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RESEARCH ARTICLE

REVISED A comparison of formal policies and practices for dual career implementation in European universities: insights from five European countries

[version 2; peer review: 1 approved, 1 approved with reservations]
Previously titled: "A comparison of formal policies and practices for dual career implementation in European universities"

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Abstract

Purpose

As part of the project FIND-ME: University Dual Career Opportunities (FIND ME – 101134043), this study explores how dual career (DC) practices for student-athletes (SAs) are implemented), focusing on the balance between formal (policy-based) and informal (practice-based) approaches across partner institutions.

Methods

Each participating country conducted a desk analysis of national and institutional DC regulations. In parallel, a 31-item online survey was administered to higher education experts to assess DC implementation in five domains: logistical support, academic assistance/tutorship, curricular flexibility, social support, and financial aid.

Results

The analysis revealed considerable cross-country variability and a strong reliance on informal practices. Logistical support was mainly informal in Spain (54%), Italy (76%), Serbia (88%), Romania and Slovenia (100%). Assistance/tutorship showed similar informal trends: Spain (43%), Italy (52%), Serbia (35%), Romania (54%), and Slovenia (55%). Curricular flexibility remained partly formalized (29–56%), whereas social support was mostly informal, except in Spain (50%). Financial support was the least formalized area across all contexts (13–32%).

Conclusions

These findings highlight a widespread dependence on informal DC measures and underscore the need for harmonized policies to ensure equitable DC support. Results will guide the development of the FIND-ME platform as an evidence-based DC tool for higher education institutions.

Keywords
dual career; student-athletes; higher education institutions; policy implementation; dual career policies; institutional regulations

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REVISED **Amendments from Version 1**

In this revised version, the title has been refined to better reflect the study sample. The Materials and Methods section now clarifies the rationale for including the five countries. These correspond to the partner institutions of the FIND-ME Erasmus +Sport consortium and were not obtained through a representative sampling procedure. We also frame this selection within the national dual career (DC) governance typology proposed by Aquilina and Henry. The description of the desk analysis has been expanded to make the procedure more transparent and reproducible. It now reports the eligibility criteria applied to institutional regulations and the procedure used to classify each provision into the five thematic domains examined.

In the Results, we clarify that the pooled percentages in Table 2 provide a descriptive overview only, given the predominance of Italian respondents. Between-country comparisons should instead rely on the country-level data presented in Figures 1–10.

The Discussion has been substantially extended. First, the findings are interpreted in light of existing DC governance models, showing broad consistency with the typology of state-centric versus informal systems. Second, they are critically compared with the EU Guidelines on Dual Careers of Athletes, which reveals partial and uneven alignment across domains, with financial support emerging as the least formalised. Third, we added a discussion of the administrative barriers that may hinder the transition from informal to formal DC policies, such as faculty autonomy and institutional bureaucracy. We also outline strategies to overcome them, including national-level coordination and the involvement of external sport stakeholders.

The Limitations section now explains why institutional DC regulations were absent in Romania and Serbia. Finally, the Conclusions have been reframed to focus on operational implications for the FIND-ME project and its partner higher education institutions. References have been updated accordingly.

Any further responses from the reviewers can be found at the end of the article

Introduction

In the last decades, European policies, academic institutions, and sports bodies have shown growing interest in the holistic development of athletes, promoting the integration of sport career and academic education, commonly referred to as dual career (DC). The concept of DC is rooted in the human right to personal and professional development throughout the life span.[1–3] In this context, the concurrent management of sporting and academic commitments relies on skills of time management, resilience, effective communication, and emotional awareness, which represent an added value not only for the individuals involved but also for society as a whole.[4,5] In general, student-athletes (SAs) are capable to handle challenging situations thanks to the competencies acquired through their multifaceted experiences.[6] However, their motivation and level of social and academic engagements are highly dependent on their supporting entourage and environmental context, including cultural attitudes toward sport, the availability of university support services, and the accessibility of DC programmes and benefits.[2,7–9]

At the European level, the implementation of DC models remains highly heterogeneous, with significant differences due to the full competence on sports and education policies of the individual Member States, as well as the institutional autonomy of higher education institutions (HEIs) and of the sport bodies.[10–13] Despite the emphasis of EU recommendations[1] on the importance of a structured and coordinated approach to DC, many institutions continue to operate without formal policies, relying instead on informal and often unregulated practices, which are frequently contingent on the initiative of individual institutional actors.[14] Although several Member States have adopted state-centred approaches, national legislation, or national guidelines on DC, the implementation is often uneven within countries due to regional disparities and differences in resources and staffing across universities.[15] As a result, many DC services are delivered informally, and SAs may perceive these services as insufficient or inconsistent.[15] This fragmentation leads to marked disparities in the availability and quality of support services, potentially affecting students' equitable access to educational and athletic development and impacting their psychosocial well-being and career continuity.

In this context, the European project FIND-ME: University Dual Career Opportunities (FIND-ME, 101134043), financed under the ERASMUS+Sport Collaborative Partnership programme, aims to promote a structured and evidence-based approach to DC policies and services at the university level. The project is founded on the collaboration of six HEIs, with recognized DC expertise located in Italy, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia, and Spain, together with the European Athlete Student (EAS) network and two companies specializing in digital innovation and dissemination. This initiative responds to the acknowledged fragmentation in services available to SAs and seeks to bridge this gap through the development of a dedicated European digital platform. The FIND-ME platform is intended as an operational and accessible tool to assist SAs and their supporting entourage in identifying DC opportunities offered by European universities. To function as a centralized information database on available DC services (i.e., curricular flexibility, tutoring, logistical, social, and

financial support) identified by SAs as crucial to their development,[16] the platform aims to enhance transparency, comparability, and visibility of institutional policies and to contribute to the establishment of European minimum standards for DC implementation at the academic level. Among its key activities, the project includes a literature review on SAs' perspectives regarding DC services,[17] a comparative analysis of HEI experts' and SAs' views on the actual implementation of DC services in the partner countries,[15] and a desk analysis aimed at collecting formally regulated measures from university DC regulations in the partner countries.

Recent evidence, including findings from the FIND-ME project, indicates that SAs' perceptions of available services are influenced not only by their actual quality but also by expectations shaped through exposure to conditions in other national contexts.[15] This suggests that even in countries with national legislation supporting DC, such as Spain, local implementation may fall short, leading to negative assessments from users. Also, HEI experts offered highly variable evaluations of the services provided at their institutions, pointing to a possible mismatch between formal (regulation-based) and informal (practice-based) provisions.[15] Despite these insights, a systematic and structured comparison of formal and informal practices across European Universities is still lacking. Most existing studies focus on subjective perceptions or national case studies without offering a shared analytical framework to evaluate the coherence and effectiveness of DC policies along comparable dimensions. This gap hinders the formulation of operational recommendations and limits progress toward shared standards and common tools at the European level.

In light of these critical issues, the present study aims to systematically examine the implementation of DC services across the universities participating in the FIND-ME project, distinguishing between formal measures, grounded in institutional regulations and policies for DC, and informal practices based on operational customs, basic support services, and unregulated initiatives. Thus, in the present study, we distinguish between formal DC measures as those explicitly codified in institutional DC regulations and non-formal measures, referring to services that are implemented in practice but not included in DC-specific regulatory documents. Such non-formal measures may include (a) genuinely ad hoc or case-by-case solutions, or (b) general student services available to the wider student population but not explicitly framed as DC support. Through a mixed-methods approach combining desk analysis of DC regulations and a quantitative survey administered to HEI experts from partner countries, this study seeks to provide a comparative overview of the degree of formalization in five key DC areas: logistical support, assistance/tutoring, curricular requirements, social support, and financial support.

The objective is twofold: first, to offer empirical data for understanding the institutional and cultural dynamics that drive the prevalence of formal or informal measures in different contexts; and second, to contribute to the development of a reference framework aimed at establishing minimum European standards for the promotion of fair, transparent, and effective DC pathways. Ultimately, the study's findings will feed into the content and operational recommendations that will form the foundation of the FIND-ME digital platform, with the overarching goal of improving accessibility and the quality of DC services in European HEIs.

Materials and methods

Study design and ethical approval

This study is part of the FIND ME research phase and was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Ethics Board of Universidad Internacional de La Rioja (Code: PI062/2024). The methodological approach was based on two complementary activities: i) a desk analysis of official university regulations concerning DC provisions; and (ii) a survey administered to HEI experts on the actual implementation of DC services within their institutions. The five partner countries included in this study (Italy, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia, and Spain) correspond to the higher education institutions of the FIND-ME Erasmus+Sport consortium (grant agreement No. 101134043). Partner selection took place during the project's proposal phase and was based on established institutional expertise in dual career research and provision, rather than on a representative sampling procedure. Based on the national governance typology described by Aquilina and Henry,[14] ranging from state-centric regulation to largely informal or fragmented systems, this selection was expected to capture, and indeed captures, meaningful heterogeneity in the degree of institutional formalisation of DC support across the five domains examined.

Desk analysis of university regulations

A structured desk search was carried out to collect and analyse the official DC regulations and/or programmes from HEIs located in the FIND ME partner countries. The documents were collected by FIND ME project partners in their respective countries through structured searches on university websites, as well as via the EAS network and personal contacts. The regulations were collected in their original language and translated into English by project partners from their respective language. To be included in the analysis, a regulation had to meet three eligibility criteria: (i) it had to be an official document issued by the institution itself, (ii) it had to be in force at the time of data collection, and (iii) it had to specifically

address dual career/student-athlete provisions, as opposed to general national legislation. Each retrieved regulation was read in full, and every identified provision was classified into one of the five thematic areas adopted throughout the study (logistic support, assistance/tutorship, curricular requirements, social support, and financial support), consistent with the classification scheme used in the HEI experts questionnaire. As with the survey instrument, the analysis was restricted to these five domains to ensure comparability between regulations and expert reports.

