

Football Coaching, Academic Learning Time, and Student Success: Exploring the Experiences of University Student-Athletes in Ghana

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Abstract

Academic workload and competitiveness in sports have been issues of concern in higher education institutions around the world. Student-athletes at the university are expected to maintain demanding academic workloads along with rigorous training, competition and coaching demands. Football participation has been proven to contribute to personal development, leadership, teamwork, and physical health; however, there are concerns about its impact on academic learning time and student success in general. Even though the university football programs are growing in Ghana, there is a scarcity of empirical evidence to show the impact of football coaching demands on academic engagement and the learning experience of the student-athletes in inter-university competitions and/or talent development programs. The study examined the experiences of the university student-athletes with regard to their participation in football coaching, learning time and student success in some selected universities in Ghana. The study was guided by two theories, namely the Social Ecological Theory and Student Involvement Theory, and was a qualitative phenomenological design with a paradigm of interpretivist. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with student-footballers, football coaches, sports administrators and academic staff. Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the data. The findings indicated that football coaching positively impacted discipline, time management, resilience and social integration, but also encountered difficulties with missed lectures, deadlines for assignments, academic fatigue and limited study time during the competitive season. The flexible academic arrangements, mentoring, and coach-academic collaboration were identified as institutional support mechanisms that positively affected student success. The study suggests that the dual career support systems should be reinforced and the academic support systems put in place should be incorporated into the university sport programs.

Keywords: Football Coaching, Academic Learning Time, Student-Athletes, University Sports, Student Success, Ghana.

Introduction

Sport is now recognised as an integral part of the overall student experience in higher education and is increasingly a focus of attention in universities worldwide. Participating in organised sport contributes to students' physical health, psychological well-being, social integration, leadership development, teamwork, and transferable life skills (Eime et al.,

2013; Bull et al., 2020; Fletcher et al., 2022). Of these sports, football is one of the most popular and culturally relevant sports in universities around the world, and is also a sport that can be used to develop talent, define university identity and promote social mobility (Fletcher et al., 2022).

It is always a challenge to strike a balance between sport and study at a global higher education institution. Student-athletes must be in good academic standing and have rigorous training, competitive, recovery and travel schedules. Sports participation has been associated with psychosocial development, discipline and identity formation; however, intensive athletic commitments may create competing demands that reduce opportunities for academic engagement (Brewer et al., 1993; Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019). It's a complex academic-athletic identity that requires strong institutional support. Yet, in the last 10 years, University sports have seen a tremendous expansion in the African context, with many Universities now using sport to connect with their students, build youth and promote their university. African universities have various structural and resource challenges, which may include lack of academic flexibility, inadequate support services, and tensions between sports and academics, among others (Aquilina, 2013; Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019). This may be exacerbated during competition months where training and travel demands are greater and less time is available for academic learning and engagement. Balancing academic and athletic commitments remains a central challenge for student-athletes, requiring institutional support mechanisms that recognise dual career development pathways (Wylleman & Lavalée, 2004; Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019; Storm & Eske, 2022).

However, despite the growing importance of university football in Ghana, limited empirical research has examined how football coaching structures, training demands, and competition schedules influence academic learning time and student success among university student-athletes. Students involved in sports and extra-curricular activities may be asked to balance their activities with their schoolwork (lectures, assignments, and exams). Even though university football has become a big sport in Ghana, there are few empirical studies that examined the effects of the structure and demands of football coaching on the time spent on academic learning and success in the university environment. Previous research has mainly examined outcomes of involvement and achievement in sport, and less has examined what it is like to be a student-athlete in school. It is now well established that markers of student success are multiple and more complex than academic performance, and include factors such as retention, graduation, personal development, employment, and student well-being and health (Tinto, 2012). In this general outlook, it is important to consider the relationship between football coaching and the learning processes, and to develop effective institutional policies and support systems. This knowledge is particularly important in places like Ghana where the formal integration of academic and athletic is still not properly established.

Statemen of the Problem

As football entered the university arena becomes more professional, training has become more intensive, competition has become more demanding, travel has become heavier, and expectations of coaches have become more demanding for the student-athletes. Playing football has the potential to develop them physically, as leaders, as team players and as future workers, but is causing concern about the impact on learning time, in-class behaviour and student achievement.

