensure their welfare [14].

Moreover, the educational system must take into account the particular situation of dual-career students and properly respond to their real needs. In this sense, the EU Guidelines on Dual Careers of Athletes was developed as a basis to introduce sustainable dual-career programs and states that both non-governmental and governmental stakeholders in sports and education (educational system, sports federations and sports organizations) have a major role in ensuring student-athletes' welfare [14].

2. Materials and Methods

The development of the methodological framework used in this research involved an interdisciplinary approach, focusing on two components: the analysis of sports events from the geographical perspective using cartography and spatial planning [24–28] and from the sociological perspective using a survey [29–31]; the aim was to describe the academic and professional profiles of students with dual careers who participate in sports championships, highlighting their opinions regarding the impact that the event has on them.

The geographical component of the study is relevant for the territorial impact of the sports event, highlighting several quantitative aspects (such as the number of universities and sports clubs involved) and also qualitative ones (such as the performance and quality of the participants). The sociological component is relevant for describing the profiles of students with dual careers participating in sports events and for outlining their opinions regarding these types of events. There are several studies that focus on the profiles of student-athletes participating in university championships [32,33] and the influence of participation in this type of event [34,35].

The cartographic representation, namely, the way in which the map is elaborated, with its content including the number and type of quantitative and qualitative elements represented chronologically and territorially, reflects the distribution, amplitude and spatial diversity of university sports events in general and of women's volleyball and men's football in particular for the 2022 tournament. Thus, the map, as a complex and visually suggestive cartographic product, represents basic support in the development of action plans for the present and especially for future planning strategies for similar events.

The sociological study adopted a quantitative approach with an exploratory-descriptive character using a questionnaire-based survey. The research tool was applied to the competitors in the National University Championship of Romania of Football and Volleyball (held in May 2022). The questionnaire was applied during the championship. The questionnaire was structured in accordance with the research objectives, aiming to obtain responses regarding the educational path, sports careers of the students and opinions regarding the sports events they participate in. The questionnaires were self-administered, anonymous and did not involve the collection of personal data. The questionnaires were voluntarily completed, and the collected data were analyzed only for scientific purposes through statistical processing, thus respecting all the ethical and deontological norms of sociology.

The survey aimed to be an exhaustive one, targeting all participants in this event. The final sample comprised 139 subjects who participated in the national university championships (volleyball or football). The subjects were students who chose a dual career: an academic university career and an athletic career. A total of 87 of them were football players, and 52 of them played volleyball. The football players were all male students, and those who played volleyball were female. Taking into account the field of study in which students who participated in the championship were enrolled, 101 (72.7%) of them were in a sports profile study program, and 38 (27.3%) were in other types of study programs. All participants in the study were students enrolled in a bachelor's (81.5%) or master's degree program (18.5%). The average age of the subjects was 21.5 years, and the majority resided in urban areas (74.8%).

The study combined interdisciplinary elements that could generate strategies for similar cases [21,36,37]. This paper analyzes student-athletes' participation in sports events

and their perceptions of these types of events [38,39], highlighting aspects regarding the academic profiles of students [40].

3. Results

3.1. Organization of Sports Event

National university championships have brought the sports movement back to the forefront, both at the national and European levels. The reputation of these competitions at the national level is attributable to the unique annual character and the history of their tournaments. Regularly held during the communist period, with sporadic attempts to resume in the post-communism era, this type of sports event, focused on men's football, was successfully restarted only in 2015 at the initiative of the Timișoara Polytechnic University and under the supervision of the School and University Sports Federation, completing six consecutive tournaments to date (without the pandemic years 2020 and 2021) (Figure 1).