Survey to HEI experts

A 31-item questionnaire was developed and administered online to HEI experts responsible for DC programmes.[18] The instrument was adapted from a tool developed by the ERASMUS+ Sport project "More than Gold" and focused on both institutional context and the five thematic areas of dual career support, provision, and policy.[6,16,19] The first section of the questionnaire (13 questions) collected background information about the respondent's HEI, including country, academic departments, degree levels offered (bachelor's, master's, PhD), and the respondent's role in DC coordination (e.g., tutor, academic advisor, consultant, or other). The second section (18 questions) evaluated the availability (frequency of occurrence) and implementation status of services across the six DC areas using a 5-point Likert scale for availability and quality (1 = non-existent to 5 = excellent) and implementation stage (1 = not planned to 5 = already ongoing). The six thematic areas included: logistic support, referring to logistics and facilities such as access to both sports and academic infrastructures and housing options; assistance and tutorship, covering all types of support aimed at meeting the needs of SAs, including tutoring and psychological services; curriculum requirements, which relate to the modalities of course delivery and examinations, such as distance learning, personalized study plans, ECTS recognition, and similar strategies; social support, involving initiatives that promote and acknowledge the efforts and achievements of SAs, including seminars, public awareness campaigns, and recognition programs; financial support, which includes scholarships, tuition waivers, and other financial aid schemes; and finally, other forms of support and policies addressing broader elements such as the creation of DC observatories, national legislation, and specific enrolment quotas for athletes. Results related to the evaluation of dual career areas and components by HEI experts have been published elsewhere.[15] In the present manuscript, only the frequency of occurrence of DC services and practices is considered, for the purpose of comparison with university-level DC regulations. The area concerning other forms of support and policies is excluded from this analysis, as it encompasses elements not directly administered by universities (e.g., national DC legislation).

Recruitment

Eligible participants were identified via i) direct contact through FIND ME partners' national and European networks; ii) outreach via the EAS database of DC professionals; iii) institutional referrals to appropriate DC representatives. Eligible participants were defined as individuals serving as internal reference points for DC matters within their universities, including faculty members, researchers, or administrative personnel involved in DC support or policy implementation. Individuals without a formal or recognized role in DC initiatives were excluded to ensure that all respondents had direct responsibilities or practical experience related to DC provisions. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and informed consent was assumed upon completion of the online survey. The survey was active from March 25 to June 15, 2024, with reminders sent biweekly to optimize the response rate.

Sample characteristics

A total of 69 responses were collected through the HEI experts' questionnaire. The highest number of responses came from Italy (50.0%), followed by Romania (15.2%), Spain (13.0%), Serbia (8.7%), and Slovenia (4.3%). Twenty-six were excluded: one due to duplication, two submitted erroneously by SAs, 21 provided by university representatives who indicated that no DC policy was in place, and two submitted by respondents from countries outside of the partnership. Among the remaining 43 valid responses, the majority were submitted by HEI experts with DC responsibilities (65.2%), followed by DC tutors (15.2%), DC consultants (15.2%), and others in roles such as Olympic Committee Assistant, Sports Delegate, or members of institutional DC commissions (2.1%), and other (2.3%).

Data analysis

To facilitate the interpretation and comparison of the collected data, a standardized reporting framework was applied. Specifically, a list of services and provisions included in the official DC regulations of each institution, as well as those reported by HEI experts through the FIND ME questionnaire was compiled and categorized across five thematic areas by each partner country. Each aspect was coded to denote its implementation status: i) Not existent: the university does not consider or provide the service; ii) Informal implementation: the service is not formally included in DC regulations but was reported by HEI experts as being provided. This coding, however, does not allow us to distinguish whether the service is (a) a DC-specific but non-regulated practice implemented through ad hoc arrangements, or (b) a general institutional service available to all students independently of DC status. Because this distinction cannot be inferred from the available data, both situations were coded as "informal"; iii) Formal implementation: the service is officially documented in the institution's DC regulation. Finally, the percentage occurrence of each aspect in its formal or informal form was calculated for each country.

All institutional regulations used in this analysis and detailed coded aspects for each university will serve as a foundational input for the development of the FIND ME digital platform, aimed at helping SAs identify suitable academic pathways according to their DC needs.

Results

General overview

The data collected through desk analysis and the HEI expert survey across the five FIND ME partner countries revealed substantial variability in the implementation of DC practices. The 43 valid survey responses were analysed and complemented by 30 institutional DC regulations (Table 1). No regulations were retrieved from Romania and Serbia. Romanian universities rely exclusively on national legislation, the Physical Education and Sports Law No. 69 of April 28, 2000. In Serbia, internal frameworks have been established within the Faculties of Sport and Physical Education at the Universities of Niš, Belgrade, Novi Sad, and Novi Pazar. These faculties have adopted "Regulations on the Privileged Study Regime," which provide tailored academic accommodations for SAs and working students. The comparison between policy documents and expert reports enabled a classification of each practice as formally implemented, informally implemented, or absent. With the sole exception of financial support, which is largely absent, being neither formally regulated nor informally provided in nearly two thirds of the institutions, the findings indicate a widespread reliance on informal mechanisms across all countries and domains, with only limited alignment between institutional policies and the actual delivery of services. Because Italy accounts for the largest share of survey responses (50.0%; Table 1), the pooled percentages reported in Table 2 should be interpreted as a descriptive overview rather than as representative of each country equally; disaggregated results for each of the five domains and their components are reported separately by country in Figures 1–10, allowing between-country comparisons independent of the relative weight of each national sample.

Logistic support

Logistic support practices were predominantly implemented informally across all partner countries. The analysis showed considerable cross-national variability, with informal implementation far outweighing formal regulation in most contexts (Figure 1).

Italy showed a higher reliance on informal mechanisms, with 76% of practices informally implemented, only 10% formally regulated, and 14% indicating its absence. Similarly, Spain displays a mixed pattern: 54% of respondents indicate informal implementation, 25% report a formal logistic support system, and 21% state that logistic support is not implemented. In Serbia, logistic support is largely informal (88%), with 12% of universities lacking any implementation,

Table 1. Number of questionnaires and regulations retrieved.

Country	Number of respondents	Number of regulations
Italy	22	22
Romania	7	0
Serbia	4	0
Slovenia	4	2
Spain	6	6
Total	43	30

Table 2. Frequency of occurrence of formally, non-formally and not implemented services for each core area.

Core area	Formally implemented (frequency of occurrence, %)	Informally implemented (frequency of occurrence, %)	Not implemented (frequency of occurrence, %)
Logistic support	7	86	9
Assistance/tutorship	28	46	26
Curricula requirements	25	39	36
Social support	0	64	36
Financial support	6	32	62

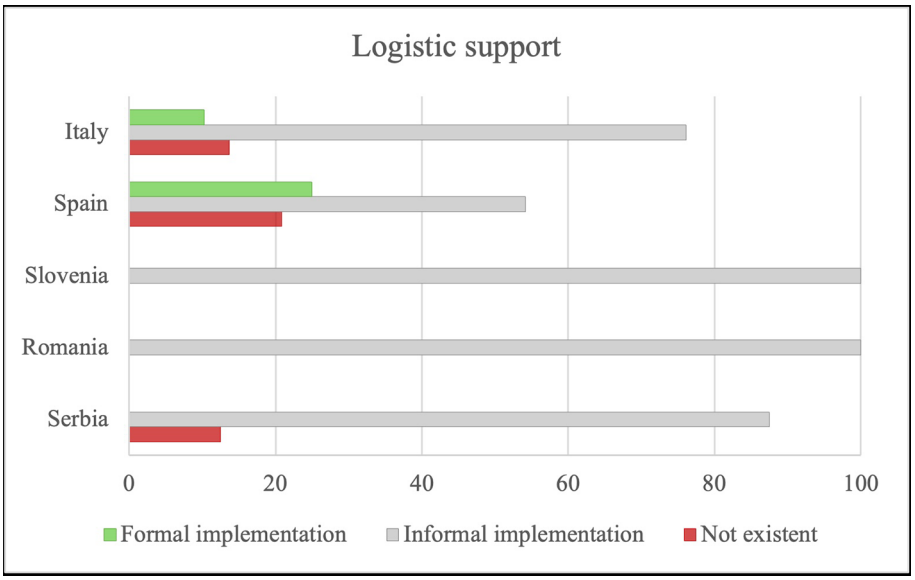

Figure 1. Percentage occurrence of logistic support in the different FIND-ME partner countries. Grey bars: services not included in institutional regulations; green bars services formally documented in DC regulations; red bars: the university does not consider or provide the service.

and none adopting a formalized approach. Both Romania and Slovenia presented a fully informal model, with 100% of logistic support practices reported as informal and none documented in official regulations. Despite the existence of a national law on sport and physical education (Law No. 69 of April 28, 2000) in Romania, individual universities do not adopt specific institutional regulations addressing the dual career of student-athletes.

Figure 2 shows the percentage occurrence of each logistic support component, distinguishing between practices that are formally implemented and included in institutional regulations, and those implemented informally without regulatory reference. In Italy, access to educational facilities is formally included in only one institutional regulation (5%), while the majority of respondents (91%) reported that SAs can rely on such access as part of existing practices. Sport facilities are highly represented in the university DC regulations (23%) or declared by HEI experts (73%). Three universities (14%) include in their DC regulations the support for accommodation facilities for SAs (Figure 2a). No institutional DC regulations were identified among the Romanian universities included in the present study. Nevertheless, all logistic support components were reported as implemented by respondents at their respective institutions (Figure 2b). Similarly, Serbian universities do not have institutional DC regulations in place. According to respondents, nearly all logistic support components were implemented (100%), with the exception of accommodation facilities, which showed a 50% implementation rate (Figure 2c). Regarding Slovenian universities, all logistic support components were in place informally (Figure 2d). Finally, in Spain, sports facilities are highly represented in the university DC regulations (100%). The remaining services were implemented informally, with 83% of universities providing access to educational facilities and economic investment in university facilities. Meanwhile, 50% provided accommodation facilities for SAs.

Assistance/tutorship

In Spain, assistance and tutorship practices were reported as 43% informal, 23% formal, and 34% of universities lacking tutorship. Italy demonstrated a higher reliance on informal mechanisms, with 52% of practices implemented informally, 30% formally regulated, and 18% indicating the absence of regulation. In Serbia, tutorship was implemented formally in 40% of organizations, informally in 35%, and absent in 25%. Romania showed a predominance of informal tutorship (54.3%), with 25.7% of organizations lacking it and 20% having a formal system. In Slovenia, 55% of assistance and tutoring practices were implemented informally, 25% were formally documented, and 20% had no tutoring (Figure 3).

Figure 4 presents the percentage occurrence of each assistance/tutorship component, differentiating between formally regulated practices and those implemented informally without institutional guidelines.