Worldwide, many studies have investigated the association between sports involvement and academic performance (Storm & Eske, 2022; Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019). In North American, European, Australian and Asian research, quantitative methods like surveys, longitudinal studies, academic achievement analyses, and statistical modelling have been used to examine the impact of sports participation on grade point average, student retention, graduation rates, and student development. The results of these studies have been mixed, with some studies showing positive correlations between sports involvement and academic performance, and others pointing towards problems of time pressure and fatigue, as well as competing priorities.

The qualitative study approach has been used in a small number of studies in advanced economies to investigate student-athletes' experiences, but these studies have been conducted in educational systems, sports organisations, and socio-economic systems that are different from those of developing nations. Cultural norms, support networks, scholarships, coaching values, resources and so on are very different in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia compared to many African universities. Thus, the results of these contexts might not be directly transferable to higher education institutions in Ghana. Research on university student-athletes in Africa is limited, and mainly focused on participation, sport development, performance and athlete welfare, especially in Ghana. There is little information available on the effects of football coaching practices on the amount of learning time, study habits, classroom involvement and the overall sense of student success for university football players. Moreover, limited qualitative research documents lived experiences, challenges, coping and coping strategies, and sources of support used by student-athletes as they manage the competing demands of sport and education.

The lack of knowledge restricts universities, coaches and policymakers from creating evidence-based interventions to support the academic and athletic success of their students. Thus, the purpose of this study is to fill this void by examining the lived experiences of university student-athletes in Ghana about the experiences of the football coaches, learning time for academic coursework and the experience of student success. This research proposes to explore the lived experiences of student-athletes and provide context-specific qualitative evidence that will be compared to the literature found in other countries around the world, thus providing for the contribution of the study to the greater understanding of the impact of cultural, institutional and socio-economic factors on the experiences of student-athletes. The results will be used to guide the design of appropriate

support systems, coaching practices and academic policies that can be used to improve the overall development of university student-athletes in Ghana and other similar settings.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of university student-athletes regarding football coaching, academic learning time, and student success in Ghanaian universities.

Objectives are to:

1. Examine student-athletes' perceptions of football coaching and academic learning time.
2. Explore the challenges associated with balancing football coaching and academic responsibilities.
3. Identify factors that facilitate academic success among student-footballers.
4. Examine the perceived impact of football coaching on student success.

Research Questions

1. How do university student-athletes perceive football coaching in relation to academic learning time?
2. What challenges do student-athletes encounter in balancing football and academics?
3. What factors facilitate academic success among student-athletes?
4. How does football coaching influence student success?

Theoretical Framework

Social Ecological Theory

The Social Ecological Theory (SET) is a holistic theory that identifies various levels of influences impacting human behaviour. The theory was originally designed to account for health-related behaviours and assumes that behaviour is a result of the interplay between four levels of factors: individual, interpersonal, organisational, community and policy (McLeroy et al., 1988). The Social Ecological Theory explains that student-athlete experiences are shaped by multiple interacting levels, including individual characteristics, interpersonal relationships, organisational structures, community influences and policy environments (McLeroy et al., 1988; Sallis et al., 2015). The quality of academic learning time and student success is not solely dependent upon personal commitment or ability, as it is influenced by the nature of the coaching, relationships with peers, institutional support systems, and university policies on sport participation among student-athletes. The value of SET for this study is that it can help to make sense of the complex environment that student-athletes exist within. Coaching schedules, training requirements and load, competition demands, school rules and policies, and social support systems are factors that impact the time allocation of student-athletes between sport and academic activities. The theory is therefore appropriate with the aim of the study, which is an exploration of how

football coaching affects the time spent in learning and the successful learning of pupils. The study transcends the emphasis of individual-level explanations and acknowledges the structural and environmental influences on student-athletes' experiences through the adoption of SET.

Student Involvement Theory

Astin's Student Involvement Theory proposes that student learning and development are influenced by the amount of physical and psychological energy invested in educationally meaningful activities (Astin, 1999). For student-athletes, high involvement in sport may provide developmental benefits while simultaneously creating competition for academic time. The theory is that children would achieve better grades if they could interact with the learning environment, be involved in the activities of the institution, and do enough work in school. University student-athletes are involved in football training, competitions, team meetings and other sports beyond the classroom. Such involvement can develop leadership, discipline, teamwork and resilience, but intensive involvement in athletics can take away time available for academic learning. The theory is, therefore, quite helpful in understanding how student-athletes make sense of the competing demands and how differing levels of engagement and involvement with football and school affect one's perceptions of success. The theory is in direct support of the objective of the study, which was to examine the relationship between football coaching, academic learning time, and student outcomes.