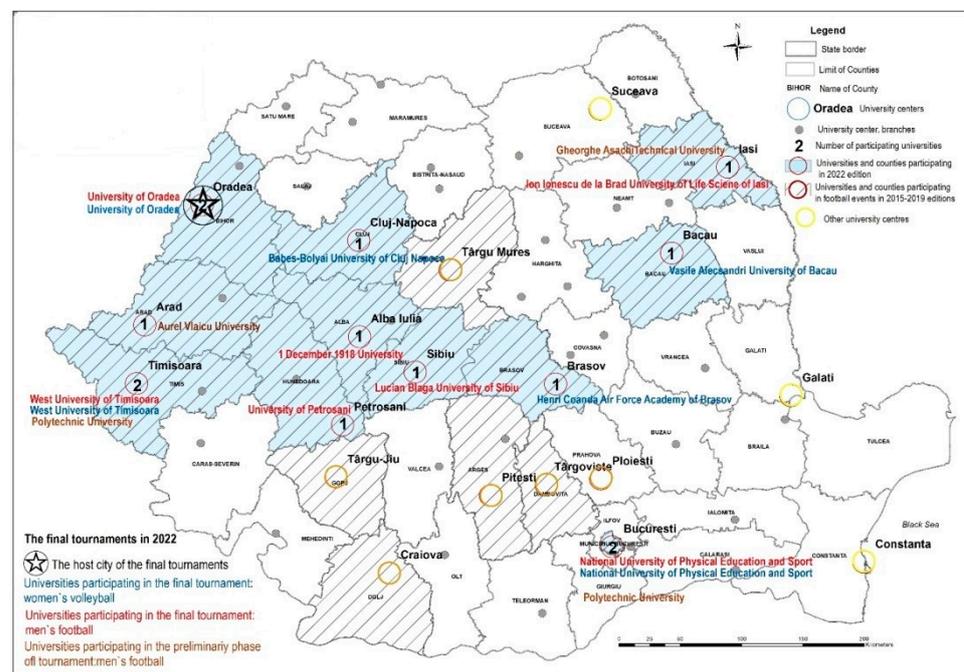


Figure 1. Romania. Universities and counties participating in the final tournaments of the national university championships of men's football and women's volleyball—Oradea, May 2022 and 2015–2019 football event tournaments.

The number of selected participating universities and university centers differed from one tournament to another (Table 1).

Table 1. Number of participating universities/tournaments.

Year	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2022
No. of universities	20	18	8	8	6	12

We mention that each university team used a group of 25 sports students on average, of which more than 95% were among those with a dual-career perspective, carrying out regular sports activities at professional and amateur clubs in Romania. During all six tournaments of the football event (2015–2019 and 2022), 72 participating university teams implicitly increased the importance of the national event through the contribution of approximately 2000 students. A total of 95% of students with dual careers are officially registered and represent, at the same time, over 500 professional and amateur sports clubs in Romania.

The championships were specific to the academic year 2022–2023, after two years of a “pandemic” break. For two weeks, the University of Oradea (220,000 inhabitants; approx. 30,000 students) became the host of the two major events in the lives of Romanian students: the final tournaments of the National University Championship of Romania of Football and Volleyball. Approximately 300 students and team staff members participated as main actors, representing 12 universities and 9 university centers from 8 counties and Bucharest (Figure 1), representing both the female teams (6 volleyball teams) and the male teams (6 football teams). The universities participating in the events were the University of Oradea, *Babes-Bolyai* University from Cluj-Napoca, the West University of Timisoara, the University of Petrosani, the *Vasile Alecsandri* University of Bacau, the *Henri Coanda* Air Force Academy of Braşov, the National University of Physical Education and Sports of Bucharest, the *Lucian Blaga* University of Sibiu, and the *Ion Ionescu de la Brad* University of Life Sciences of Iaşi. The first post-pandemic tournament, analyzed in this study, brought into competition dominant universities from Transylvania, three from Moldova and two from Bucharest (Figure 1).

The importance of the event, from the history of its six tournaments, has grown every year through the participation of an increasing number of students who are active as professional players at clubs from three Romanian professional football leagues (Steaua and Dinamo Bucharest; Politehnica and Ripensia from Timişoara; Cluj-Napoca University, UTA Arad, FC Hermanstadt Sibiu; Politehnica Iaşi, University of Craiova, Academica Clinceni, CSC Şelimbăr, etc). The situation is even more obvious in the case of the women’s volleyball competition.

In the case of the 2022 tournament of the football event, the 12 selected universities involved over 300 student-athletes, with an average of 25 players on each team. A total of 95% of them were dual-career students from 122 professional and amateur sports clubs. At the same time, in the women’s volleyball competition, all six participating universities had their teams entirely formed of female students engaged in dual activities, also officially registered in clubs from the national leagues of Romania.

Students who were competitors at the national university championships (volleyball or football) stated their opinions about this type of event. Among respondents, 61.6% of them stated that while they are away with the sports team, they participate in other sports events in the area (Figure 2). This aspect shows students’ interest in their athletic career. Additionally, their participation in a sports competition outside their area of residence gives students the opportunity to be involved in other types of activities: 66.3% of them visit parks and natural attractions in the area, 60.5% of students visit places for fun and food, and 37.6% participate in socio-cultural events (festivals, concerts and fairs).