In Italy, assistance and tutorship practices were generally well represented. Only one university (5%) did not address tutorship or mentorship, while most institutions (68%) formally included this support in their DC regulations or reported its implementation informally (27%). Similarly, individualized programmes were either formally regulated (59%) or mentioned by respondents as implemented (32%), indicating a high level of diffusion. In contrast, the integration of

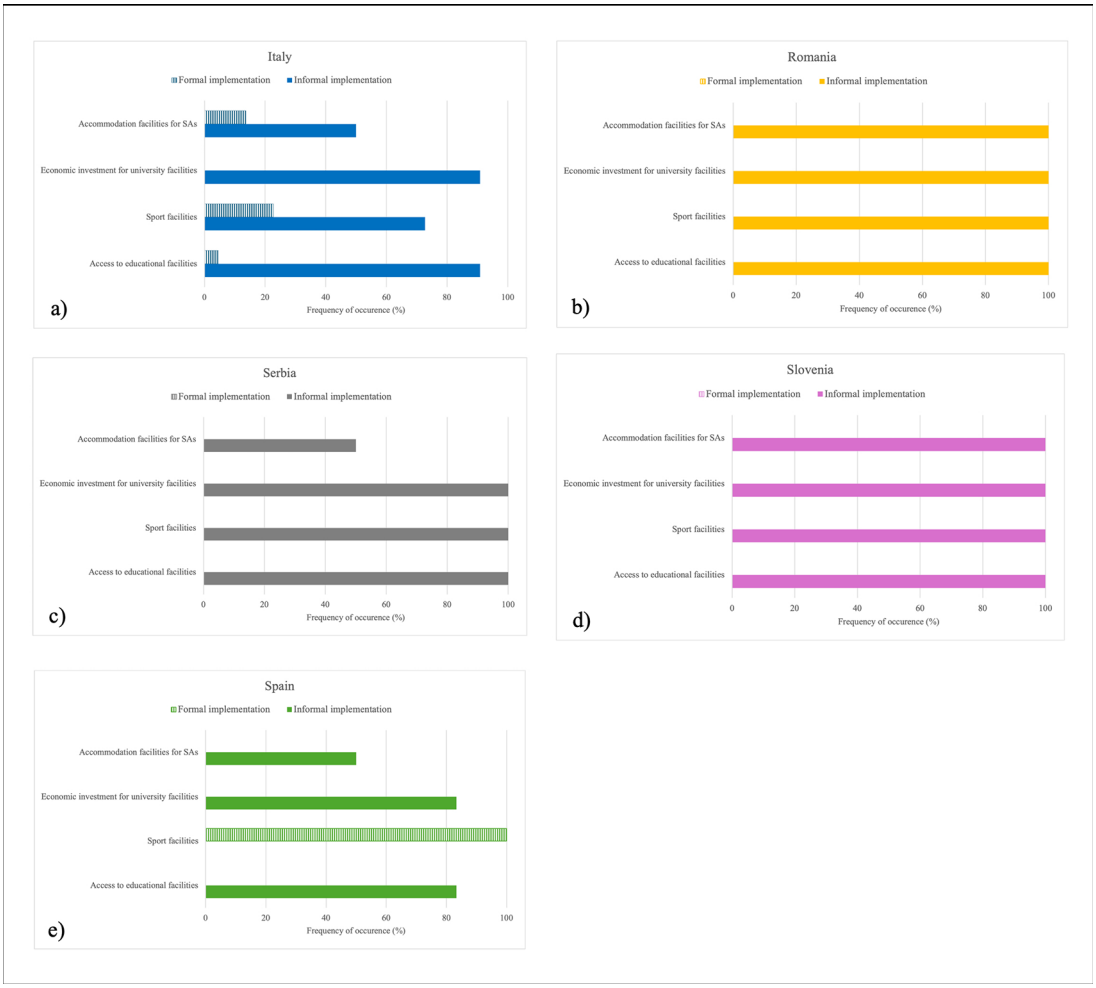

Figure 2. Percentage occurrence of each logistic support component in the different FIND-ME partner countries. Solid bars: services not included in institutional regulations; vertical striped bars: services formally documented in DC regulations. Panels show data for: (a) Italy, (b) Romania, (c) Serbia, (d) Slovenia, and (e) Spain.

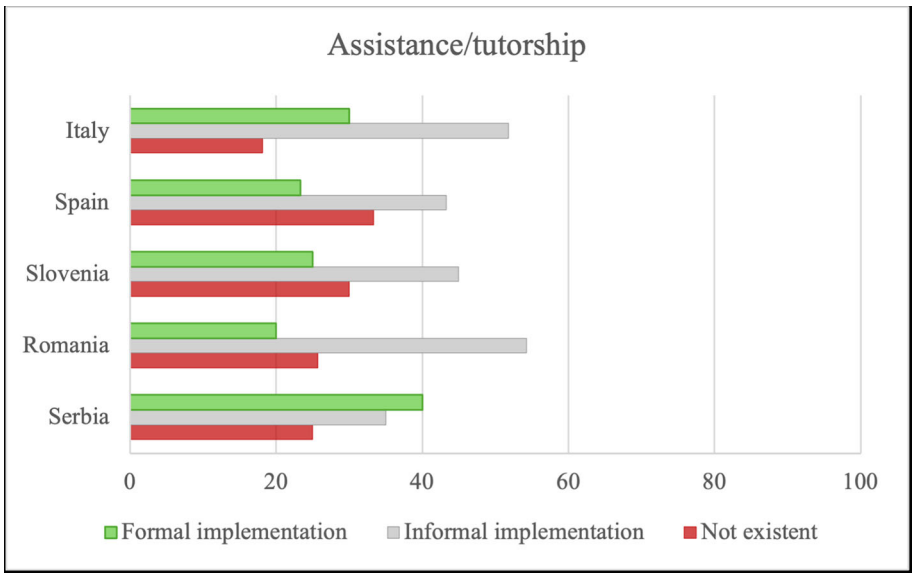

Figure 3. Percentage occurrence of assistance/tutorship in the different FIND-ME partner countries. Grey bars: services not included in institutional regulations; green bars services formally documented in DC regulations; red bars: the university does not consider or provide the service.

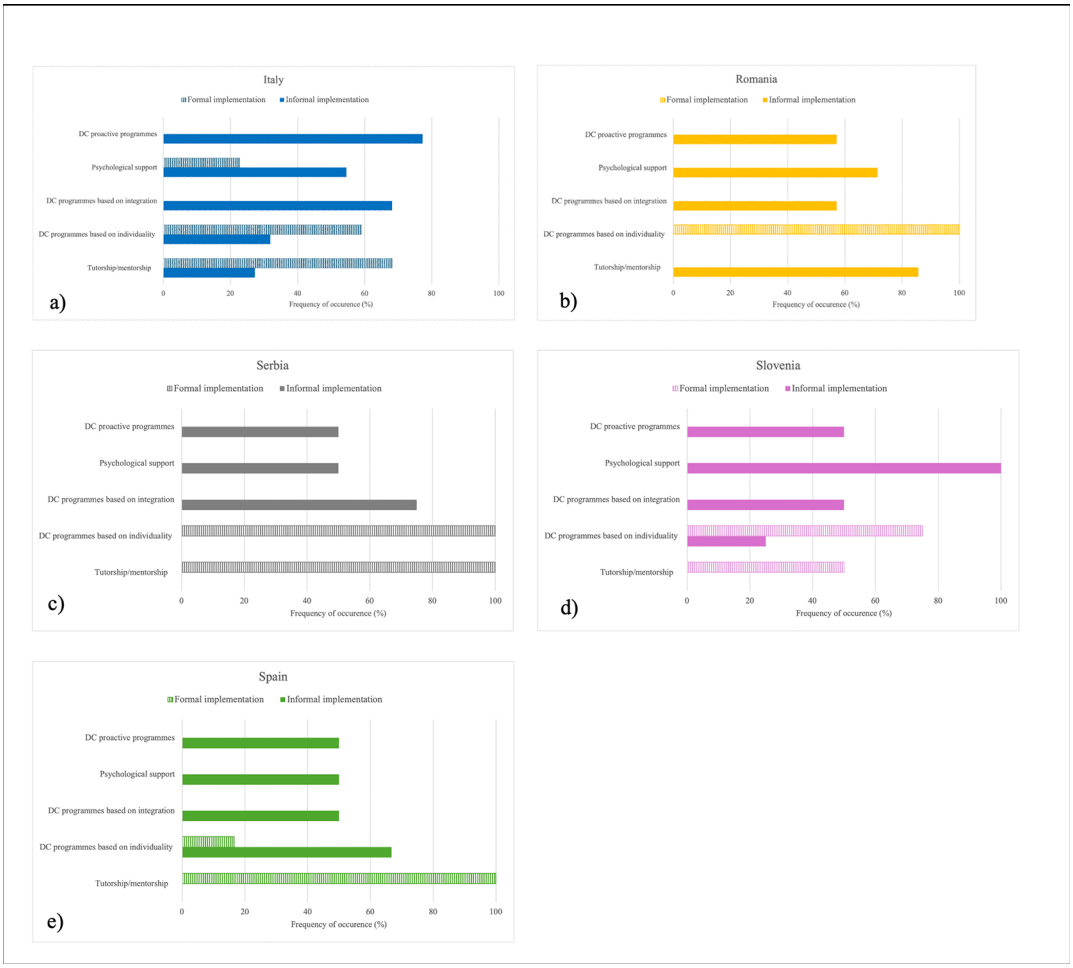

Figure 4. Percentage occurrence of each Assistance/tutorship component in the different FIND-ME partner countries. Solid bars: services not included in institutional regulations; vertical striped bars: services formally documented in DC regulations. Panels show data for: (a) Italy, (b) Romania, (c) Serbia, (d) Slovenia, and (e) Spain.

academic departments, sports, or professional services, and the implementation of proactive DC programmes were not included in any institutional regulations and were only cited by 32% and 23% of respondents, respectively. Psychological support appeared in the regulations of five universities (23%), was mentioned by 55% of respondents, and was completely absent in another 23% of cases. In Romania, six out of seven universities (86%) reported having implemented a tutorship system. Although individualized programmes were referenced in national legislation, they were not consistently implemented; two respondents (29%) indicated their absence. Integration with academic or professional services and proactive DC programmes were not covered in institutional documents but were reported by 57% of respondents. Psychological support was also implemented informally in 71% of universities. In Serbia, one out of four universities did not provide assistance or tutorship services. The remaining three institutions relied on internal regulations, specifically, the "Regulations on the Privileged Study Regime", which supported tutorship in 75% of cases and individualized programmes in 50%. Integration with academic departments or professional services was provided in 75% of institutions, albeit without formal regulatory reference. Psychological support and proactive programmes were each implemented informally in 50% of cases. In Slovenia, among the two responding universities, one formally included tutorship in its regulations, while the other did not provide this service. Individualized programmes were available at one institution but absent at the other, and neither university included them in formal documents. Psychological support was available in both cases but implemented informally. Proactive DC programmes were also informally implemented by one of the two institutions. In Spain, tutorship and mentorship were formally included in the DC regulations of all universities (100%). Individualized programmes were regulated in one institution, while 66% of universities provided them informally. The remaining services, integration of academic departments, sports or professional services, psychological support, and proactive dual career programmes, were not formally included in regulations but were each implemented informally by 50% of institutions.