The Social Ecological Theory and Student Involvement Theory offer complementary views to the experiences of university student-athletes. Student Involvement Theory is an approach that focuses on the importance of engagement and investment of time in determining academic outcomes while explaining the environmental and institutional factors that affect behaviour, as described in SET.

Empirical Review

Evidence from international literature suggests that student-athlete participation is associated with improved psychological well-being, social development and life skills acquisition (Eime et al., 2013; Fletcher et al., 2022). However, dual-career research indicates that intensive sport participation may generate academic pressures through increased training loads, travel requirements and competition schedules (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019; Storm & Eske, 2022). Research into the impacts of student-athletes' involvement in sports and their academic performance has increased worldwide. Overall, the North American, European, and Australian literature suggests that involvement in organised sport is consistently linked to positive outcomes for academic persistence, leadership, self-discipline, social integration, and psychological well-being (Miller et al., 2023). The research mentioned above indicates that structured sports programmes can have a positive impact on student development and promote life skills which can benefit academic achievement. But studies also suggest that a heavy training regimen, excessive travel, competition

demands and coaching pressures can also result in less time spent learning and academic pressures for student-athletes. Sports may be more competitive during certain times of the year, and athletes may face challenges to balance their academic demands with their athletic needs, which can lead to increased stress, fatigue, absences and less study time. These results underscore the twofold aspect of sports engagement: benefits and challenges. In the African context, emerging evidence suggests that student-athletes face difficulties managing educational and sporting demands due to limited institutional support mechanisms and challenges associated with balancing training, competition and academic responsibilities. However, compared with North America and Europe, research examining these experiences within African higher education remains limited (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019; Storm & Eske, 2022). These challenges highlight the need for universities to establish supportive environments that recognise both academic and athletic development. Research on dual careers shows that successful student-athlete development depends not only on individual motivation but also on institutional support structures that facilitate academic flexibility, career planning and athlete welfare (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019; Storm & Eske, 2022).

In developed countries, many universities offer a wide variety of support structures for athletes, which do not exist in Africa. In many African universities, the athletes have to deal with additional pressure because they don't have any structure to support them. Studies in Ghana indicate that playing football is a significant factor in personal growth, development of social capital, leadership development, and institutional representation. However, there is often conflict between schoolwork and football during student-athletes' competitive seasons. Ghanaian research studies on sports participation and the development of athletes have been useful but have used quantitative methods and mostly centred on performance instead of lived experiences.

A literature search indicates that a gap exists in the literature. The majority of the current evidence comes from developed countries where the educational system, sporting culture, athlete support mechanisms and socioeconomic context are very different from Ghana's. Moreover, the few qualitative studies conducted in other countries of the world have been done in settings that may not be representative of the student-athletes' conditions in Ghanaian universities. Therefore, there is a lack of student-athletes' perspectives on how the way football is coached impacts their academic learning time and success. This study aims to fill this gap by using a qualitative research approach to understand the lived experiences of the university student-athletes in Ghana. The study aims to produce context-relevant evidence to guide coaching practices, university policies, and supports for enhancing academic success and athletic excellence by highlighting their narratives and experiences. These results will also inform and contribute to the education and development of Ghanaian student-athletes as well as international literature.

Method

In this section, the methodological procedures used in this study are presented. It describes research philosophy, research approach, research design, subjects of the study, sampling

techniques, data collection methods, data analysis techniques, trustworthiness of the study, and ethical issues. The methodological approach was informed by the study's aim of finding out the experiences of football coaches, academic learning time and student success among the university student-athletes in Ghana. The exploratory nature of the study and the desire to understand the participants' lives justified the use of a methodological framework of a qualitative nature.

Research Philosophy

This research was based on the interpretivist paradigm. Interpretivist research approaches are appropriate when researchers seek to understand how individuals construct meaning from their lived experiences within particular social contexts (Patton, 2022). Interpretivism assumes that reality is constructed socially and that people interpret their experiences differently based on their social and cultural contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2024). Interpretivism differs from positivist approaches, which attempt to find objective and measurable realities, in that it is concerned with understanding how individuals interpret and make sense of their actual experiences.