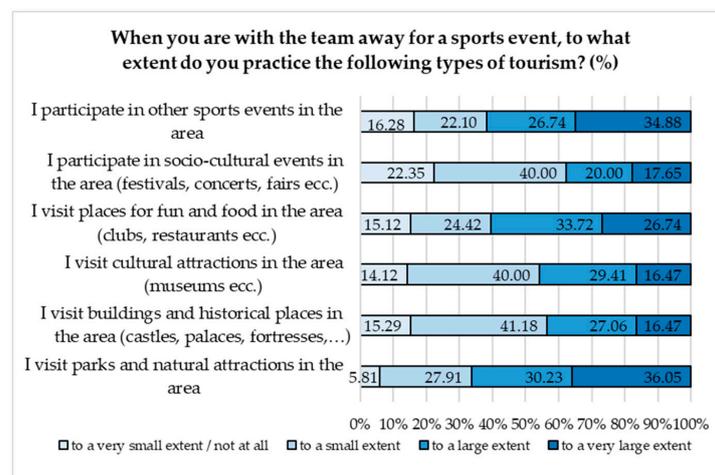


Figure 2. Student-athletes as tourists.

The majority of students (94.5%) declared that this event contributes to their personal development, 82.4% of students believed that it helped them in their current educational activities, and 75.6% of them thought that this sports event provided support in their athletic career (Figure 3).

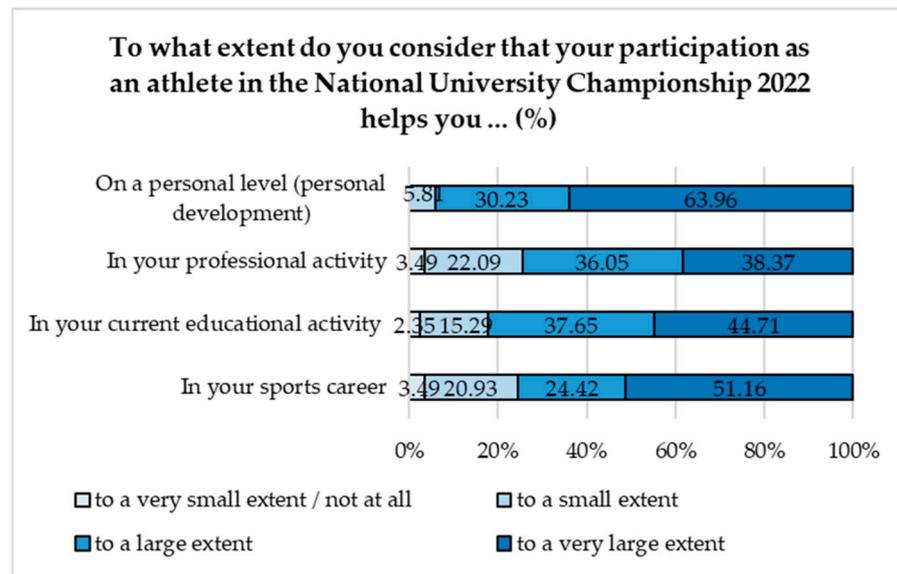


Figure 3. Students' opinions regarding their participation in the national university championship in 2022.

3.2. Academic Profiles of Student-Athletes Participating in University Championships

Our data show consistency regarding the academic paths of athletes. A total of 39.9% of them graduated from a sports program in high school. According to the value distribution, the other two study areas mentioned are real science (26.1%) and humanistic (24.6%), while other programs registered values less than 3% (military, technical and services, pedagogy and the environment).

Both in terms of deciding to pursue university and choosing a study program (Figure 4), the data show that students were mostly oriented toward the development of their professional careers. Therefore, they aimed to obtain specific skills and to increase their chances of finding a job, particularly a well-paid and prestigious one. Lower values were registered in terms of the connection with their previous sports activity and the influence that other people (coaches, family and friends) have on their decision regarding their field of study. However, the answers to the question regarding the impact that their athletic career had on their decision in choosing a university study program indicate that most of them were strongly influenced by it. A total of 74.3% of students declared that their athletic career had influenced their academic path to a very great or great extent.