Curricula requirements

Curricula requirements exhibited a generally limited degree of formalization across the partner countries (Figure 5). In Spain, 42% of practices were formally regulated, 29% were implemented informally, and another 29% indicated the absence of structured curricula. Italy showed a comparable distribution, with formal and informal implementations equally represented (33% each) and 34% reporting no curricular structure. In Serbia, curricular implementation was predominantly informal (56%), with 44% of organizations reporting no curricula and no evidence of formal regulation. Romania reported 39% informal, 25% formal, and 36% non-existent curricula, while Slovenia exhibited a similar pattern, with 38% informal implementation, 25% formal inclusion in university documentation, and 38% indicating no structured curricula.

Figure 6 displays the percentage occurrence of each curricula requirements component, separating formally institutionalized practices from those applied informally without regulatory backing. In Italy, all universities addressed individualized study plans, with 86% formally including them in DC regulations and an additional 14% reported through respondents. By contrast, untraditional learning strategies were absent in 68% of university regulations and were mentioned by only 32% of respondents. Distance learning and the recognition of ECTS for sport careers were included in 18% and 27% of university regulations, respectively, and were reported as implemented by 50% and 32% of respondents. In Romania, individual study plans were indirectly supported through national legislation, which allowed exemptions from attendance and flexible exam scheduling. Distance learning was implemented in 86% of universities, while the recognition of ECTS for sports careers was present in 57%. Untraditional learning strategies were reported by only one respondent (14%). In Serbia, no universities implemented formal individualized study plans, although the "Regulations on the Privileged Study Regime" provided some flexibility for SAs. Distance learning was implemented in 50% of the institutions. All universities reportedly offered recognition of ECTS for the sports career and untraditional learning strategies, even if not formally regulated. In Slovenia, all universities formally included individualized study plans in their regulations. Distance learning was implemented informally, without regulatory inclusion. Untraditional learning strategies were offered by one university only. None of the institutions provided recognition of ECTS for sports careers. In Spain, most curricula requirements were regulated, with the exception of untraditional learning strategies. Nearly all universities regulated distance learning, with one institution providing it informally. However, two universities did not implement it despite its inclusion in official documents. Half of the universities included individualized study plans in their regulations, while others implemented them informally. Recognition of ECTS for sports careers was present in two regulations, but was confirmed as implemented by only one respondent. Additionally, two universities offered this support informally. Untraditional learning strategies were provided informally by two universities (33%), without formal documentation.

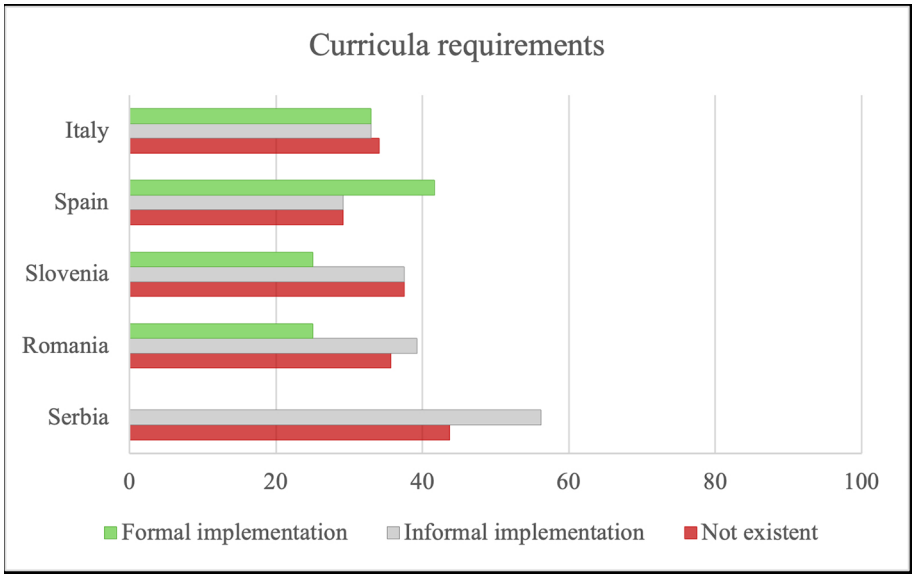

Figure 5. Percentage occurrence of curricula requirements in the different FIND-ME partner countries. Grey bars: services not included in institutional regulations; green bars services formally documented in DC regulations; red bars: the university does not consider or provide the service.

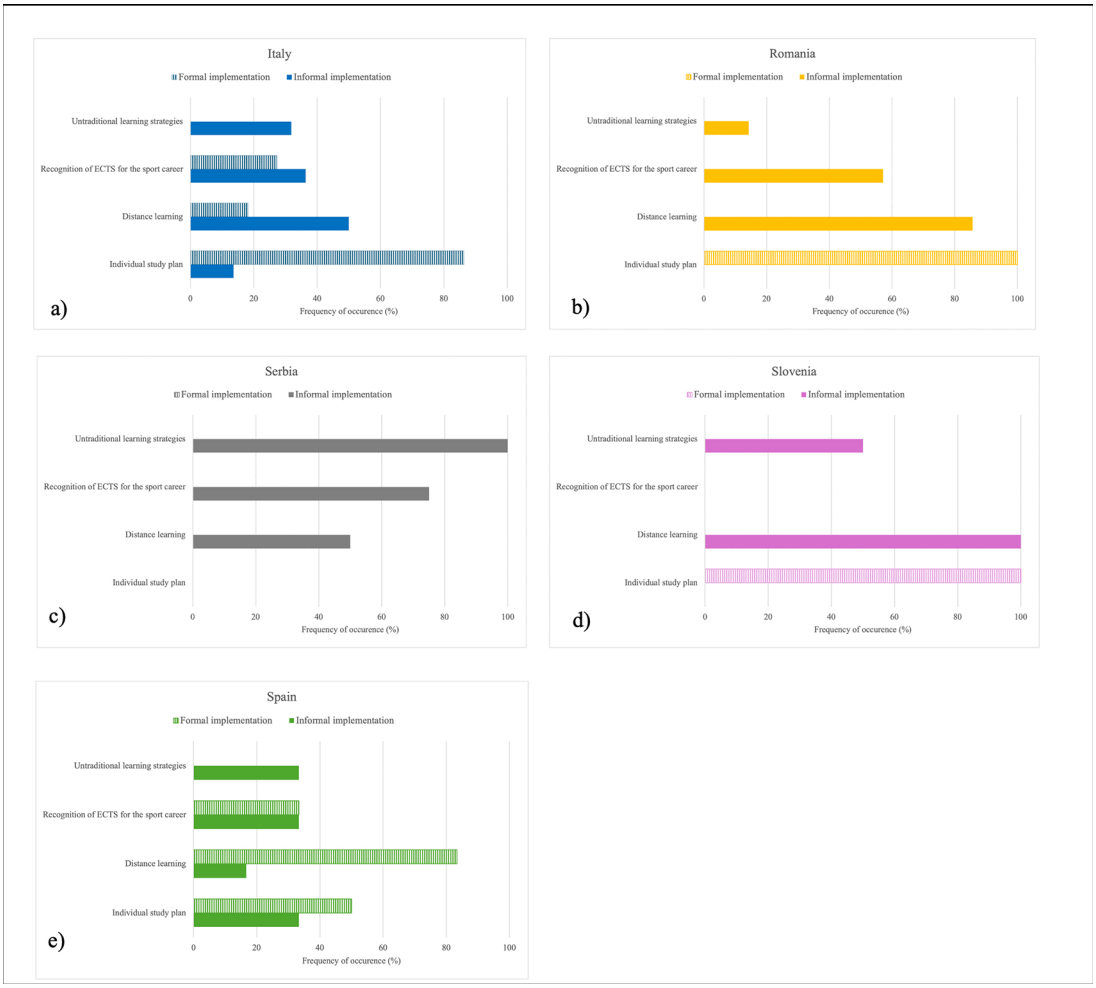

Figure 6. Percentage occurrence of each curricula requirements component in the different FIND-ME partner countries. Solid bars: services not included in institutional regulations; vertical striped bars: services formally documented in DC regulations. Panels show data for: (a) Italy, (b) Romania, (c) Serbia, (d) Slovenia, and (e) Spain.

Social support

Social support practices were predominantly implemented informally across the partner countries (Figure 7). In Italy, 64% of organizations reported informal implementation, only 2% had formally regulated systems, and 34% indicated the absence of social support. Spain, in contrast, showed an equal distribution between informal implementation (50%) and complete absence of support (50%), with no formal systems reported. In Serbia, social support was implemented informally in 75% of organizations, while 25% reported no such practices. Romania displayed a similar pattern, with 71% informal implementation and 29% absence. Slovenia reported slightly lower levels of informal implementation (58%) and higher absence (42%).

Figure 8 shows the percentage occurrence of each social support component, distinguishing between practices that are formally implemented and included in institutional regulations, and those implemented informally without regulatory reference. In Italy, 14% of universities formally included publicity for SAs representing the institution in their DC regulations, with an additional 73% reporting this support informally through respondents. Publicity of SAs' profiles for the labor market was reported by 59% of respondents, although it is not included in any regulations. Local or international seminars, workshops, and meetings on DC issues were also not formally documented but were reported informally by 68% of respondents. Institutional DC committees, peer-to-peer support, and seminars with parents and coaches were likewise absent from regulations but were reported as implemented by 64%, 59%, and 41% of respondents, respectively. In Romania, all universities offered publicity for SAs representing the institution, despite the absence of a legal mandate. Local and international seminars, workshops, and meetings were reported in 86% of universities. Institutional DC committees and peer-to-peer support were implemented in 71% of the sample. Publicity of SAs profiles for the labor

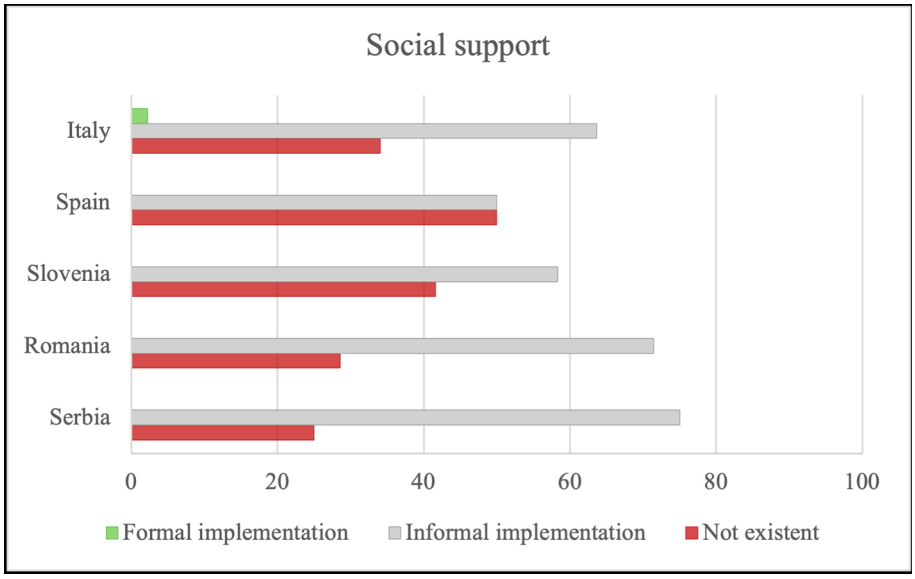

Figure 7. Percentage occurrence of social support in the different FIND-ME partner countries. Grey bars: services not included in institutional regulations; green bars services formally documented in DC regulations; red bars: the university does not consider or provide the service.

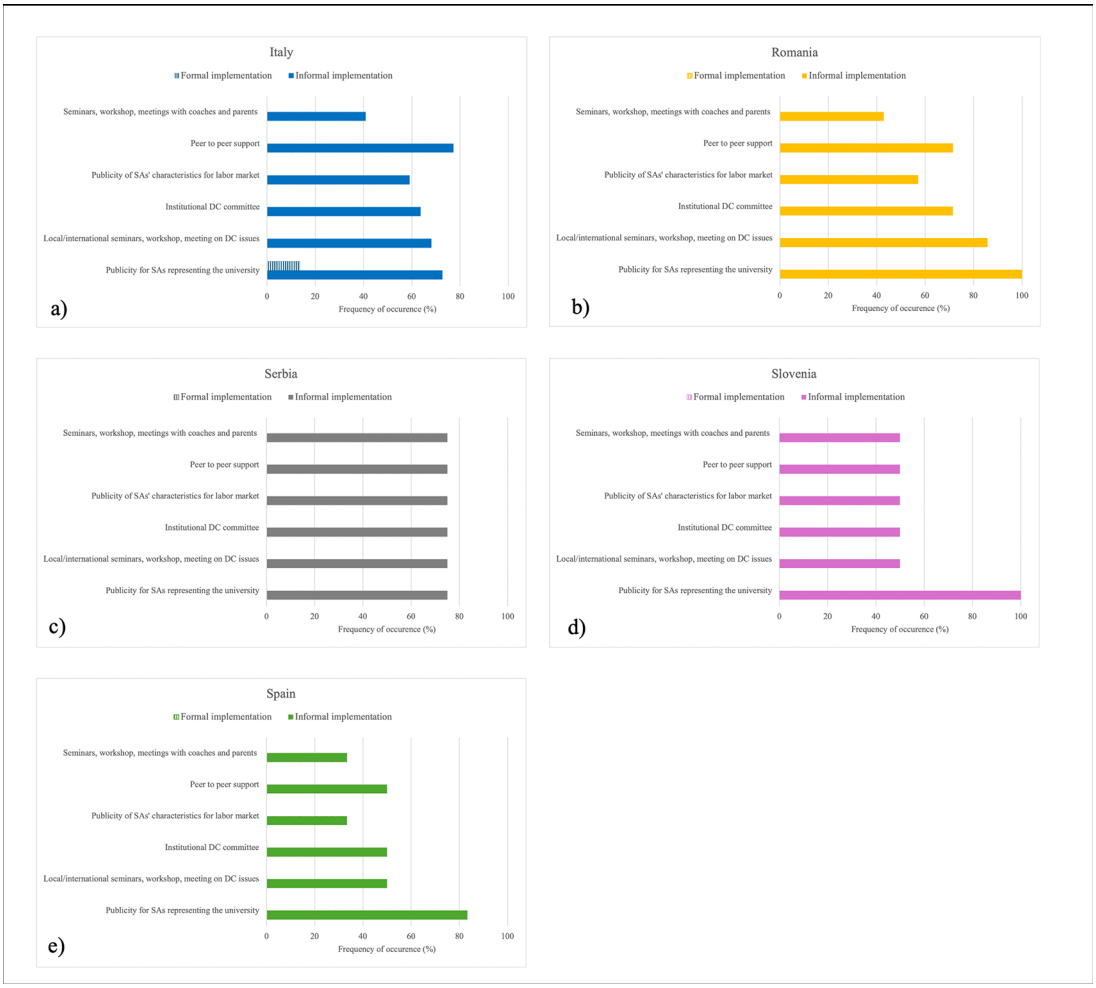

Figure 8. Percentage occurrence of each social support component in the different FIND-ME partner countries. Solid bars: services not included in institutional regulations; vertical striped bars: services formally documented in DC regulations. Panels show data for: (a) Italy, (b) Romania, (c) Serbia, (d) Slovenia, and (e) Spain.

market was present in 57% of cases, while seminars and meetings involving parents and coaches were implemented in 43% of universities. In Serbia, one out of four universities did not provide any form of social support. Among the remaining institutions, social support was offered in various forms, although not formally documented in the "Regulations on the Privileged Study Regime" adopted by the Faculties of Sport and Physical Education. In Slovenia, both universities participating in the survey provided publicity for SAs, but none of the other social support measures were reported as regulated. Other forms of support, such as peer activities, seminars, and committee involvement, were only mentioned informally by respondents and varied widely in implementation. In Spain, several social support services were available but not formally regulated. Publicity for SAs representing the institution was present in five out of six universities (83%). Half of the universities provided local/international seminars, peer-to-peer support, and institutional committees. Two out of six institutions offered support related to publicity for the labor market and events with parents and coaches, all implemented informally (33%).

Financial support

Financial support emerged as the least formalized area across all partner countries (Figure 9). In Italy, 56% of organizations reported no financial support, 24% provided it informally, and 20% had formalized financial support structures. Spain showed a similar pattern, with 67% reporting absence of financial support, 25% informal implementation, and 8% formal systems. Serbia reported 69% informal implementation with no formal inclusion, while 31% reported the absence of formal inclusion. Romania showed that 68% of organizations lacked financial support, while only 32% had informal systems. Slovenia presented the highest rate of absence, with 88% of organizations reporting no financial support, 13% providing informal support, and none offering formalized support.

Figure 10 reports the percentage occurrence of each financial support component, differentiating between formal implementations governed by institutional rules and informal implementations without formal regulation. In Italy, Scholarships were formally regulated in 36% of cases, and implemented informally in 23%. The remission of tuition fees showed an equal proportion of formal and informal implementation (36% each), while 27% of universities reported no such provision. Other forms of financial support were mostly absent (64%), with 27% informal and only 9% formally implemented. Regarding salary-based support, the absence of structured mechanisms was almost total (91%), with 9% of cases informally implemented and no formal inclusion reported.

In Romania, none of the universities offered salaries for SAs. Other types of financial support were available in 29% of institutions. Tuition fee waivers were reported by 57% of universities, while scholarships were offered by 43%. In Serbia, salaries for SAs were reported across all universities, despite not being mentioned in institutional regulations. Other financial support was provided by 75% of the institutions, and tuition fee waivers were offered by two universities. No financial provisions were included in the "Regulations on the Privileged Study Regime." In Slovenia, only one university

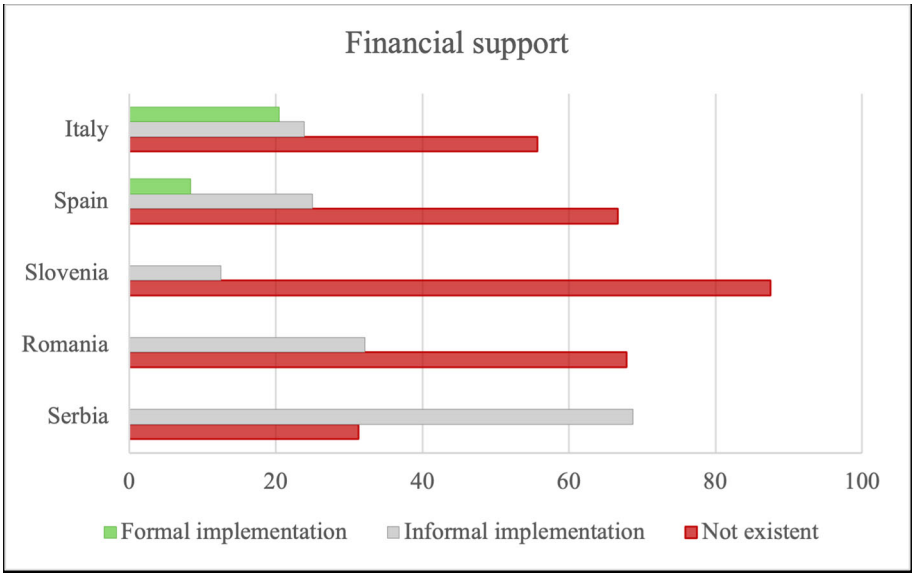

Figure 9. Percentage occurrence of financial support in the different FIND-ME partner countries. Grey bars: services not included in institutional regulations; green bars services formally documented in DC regulations; red bars: the university does not consider or provide the service.



Figure 10. Percentage distribution of the financial support components across the FIND-ME partner countries. Solid bars represent services not included in institutional regulations, while vertical striped bars: represent services formally documented in DC regulations. Panels show data for: (a) Italy, (b) Romania, (c) Serbia, (d) Slovenia, and (e) Spain.

offered alternative financial support, and no form of financial aid was mentioned in any of the DC regulations. In Spain, scholarships were divided equally between absence (50%) and informal implementation (50%), with no formal regulation reported. The remission of tuition fees was mainly absent (67%), while 33% of cases were informally implemented. Other forms of financial support showed a more balanced distribution, with 50% of cases reporting no provision, 17% informal implementation, and 33% formal inclusion. Finally, salary-based support was completely absent across all institutions.

Discussion

This comparative desk analysis assessed how DC support for SAs is structured and delivered, formally and informally, across five European contexts. By identifying discrepancies between formal regulations and actual provision, our study informs about the consistency, transparency, and completeness of support systems across HEIs.