Subjects considered their academic studies and athletic career to be strongly connected. Therefore, students thought that they would use about 67% of the knowledge and skills acquired in the study program further in their athletic careers. Additionally, the percentage of the knowledge and competencies acquired in the study program that they believed they would use in their further professional career is around 81.6%.

The results indicate that students are more oriented toward an athletic career. Being asked what they would do if they had to choose between their academic or sports activities, 57.6% of students stated that they would opt for an athletic career at the expense of their educational activities. Therefore, sports are an important part of their lives.

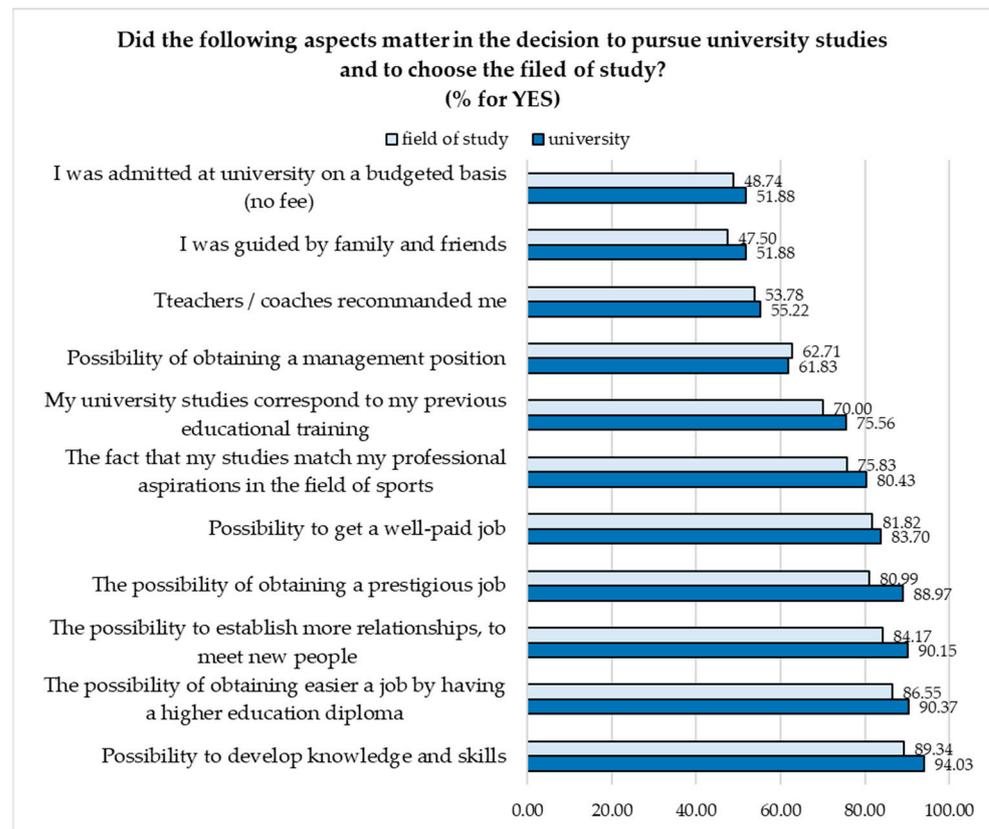


Figure 4. Aspects regarding the decision to pursue university studies.

3.3. The athletic Careers of Students

The average age from which students practiced football or volleyball was 8.96 years, with a standard deviation of 3.1 years. The minimum age was 4 years, and the maximum age was 19 years. A total of 52% of students practiced sports at the performance level, evolving to the I, II or III League, while 48% of them were in League IV.

We need to stress that 74.8% of students received a financial benefit from the sports activities they practiced, as they received a monthly income. It is possible that this situation influenced the decision to continue their athletic career in the future, after completing their studies. The majority of students (72.1%) declared that they wanted to continue their athletic career to a very large or large extent.

As mentioned above, there was a connection between university studies and an athletic career (Figure 5). Most of the students wanted to find a job after graduation, but they wanted their professional activities to continue in sports. There were quite a number of them who looked at their current sports activity as a real job and considered that they would use their sports skills in their future professional activities. At the same time, even after finishing their athletic careers, they aimed to find a job in a related field.

Regarding their current professional activities, 44.8% of students were employed, and 68.2% of them worked in the sports field. It should be mentioned that 56.7% of students had a job in a field that was not related to the studies they were enrolled in.