Notable differences in regulatory frameworks and the availability of institutional data emerged: some countries and universities lack formal policies altogether, which complicated the evaluation. Slovenia and Spain demonstrated relatively well-developed regulatory transparency and structure, whereas Romania and Serbia showed significant gaps in both policy presence and implementation. Italy occupies an intermediate position with certain services codified in formal regulations, but many others being provided through informal channels. This finding is not unexpected, as DC governance is managed at the national level in Europe, with EU providing only non-directive guidelines in the areas of education and sport. Despite progress made in recent years, a certain degree of fragmentation persists, with some

countries regulating DC centrally through national legislation, whereas others adopting diverse implementation approaches.[14] Aquilina and Henry[14] classified EU Member States along a typology ranging from state-centric regulation, where government legislation places direct responsibilities on HEIs (e.g., Spain), to a 'laissez-faire' model with no formal structures (e.g., Italy and Slovenia, as of 2010). Our findings are broadly consistent with this range: Spain retains the most formalised framework among the countries studied, Italy and Slovenia show only partial, institution-driven formalisation, and Romania and Serbia remain the most fragmented, reflecting their reliance on general national legislation or lack of HEI-specific mandates. For instance, Romania relies on a general law on sport but lacks specific DC legislation, which limits incentives for universities to develop dedicated institutional regulations. Comparisons at the country level are constrained by uneven response rates, particularly where only a handful of institutions participated according to the limited number of national HEIs (e.g., Slovenia) and paucity of responses (e.g., Serbia). Nevertheless, the overall trend seems to be clear: across countries, the proportion of DC measures formally documented in institutional regulations represents only a small part of the overall support landscape. Most of the services reported by HEI experts fall outside DC-specific regulations and these may correspond either to general student services accessible to the whole student population or to DC-related accommodations provided on an ad hoc basis. In Slovenia and Spain, formal frameworks exist for most logistical and academic supports, such as tutoring, facility access, ECTS recognition, indicating institutional commitment. However, even in Spain, some services like financial aid remain largely poorly implemented. This suggests that national law does not guarantee complete implementation, likely due to institutional resource constraints or limitations in dissemination and awareness.[15] Italy reflects a transitional model: only a limited subset of DC-related measures is formally documented, while most support mechanisms reported by HEI experts likely derive either from general student services or from accommodations implemented without specific DC regulation. This pattern suggests institutional adaptability but also highlights a gap in DC-specific formalisation. From the perspective of SAs, adaptability is not merely desirable but essential for effective DC support. As highlighted in the "More than Gold" focus group study,[16] SAs expressed a clear preference for programmes that accommodate fluctuating academic and athletic demands. They also emphasized the value of Proactive DC programmes, where institutions anticipate student needs, and Integrated DC programmes, in which academic, athletic, and administrative services are coordinated within a unified framework.[20] Whilst the use of non-formalised measures for SAs may reflect institutional responsiveness to their needs, as well as the presence of well-established general student support systems, the lack of DC-specific formalisation can hinder consistency and accessibility across institutions and limit appropriate quality assurance and monitoring. In this regard, the capacity for formal implementation may vary significantly among HEIs due to socioeconomic and structural factors. In a recent study, experts rated as highly implementable, whereas poorly implementable were considered aspects requiring financial or infrastructural constraints, particularly in the areas of financial and logistical support.[6] This may be attributed to their reliance more on institutional coordination and commitment than on formal regulatory or financial investments. In Romania and Serbia, the absence of national DC frameworks results in a heavily fragmented system. Romania relies on general national legislation on sport, which does not translate into detailed institutional implementations for DC, leaving support mechanisms inconsistent. Serbia does benefit from internal policies like the "Privileged Study Regime," but these remain limited to certain faculties rather than applied across the higher education system.

When universities move from informal accommodations to more rigid, formal policies we must consider that administrative barriers may become particularly salient: faculty-level autonomy and institutional bureaucracy can slow or fragment this transition. Our own findings, together with prior work within the consortium, point to two complementary strategies for overcoming them: coordinated action at the national level, and the accelerating role of external stakeholders at the institutional level. As an example, in Italy, a broader and more structural process is under way: in 2024, an interministerial agreement was signed among the Ministry of Youth and Sport, the Ministry of Education and Merit, the Ministry of University and Research, and the Ministry of Social Affairs, marking the first coordinated government-level commitment to dual career spanning these portfolios. Building on this agreement, the Italian Conference of University Rectors (CRUI) has established a high-level working group dedicated to dual career, currently developing a framework for minimum dual career service standards to be adopted across Italian universities.[21] This marks a shift from the accumulation of isolated, institution-specific practices toward a coordinated, system-wide effort, directly addressing the fragmentation that faculty-level autonomy can produce. The second strategy is illustrated by our own consortium's prior work, which has shown how external stakeholders, such as local and national sport bodies, can act as accelerators toward the adoption of institutional regulations and services, helping to overcome bureaucratic inertia at the faculty level.[19] These national and local mechanisms are also consistent with the governance trajectory already discussed above[14]: Italy's shift away from a purely informal baseline reflects precisely this combination of national coordination and institutional initiative. Taken together, these national and local mechanisms indicate that overcoming the administrative barriers inherent to the transition from informal to formal DC policies requires both top-down coordination and bottom-up institutional engagement, rather than either approach alone.

When considered against the EU Guidelines on Dual Careers of Athletes,[1] our findings suggest only partial and uneven alignment across the five domains examined. Logistic support, tutoring, and curricular flexibility, areas explicitly addressed by the Guidelines through recommendations on flexible curricula, e-learning, and tutoring arrangements, show at least some degree of formalisation in most countries, particularly Spain and Slovenia. Financial support, which the Guidelines identify as a priority area through recommended reward mechanisms for educational institutions, is by contrast the least formalised domain across all countries studied. Social support, as defined in the present study, is not directly addressed by specific recommended actions within the Guidelines, which limits the possibility of a direct comparison for this domain. Because the Guidelines are non-binding recommendations rather than a mandate, their adoption across Member States is necessarily a gradual process. Encouragingly, the trajectory observed in our own comparative evidence points in the direction the Guidelines encourage: countries with a historically more informal DC governance model, such as Italy and Slovenia, already show partial, institution-driven formalisation in several domains, suggesting that, while progress remains uneven, it is moving in the right direction.

Some discrepancies between formal policies and respondents' perceptions cannot be excluded. Certain regulated services may have been poorly communicated or difficult to access, whereas several measures not explicitly framed as DC support likely remained unrecognized in official guidelines. This highlights the need not only for the formalization of DC services but also for clear communication, visibility, and user-friendly frameworks within universities. Although formal regulations provide essential structure, informal practices often compensate for systemic gaps, particularly in financially constrained or evolving contexts. To ensure consistency and continuity of support, institutional policies should be regularly reviewed and updated to reflect real-world practices and needs. Moreover, an effective system of monitoring and feedback, involving both student-athletes and institutional actors, is crucial to maintain adaptability and relevance. From this perspective, the development of the FIND-ME platform represents a significant step toward harmonizing DC services, offering a transparent and comparable database that can foster evidence-based standards and help SAs navigate their academic and athletic pathways more effectively.

This study also presented several limitations. As a desk-based comparative analysis, it relied on publicly available institutional and regulatory sources, which may not have captured unpublicized or informal initiatives within universities. Regarding Romania and Serbia specifically, the absence of institutional DC regulations does not reflect an incomplete search of available documentation: it was confirmed by the national FIND-ME partners with direct knowledge of these higher education systems. In Romania, DC provision is governed only by a general national sport law, which had not been translated into university-specific regulations by any institution in our sample. In Serbia, the 'Regulations on the Privileged Study Regime' constitute a document of shared practices adopted jointly across several Faculties of Sport and Physical Education, rather than an institution-specific regulation issued by each university. Additionally, the availability and completeness of institutional data varied across countries, which limited cross-national comparability. In certain contexts (e.g., Slovenia and Serbia), the small number of responding higher education institutions may have reduced the representativeness of national findings. Furthermore, results cannot be generalized to the entire European context due to structural, legislative, and cultural heterogeneity across higher education systems. A further limitation concerns the interpretation of "informal" implementation. In our coding system, the label reflects the absence of explicit DC regulation rather than the absence of structured services. Many services classified as informal may correspond to general student support measures available to the whole student population but not explicitly framed as DC provisions. Conversely, some may represent DC-specific accommodations delivered on a case-by-case basis. Because the available data do not allow these scenarios to be distinguished, the prevalence of informal implementation should be interpreted with caution. Despite these limitations, the study provided valuable insights into the current state of DC support across the partner countries. Most measures were implemented informally, with formal regulation differing substantially among nations. Italy, Spain, and Slovenia exhibited more structured frameworks, whereas Romania and Serbia presented fragmented systems with limited formalization. These findings carry practical implications for higher education institutions and policy-makers, who should enhance the alignment between formal policies and practice, improve the visibility of available services, and develop integrated, proactive DC programs that coordinate academic, athletic, and administrative support. Digital tools such as the FIND-ME platform can play a pivotal role in promoting transparency, benchmarking, and harmonization at the European level. Future research should extend comparative analyses to a broader range of countries and higher education institutions, adopting longitudinal and mixed-method approaches to trace the evolution of formal and informal practices over time and identify institutional drivers of change.

Conclusions

The findings of the present study confirm marked heterogeneity in DC implementation models across the five European countries examined, highlighting the gap between formal regulation and practical application. This analysis addresses the previously identified lack of systematic comparisons in the literature and provides an empirical foundation for the development of internal operational instruments for the FIND-ME project and its partner higher education institutions,

supporting the design of the FIND-ME platform as a tool to enhance transparency and coherence of DC services at the university level. The country-specific findings may also be of practical relevance to institutions in other European countries with similar national contexts, offered here as illustrative case examples rather than as statistically generalisable evidence.

Ethics and informed consent statement

The studies involving humans were approved by Ethics Board of Universidad Internacional de La Rioja, Code: PI062/2024. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study. Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data availability statement

Underlying data

Mendeley Data: Evaluation form of the Higher Education Institutes (HEI) status quo in Dual Career. DOI: 10.17632/zhptzksf8s.2.[18] This project contains the following underlying data:

- Dataset DC HEI.csv (anonymized dataset containing the variables used for the analyses reported in this study).

Extended data

Mendeley Data: Evaluation form of the Higher Education Institutes (HEI) status quo in Dual Career. DOI: 10.17632/zhptzksf8s.2.[18] This project contains the following extended data:

- Appendix A.pdf (questionnaire used for data collection).

Data are available under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) licence.

Acknowledgments

The authors are thankful to all the “FIND-ME: University Dual Career Opportunities” (FIND ME—101134043) consortium members who do not meet the authorship criteria for their contribution: Barbara Bazzanella, Marta Bon, Milovan Bratic, Aksel Ege, Ismael Nordli Elotmani, Ghiga Florentina-Livia, Niko Keyesen, Andrea Leoni, Zoran Milanović, Andrea Molinari, Viktorija Pečnikar Oblak, Kaja Poteko, Katjuša Radinovič.

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This research article makes a highly valuable conceptual contribution to the literature on dual careers in higher education. The concepts of “Formal Practices” and “Informal Practices” provide a straightforward analytical framework. This terminology facilitates the analysis of the gap between written regulations and operational realities at the university level.
I strongly recommend this research; however, the review results indicate that there remains methodological room for improvement that should be addressed. I propose two forms of improvement, while not excluding the possibility that the authors may have other relevant proposals.

1st Suggestion: Limitation of the Scope and Research Title
The authors should undertake the following methodological steps if they choose to retain the quantitative and qualitative data currently available from the five partner countries:

1. The authors should present a revised title that precisely reflects the sample used, for example: “A comparison of formal policies and practices for dual career implementation in five European countries.”
2. The authors should provide a methodological process for (why these countries were selected beyond their involvement as partners in the consortium programme). It would be highly beneficial to relate this selection to the factors underlying the findings concerning logistical support, assistance/tutoring, curricular requirements, social support, and financial support (reference: https://doi.org/10.1007/s40647-025-00450-7).
3. The authors should consider presenting dataset weighting or reporting the results separately through a country-by-country breakdown to prevent the dominant representation of data (>50%) from disproportionately influencing the aggregated group mean (reference: https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2021.2002382).
4. The authors should provide an in-depth discussion of the data limitations arising from the absence of official university regulatory documents in Romania and Serbia. (reference: https://doi.org/10.1007/s11159-025-10138-5).
5. The authors should adjust the claims in the conclusion so that they focus on operational

recommendations for the development of internal instruments for the FIND-ME project and its partner higher education institutions.

2nd Suggestion: Retaining the Title "dual career implementation in European universities"
The authors would need to undertake the following methodological steps if they choose to retain generalisations at the continental European level:

1. The authors should present methodological categorisation within the data collection method proportionally in order to substantiate claims concerning generalisation to "Universities in Europe", applying a cross-national study design capable of covering key regions across Europe (reference: https://doi.org/10.1186/s12887-024-05259-z).
2. As an implication, the authors should use random sampling techniques to ensure statistical representativeness of the population of higher education institutions in Europe.
3. As an implication, the authors should systematically collect official institutional regulatory documents from all newly added universities included in the sample.
4. The authors may classify dual-career implementation models according to the type of national sports legal framework and the level of university autonomy, based on the sample used. This could be presented in the form of a matrix or figure to simplify the discussion (reference: https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2025.2563171). If not presented in the current study, this could be proposed as a direction for future research.

Notes for Improvement Options 1 and 2:
(A). The authors have not yet provided a critical evaluation of the alignment between the findings and the "European Commission: EU Guidelines on Dual Careers of Athletes Recommended Policy Actions in Support of Dual Careers in High-Performance Sport" in order to assess the level of compliance with and harmonisation of higher education policies across Five European Countries/across European.
(B). The authors have not yet presented a systematic review process for the policy documents used, including the criteria applied and the findings obtained.
(C). The authors have effectively addressed the issue of language bias by stating that "The regulations were collected in their original language and translated into English by project partners from their respective language" acknowledging the partners' expertise. It would be highly beneficial to include this information within the literature review process.

To facilitate the improvement process, I recommend revisiting the "Improvement Space" based on the formulated mixed-methods research questions.

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6. Mendoza-Jiménez J, García-Rodriguez F, García-González C: International Student Mobility and Its Impact on Destination Countries. *Fudan Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences*. 2026; **19** (2): 277-302 Publisher Full Text

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it engage with the current literature?
Yes

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?
Partly

Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?
Partly

Are all the source data and materials underlying the results available?
Partly

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
Partly

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
Partly

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Reseach Methods; Management of Sports Education; Sports Coaching Management; Sports Governance and International Development

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.

Author Response 01 Oct 2026

Sofia Serafini

We thank Dr. Irfan Benizar Lesmana for his careful reading of our manuscript and for the detailed and constructive recommendations provided as well as for the options provided. We opted for the option 1 and each point is addressed below.
Point 1 (Title) The authors should present a revised title that precisely reflects the sample used, for example: “A comparison of formal policies and practices for dual career implementation in five European countries.
We thank the reviewer for raising this point. We agree that greater precision regarding the sample is warranted. Adding "insights from five European countries" as a subtitle allows us to better contextualise the nature of the data underlying the study, while preserving the broader European policy framing that motivates the work. We will therefore revise the title as follows: A comparison of formal policies and practices for dual career implementation in

European universities: insights from five European countries.

Point 2 (Country/partner selection and its relation to the findings) The authors should provide a methodological process for (why these countries were selected beyond their involvement as partners in the consortium programme). It would be highly beneficial to relate this selection to the factors underlying the findings concerning logistical support, assistance/tutoring, curricular requirements, social support, and financial support (reference: https://doi.org/10.1007/s40647-025-00450-7).
We thank the reviewer for this point. The five countries included in this study are not the result of a sampling procedure, but correspond to the official partner HEIs of the FIND-ME consortium, funded under the Erasmus+Sport Collaborative Partnership programme (grant agreement 101134043). Partner selection took place during the project's proposal phase and was based on established institutional expertise in dual career research and provision, prior collaboration among consortium members, and complementary geographic coverage within the partnership, as stated in the introduction. This selection also reflects a documented range of national DC governance models. Based on the typology described by Aquilina and Henry (14), ranging from state-centric regulation to largely informal or fragmented systems, we expected, and our findings confirm, meaningful heterogeneity in the degree of institutional formalisation of DC support across the five domains examined. We note that the specific reference suggested by the reviewer does not appear to directly address this point; we have relied instead on Aquilina and Henry (14), already cited in the manuscript. The following sentences have been added to the manuscript (Materials and methods, *Study Design and Ethical Approval*): The five partner countries included in this study (Italy, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia, and Spain) correspond to the higher education institutions of the FIND-ME Erasmus+Sport consortium (grant agreement 101134043). Partner selection took place during the project's proposal phase and was based on established institutional expertise in dual career research and provision, rather than on a representative sampling procedure. Based on the national governance typology described by Aquilina and Henry (14), ranging from state-centric regulation to largely informal or fragmented systems, this selection was expected to capture, and indeed captures, meaningful heterogeneity in the degree of institutional formalisation of DC support across the five domains examined. The following sentences have been added to the manuscript (Discussion): Aquilina and Henry (14) classified EU Member States along a typology ranging from state-centric regulation, where government legislation places direct responsibilities on HEIs (e.g., Spain), to a 'laissez-faire' model with no formal structures (e.g., Italy and Slovenia, as of 2010). Our findings are broadly consistent with this range: Spain retains the most formalised framework among the countries studied, Italy and Slovenia show only partial, institution-driven formalisation, and Romania and Serbia remain the most fragmented, reflecting their reliance on general national legislation or lack of HEI-specific mandates.

Point 3 (Weighting or country-by-country breakdown) The authors should consider presenting dataset weighting or reporting the results separately through a country-by-country breakdown to prevent the dominant representation of data (>50%) from disproportionately influencing the aggregated group mean (reference: https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2021.2002382).
We thank the reviewer for this suggestion. Of the two options proposed, we have opted for the country-by-country breakdown, which is already presented throughout the manuscript:

Figures 1, 3, 5, 7, and 9 report the percentage occurrence of formal, informal, and non-existent practices separately for each country and each of the five domains, and Figures 2, 4, 6, 8, and 10 further disaggregate these results by individual service component. Table 2 is provided in addition to these figures, as a pooled overview across all countries, and is not intended to substitute for the country-level comparisons. We agree that this relationship between the aggregated table and the disaggregated figures was not made explicit enough, and have clarified it in the text. The following sentence has been added to the manuscript (Results, *General Overview*, immediately before the Table 2 citation): Because Italy accounts for the largest share of survey responses (50.0%; Table 1), the pooled percentages reported in Table 2 should be interpreted as a descriptive overview rather than as representative of each country equally; disaggregated results for each of the five domains and their components are reported separately by country in Figures 1–10, allowing between-country comparisons independent of the relative weight of each national sample.

Point 4 (Data limitations from absence of official regulatory documents in Romania and Serbia) The authors should provide an in-depth discussion of the data limitations arising from the absence of official university regulatory documents in Romania and Serbia. (reference: https://doi.org/10.1007/s11159-025-10138-5).
We thank the reviewer for raising this point. We would like to clarify that the absence of official university-level DC regulations for Romania and Serbia does not reflect an incomplete desk search, but the actual state of institutional regulation in these two countries, as confirmed by the FIND-ME national partners with direct knowledge of their respective higher education systems. In Romania, DC provision is governed only at the national level by a general sport law, which has not been translated into university-specific DC regulations by any of the institutions in our sample. In Serbia, the "Regulations on the Privileged Study Regime" constitute a document of shared practices adopted jointly across several Faculties of Sport and Physical Education, rather than an institution-specific regulation issued by each individual university. We have expanded the Limitations section to make this distinction explicit. The following sentences have been added to the manuscript (Limitations): Regarding Romania and Serbia specifically, the absence of institutional DC regulations does not reflect an incomplete search of available documentation: it was confirmed by the national FIND-ME partners with direct knowledge of these higher education systems. In Romania, DC provision is governed only by a general national sport law, which had not been translated into university-specific regulations by any institution in our sample. In Serbia, the 'Regulations on the Privileged Study Regime' constitute a document of shared practices adopted jointly across several Faculties of Sport and Physical Education, rather than an institution-specific regulation issued by each university.

Point 5 (Adjusting claims in the Conclusion) The authors should adjust the claims in the conclusion so that they focus on operational recommendations for the development of internal instruments for the FIND-ME project and its partner higher education institutions.
We thank the reviewer for this suggestion and agree.
We have revised the Conclusion to focus primarily on the operational contribution of this study to the FIND-ME project's internal instruments and its partner HEIs, consistent with the revised scope of the manuscript (see our response to Point 1). The following text replaces the current Conclusions section: The findings of the present study confirm marked heterogeneity in DC implementation models across the five European countries examined,

highlighting the gap between formal regulation and practical application. This analysis addresses the previously identified lack of systematic comparisons in the literature and provides an empirical foundation for the development of internal operational instruments for the FIND-ME project and its partner higher education institutions, supporting the design of the FIND-ME platform as a tool to enhance transparency and coherence of DC services at the university level. The country-specific findings may also be of practical relevance to institutions in other European countries with similar national contexts, offered here as illustrative case examples rather than as statistically generalisable evidence. Note A The authors have not yet provided a critical evaluation of the alignment between the findings and the “European Commission: EU Guidelines on Dual Careers of Athletes Recommended Policy Actions in Support of Dual Careers in High-Performance Sport” in order to assess the level of compliance with and harmonisation of higher education policies across Five European Countries/across European. Thank you for this observation. We agree that the European landscape regarding dual career support remains fragmented across Member States, and this fragmentation is itself part of what our comparative approach aims to document. We would also note that the EU Guidelines on Dual Careers of Athletes (European Commission, 2012) do not provide specific recommendations addressing the social support domain, which may partly explain the heterogeneity observed in this area across our sample. More generally, as these are recommendations rather than binding requirements, their adoption across Member States is necessarily gradual; however, the trajectories observed in our case studies (see Discussion, e.g., Italy and Slovenia) indicate that implementation is moving in the right direction, even if unevenly across the five countries examined.