The majority of students (91.9%) declared that the following is totally true or rather true: the sport that they practice at a performance level gives them the opportunity to attend other sports events in addition to those in which they already participate. Sports activities can be seen as a possible means of students' personal and professional development, as 95.3% of them believed that they had the opportunity to visit new places, and 94.2% of participants believed that the sport that they practiced gave them the opportunity to meet new people.

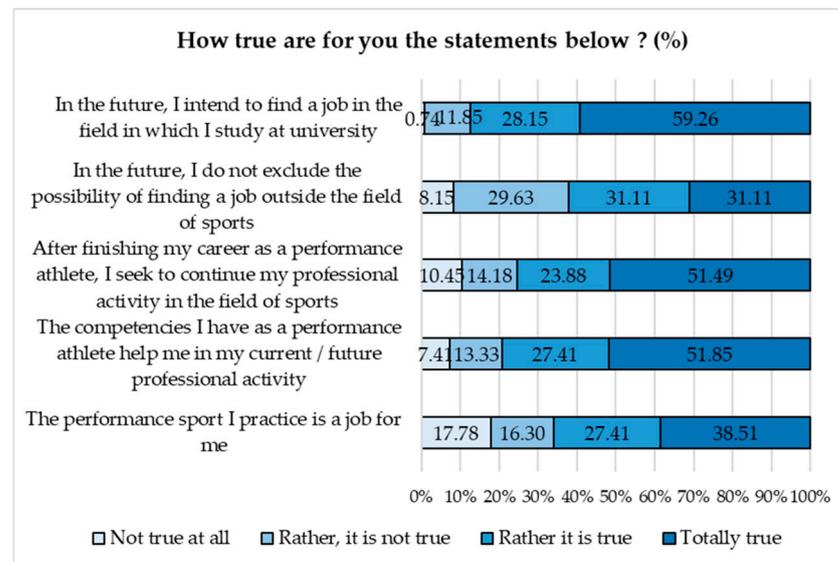


Figure 5. The relationship between university studies and athletic career.

3.4. Research Limitations

A number of research limitations are associated with the analyzed event. In particular, they are related to the fact that it is a small-scale event that took place at the level of universities in Romania. The study was limited to the football and volleyball championship that was held in Oradea in 2022. A more consistent perspective on the results could be obtained by adding the data related to all previous tournaments of the university championships, and future research could adopt a comparative approach by including all participants from the next tournaments. The profiles of dual-career students could be more detailed by a longitudinal approach in this regard. The quantitative approach could be complemented by a qualitative perspective by using in-depth interviews with dual-career students for a more comprehensive image of their status.

The data collected in this study do not offer a comparative perspective regarding the participation of dual-career students in different types of events. Comparing the data with aspects observed in the case of participation in large sports events could bring more clarification regarding how students relate to these events, their motivation to participate and the contribution that these events have to students' career development. The exploratory-descriptive character of the study gives us the possibility to describe the main characteristics of dual-career students; however, it does not provide details about how different characteristics shape their academic and athletic careers, or how participation in sports events is influenced by these characteristics.

We must mention that another research limitation is imposed by the way in which the data were collected, namely, through self-administered questionnaires. Self-reported data could generate biases, such as social desirability, and could affect the research results, which we can control only to a small extent. Even in the case of a small-scale event, a series of stakeholders are involved. A future study approach in which all stakeholders from all levels are taken into consideration could contribute to providing a more comprehensive picture of the link between sports events and competitors.

4. Discussion

The importance of national university championships is determined, on the one hand, by the characteristics of the competitors. Their reputation attributable to their status as professional players is reflected in the event itself. At the same time, we emphasize the dual careers of the participants, as students enrolled in one of the participating or organizing universities of the championship. These aspects increase the importance of the event and stimulate the interest of the public. As this interest rises, the sustainability of the event is

ensured, and its repetitiveness generates effects on other related fields, such as the economy or tourism. At the community level, the impact of small-scale events is smaller compared to that of large-scale events. However, these events (such as university championships) generate economic and tourism effects that cannot be neglected, as the organization and development of the event involve specific costs and resource consumption [5]. Equally, from the opposite point of view, the event itself offers benefits to the participants. Participation in the event represents an opportunity, offering the possibility of developing sports and professional careers. In the case of dual-career students, the effects also extend to their educational path [21].