The following sentence has been added to the manuscript: *When considered against the EU Guidelines on Dual Careers of Athletes (1), our findings suggest only partial and uneven alignment across the five domains examined. Logistic support, tutoring, and curricular flexibility, areas explicitly addressed by the Guidelines through recommendations on flexible curricula, e-learning, and tutoring arrangements, show at least some degree of formalisation in most countries, particularly Spain and Slovenia. Financial support, which the Guidelines identify as a priority area through recommended reward mechanisms for educational institutions, is by contrast the least formalised domain across all countries studied. Social support, as defined in the present study, is not directly addressed by specific recommended actions within the Guidelines, which limits the possibility of a direct comparison for this domain. Because the Guidelines are non-binding recommendations rather than a mandate, their adoption across Member States is necessarily a gradual process. Encouragingly, the trajectory observed in our own comparative evidence points in the direction the Guidelines encourage: countries with a historically more informal DC governance model, such as Italy and Slovenia, already show partial, institution-driven formalisation in several domains (see above), suggesting that, while progress remains uneven, it is moving in the right direction.* Note B The authors have not yet presented a systematic review process for the policy documents used, including the criteria applied and the findings obtained.
Thank you for this observation. We agree that the desk-search methodology would benefit from further detail, and we have expanded the "Desk Analysis of University Regulations" subsection accordingly, specifying both the eligibility criteria applied and the process used to classify the content of the retrieved regulations. To be included, a document had to be (i) an official regulation issued by the institution itself, (ii) in force at the time of data collection, and (iii) specifically addressing dual career/student-athlete provisions at the institutional

level, as opposed to national legislation (which was instead recorded and reported separately, see Results). Each retrieved regulation was read in full, and every identified provision was classified into one of the five thematic areas used throughout the study, consistent with the classification scheme adopted in the HEI experts questionnaire. As with the survey instrument, the analysis was restricted to these five domains to ensure comparability between regulations and expert reports. The number of regulations retrieved for each country, including the absence of institutional-level regulations in Romania and Serbia, is already reported in the Results section (Table 1).

The following sentences have been added to the manuscript: *To be included in the analysis, a regulation had to meet three eligibility criteria: (i) it had to be an official document issued by the institution itself, (ii) it had to be in force at the time of data collection, and (iii) it had to specifically address dual career/student-athlete provisions, as opposed to general national legislation. Each retrieved regulation was read in full, and every identified provision was classified into one of the five thematic areas adopted throughout the study (logistic support, assistance/tutorship, curricular requirements, social support, and financial support), consistent with the classification scheme used in the HEI experts questionnaire. As with the survey instrument, the analysis was restricted to these five domains to ensure comparability between regulations and expert reports.* Note C The authors have effectively addressed the issue of language bias by stating that "The regulations were collected in their original language and translated into English by project partners from their respective language" acknowledging the partners' expertise. It would be highly beneficial to include this information within the literature review process.
Thank you for this positive feedback on our approach to language bias. We are glad to confirm that this information now sits within a more complete account of the desk-search methodology: as noted in our response to the previous point, the "Desk Analysis of University Regulations" subsection has been expanded to include the eligibility criteria applied to the regulations and the process used to classify their content, immediately followed by the existing statement on the collection and translation of regulations by project partners in their respective languages. Thank you for the final recommendation. The mixed-methods research questions underlying this study are already articulated in the Introduction and operationalised in the Materials and Methods section. We hope the point-by-point revisions detailed above collectively respond to the improvement areas raised throughout this review. Kind regards,
Sofia Serafini, on behalf of the co-authors

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Report 14 September 2026

https://doi.org/10.21956/openreseurope.26331.r80452

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Summary of the Article:

The manuscript investigates the current implementation of Dual Career (DC) policies for student-athletes across six European higher education institutions within the framework of the FIND-ME project. It accurately identifies a prominent gap in European sports management: the heavy reliance on informal, ad-hoc academic accommodations rather than formalized, codified institutional policies. The paper successfully introduces the FIND-ME digital repository and framework, which categorizes support into five essential domains: logistical, assistance/tutorship, curricula, social, and financial support.

Strengths of the Work:

High Policy Relevance: The study directly addresses European policy directives regarding athlete education and fills a crucial gap between high-level EU guidelines and ground-level university execution.

Robust Qualitative Framework: The comparative mapping across partner universities in Italy, Spain, Slovenia, Romania, and Serbia provides valuable multi-institutional perspectives.

Practical Application: The development of the FIND-ME digital platform serves as an evidence-based tool that directly translates empirical findings into actionable solutions for student-athletes and academic administrators.

Minor Weaknesses and Constructive Recommendations for Authors:
While the manuscript is scientifically sound, the authors are encouraged to consider the following minor enhancements to further elevate the paper's impact:

Platform Sustainability: The authors should briefly clarify the long-term maintenance and funding strategy for the FIND-ME repository after the initial project funding cycle concludes, ensuring its continued reliability for users.

Institutional Resistance & Implementation Barriers: It would be beneficial to add a short paragraph discussing potential administrative barriers (e.g., faculty autonomy, institutional bureaucracy) that universities might encounter when transitioning from informal

accommodations to rigid formal policies, alongside practical strategies to overcome them.

Clarification on Methodology Selection: A brief sentence explicitly stating the qualitative nature of the comparative mapping framework in the methods section would help prevent any ambiguity regarding data processing.

References

1. Kuettel A, Christensen M, Zysko J, Hansen J: A cross-cultural comparison of dual career environments for elite athletes in Switzerland, Denmark, and Poland. *International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*. 2020; **18** (4): 454-471 Publisher Full Text

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it engage with the current literature?
Yes

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?
Yes

Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?
Yes

Are all the source data and materials underlying the results available?
Yes

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
I cannot comment. A qualified statistician is required.

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Dual Career; Student-Athletes; Higher Education Institutions; Policy Implementation; Dual Career Policies; Institutional Regulations

We confirm that we have read this submission and believe that we have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.

Author Response 01 Oct 2026

Sofia Serafini

Dear reviewers, We thank Dr. Fauzan and Mr. Hildan for their careful reading of our manuscript and for the constructive recommendations provided. We address each point below.
1. Platform Sustainability Platform Sustainability: The authors should briefly clarify the long-term maintenance and funding strategy for the FIND-ME repository after the initial project funding cycle concludes, ensuring its continued reliability for users.

We thank the reviewer for highlighting the importance of the FIND-ME repository's long-term sustainability. The coordinating institution, the Faculty of Sport and Physical Education, University of Niš, proposes to support platform hosting and essential technical maintenance beyond the Erasmus+ funding period. This institutional support would provide continuity while the consortium seeks sponsorship from sports federations, sports institutions, and other organisations that could benefit from the platform's contribution to student-athletes' dual careers. Sponsorship is therefore envisaged as a complementary source of funding that could progressively support long-term operation, although such funding has not yet been secured. Alongside financial and technical sustainability, the proposed approach includes periodic verification of university information in cooperation with participating institutions to support the repository's continued reliability.

2. Institutional Resistance & Implementation Barriers Institutional Resistance & Implementation Barriers: It would be beneficial to add a short paragraph discussing potential administrative barriers (e.g., faculty autonomy, institutional bureaucracy) that universities might encounter when transitioning from informal accommodations to rigid formal policies, alongside practical strategies to overcome them.
This is a valuable suggestion. Our data already point to some of these barriers implicitly: institutional or national frameworks often exist on paper but translate unevenly into practice. For instance, in Serbia frameworks "remain limited to certain faculties rather than applied across the higher education system," while in Spain, despite national legislation, gaps persist "likely due to institutional resource constraints or limitations in dissemination and awareness." This suggests that faculty-level autonomy and resource constraints, rather than attitudinal resistance alone, are key barriers. Building on these patterns, and consistent with our own recommendation for regular policy review, extending faculty-level good practices across the wider institution through central coordination, alongside periodic monitoring involving both student-athletes and institutional actors, would represent a practical way to narrow the gap between regulation and practice. The following sentences were added to the discussion section: When universities move from informal accommodations to more rigid, formal policies we must consider that administrative barriers may become particularly salient: faculty-level autonomy and institutional bureaucracy can slow or fragment this transition. Our own findings, together with prior work within the consortium, point to two complementary strategies for overcoming them: coordinated action at the national level, and the accelerating role of external stakeholders at the institutional level. As an example, in Italy, a broader and more structural process is under way: in 2024, an interministerial agreement was signed among the Ministry of Youth and Sport, the Ministry of Education and Merit, the Ministry of University and Research, and the Ministry of Social Affairs, marking the first coordinated government-level commitment to dual career spanning these portfolios. Building on this agreement, the Italian Conference of University Rectors (CRUI) has established a high-level working group dedicated to dual career, currently developing a framework for minimum dual career service standards to be adopted across Italian universities (REF). This marks a shift from the accumulation of isolated, institution-specific practices toward a coordinated, system-wide effort, directly addressing the fragmentation that faculty-level autonomy can produce. The second strategy is illustrated by our own consortium's prior work, which has shown how external stakeholders, such as local and national sport bodies, can act as accelerators toward the adoption of institutional regulations and services, helping to overcome bureaucratic inertia

at the faculty level (Abelkalns et al., 2021, More than Gold - Methodology for Universities volume). These national and local mechanisms are also consistent with the governance trajectory already discussed above (Aquilina and Henry, ref. 14): Italy's shift away from a purely informal baseline reflects precisely this combination of national coordination and institutional initiative. Taken together, these national and local mechanisms indicate that overcoming the administrative barriers inherent to the transition from informal to formal DC policies requires both top-down coordination and bottom-up institutional engagement, rather than either approach alone.

3. Clarification on Methodology Selection Clarification on Methodology Selection: A brief sentence explicitly stating the qualitative nature of the comparative mapping framework in the methods section would help prevent any ambiguity regarding data processing.
We thank the reviewers for pointing this out. The comparative mapping framework is indeed qualitative in nature: it combines documentary/desk analysis of institutional regulations with descriptive survey data to map patterns of formal and informal DC provision across countries, rather than to test statistical associations between them. We will add an explicit sentence to this effect in the Materials and Methods section (Study design and ethical approval / Desk analysis of university regulations) in a revised version, to avoid any ambiguity regarding data processing. We are grateful for the reviewers' positive assessment of the manuscript and will ensure these clarifications are incorporated in due course, in line with the editorial team's recommendation to wait for additional reviewer reports before finalizing any revision. Kind regards,
Sofia Serafini, on behalf of the co-authors

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.