The interdisciplinary analysis of sports events highlights this link between the event and competitors. By using geographically specific methods (cartography and spatial planning), quantitative aspects are presented regarding the spatial organization of events, while the sociological approach outlines the profiles and opinions of the athletes.

From the geographical perspective, this study indicates the reputation of this type of university sports event, attributable to its history, the number of participating universities, the degree of coverage of the phenomenon at the national level (based on the map), the number of participants and professional clubs they represent, the organization of preliminary phases at the level of university centers and especially the final tournaments by considering the importance and cultural characteristics of the host city chosen for each tournament.

The research results stress the continuity of students' athletic careers and highlight the strong relationship between students' choice of university study programs and their sports careers. They consider that the competencies they acquire during the university study program they follow will be useful in their future professional activities. Most of them want to continue their athletic path; however, at the same time, the majority of them (90%) did not think of giving up their studies. Following both a higher education path and a sports career can be complex and challenging for students [19,21]. Universities must be aware of the difficulties faced by this category of students and must define their status more clearly and transparently [14,41]. First of all, a relevant aspect that universities must take into account is the fact that these students still want to remain students, but at the same time, they want to invest in their sports careers. Universities must offer support to students in finding this balance. There are several measures that can be taken to ensure this balance: academic monitoring, counseling, tutoring sessions, etc. Universities must pay more attention to these students in order to be able to identify which activities on campus provide the most benefits and to encourage better student–faculty and coach–faculty communication [42].

Because the studies highlight the fact that dual-career students report difficulties in adapting to the academic environment and to the sports environment and face different conflicting roles [43] and need to deal with the lack of support [41,44], our study outlines the importance of stimulating participation in sports events in a way that contributes to shaping their status and creating a better image in the sports community. At such events, students have the opportunity to share experiences with other students who have similar positions. Sports and school institutions are responsible for providing the necessary support to these students. The experience that these students gain in universities is a beneficial one, as is the experience gained in sports events and competitions. Both make significant contributions to their personal and professional development [45]. Academic institutions and policies that address dual-career status must first ensure that these students benefit from positive academic experiences that increase their chances of obtaining a higher education degree in parallel with maintaining their sports careers [41].

The sport they practice gives students the chance to develop their athletic careers due to the chance they have to participate in other sports competitions, to meet new people and to establish new relationships and networks. Students consider that their sport contributes to their personal development and also gives them other opportunities, such as their involvement in different activities outside of competitions.

This study encountered several limitations, most of them being generated by the small number of participants included in the survey, as well as the approach involving a single small-scale event, making the comparative approach difficult.

5. Conclusions

From a descriptive-exploratory perspective, this research approaches the implications of planning and participating in a small-scale sports event. On the one hand, the sports event itself is analyzed, including the way it is organized and its spatial planning, taking into account the territorial distribution of the participants and its continuity, and on the other hand, it places an emphasis on sport-athletes who participate in the competition. In this sense, this paper offers a new perspective on the social actors involved in sports events. A network with a complex structure is built around the event, including different categories of stakeholders. The importance of the event is also reflected by the type and number of participants—spectators and competitors. In the case of small events, the role played by athletes is especially highlighted. Taking into account their behavior, their number, their geographical representation and the activities in which they are involved outside of the sports competition itself, they make certain contributions to several sectors, such as community development, the economy or tourism.

This study focuses on a special category of competitors participating in a small-scale sports event, namely, dual-career students. Taking into account their characteristics and academic and professional profiles, this paper captures the role they have in the reputation of the university championship. This paper aimed to analyze the national university championship and focused on outlining the profiles of the student-athletes, emphasizing the implications that their specific characteristics have, namely, their ability to have dual careers, for the way in which such an event is planned, the network formed around the event and the way it is carried out. Dual-career students see the championship as a generator of certain benefits. This study reveals that the students who participate in these events pursue their personal and professional development. Thus, they manage to combine the two components of their career—sports and studies.

Although the university championship is a small-scale sports event, it is still important from the perspective of the social, economic and tourism impacts it has on the local community. The importance of the national university championship, even if it is a small-scale event, is attributable to the profiles of the competitors and their number, the level of sports activity and the sports clubs involved (football students from the professional leagues in Romania present a major interest for this type of event), the duration of the competition, the level of representation of the universities and the competition at the national level.

The analysis of sports events such as university championships can contribute to the development of strategies for the development of similar events that can be perceived as generating sources of sustainable sports activities.

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