Reliance on interpretivism was warranted, as the study aimed to grasp the perceptions and experiences of the student-athletes, coaches, sport administrators and academic personnel of the relationship between football coaching and academic learning. The issues of sport and education are subjective and depend on individual experience, institutional context and society. Thus, an interpretivist approach allowed the researcher to better understand the meaning people gave to their multiple identities as students and athletes.

In addition, its philosophy supports not only the theory of social ecology but also the theory of student involvement, which both highlight context and social factors as important determinants of behaviour and learning. The researcher was able to examine these influences from the participants' point of view through interpretivism.

Research Approach

The qualitative research method was used in the study. When the purpose of research is to gain an understanding of complex social phenomena and the experience of participants in depth, qualitative research is useful (Denzin & Lincoln, 2023). Qualitative research is more about revealing rich, detailed descriptions of participants' thoughts, feelings and behaviours, rather than focusing on numerical measurement.

The qualitative approach was found to be suitable because little information is available about the impact of football coaching on academic learning time and student success among the University student-athletes in Ghana. Previous research has largely focused on the use of quantitative approaches that offer statistical relationships, while neglecting to reflect the lived realities and lived relationships. The qualitative method thus allowed participants to express their experiences in their own words and helped reveal the nuances of their experiences and perspectives that may not be captured in surveys or structured questionnaires.

The approach also facilitated the exploration of contextual factors such as coaching practices, academic expectations, institutional support systems, and personal coping strategies that influence student-athletes' experiences.

Research Design

This study used a phenomenological research design. From a phenomenological perspective, the focus is on understanding and describing the essence of experiences as perceived by the individuals experiencing a certain phenomenon firsthand (Moustakas, 1994).

The research problem was balancing the demands of the football coaching program with the demands of the academic learning program. Phenomenology was deemed relevant due to its capacity to allow the researcher to investigate how participants experience and interpret, and make sense of the interaction between participation in football and academic life.

The design enabled the participants to think about such matters as training schedule, competition requirements, attending class, how they study, their academic performance, and the support they receive from the school. The reflections were used in this study to identify commonalities and understandings among the experiences of the participants.

Study Participants

Key stakeholders were engaged in the study who are directly related to the University Football programmes and Student-athlete development. The involvement of several stakeholder groups broadened the depth and scope of understanding about the phenomenon being studied.

The participants comprised:

Table 1: study's stakeholders

Category	Number
Student Footballers	20
Football Coaches	5
Sports Administrators	4
Academic Staff	6
Total	35

Student Footballers (n = 20)

The main group of participants were student footballers due to them having first-hand experience of the demands of balancing football and academic work. They shared their first-hand experience on the impact of coaching schedules, competition, and training on their learning time and academic success.

Football Coaches (n = 5)

Coaches were added as they are integral to the planning of training programmes, expectations of performances and making a difference to student-athletes. Their views gave them insight into coaching philosophies and strategies for integrating academic and athletic commitments.

Sports Administrators (n = 4)

The sports administrators provided details about the sports policies in their institutions, the support to the athletes and the challenges they faced in their organisations.

Academic Staff (n = 6)

Perspectives on classroom involvement, academic achievement, attendance and academic difficulties student-athletes faced were shared by academic staff.

Sampling Technique

The purposive sampling method was used in selecting the subjects for the study.

In qualitative studies, when participants with rich and relevant experiences related to the phenomenon under study are needed, researchers often resort to purposive sampling (Patton, 2022). The participants were carefully chosen for their experience in university football and understanding of student-athlete experiences.

Inclusion criteria were:

Student Footballers: Registered university students. University football players who are active members for at least 1 year in university football.

Coaches: Currently coaching University football teams. Minimum of two years coaching experience.

Sports Administrators: Participation in sports management at the University level.

Academic Staff: Gain experience with teaching or communicating with student-athletes.

Purposive sampling helped participants to give detailed information toward the research goals.

Data Collection Methods

Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were used to gather data.

Semi-structured interviews can be used effectively in Qualitative Research as they can be flexible, but the key issues are covered in the same way for every participant (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2023).

A questionnaire guide was developed that was used to guide the interview based on the research questions and the theoretical framework. The guide contained details about the following:

1. Experiences in coaching football.
2. The training timetable and studies.

3. Academic learning time.

Balancing sport and education strategies were developed

1. Institutional support systems.
2. Perceptions of student success.
3. Challenges and opportunities for involvement in football.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face at mutually agreed places in the Universities involved. The interviews were conducted for about 45-60 minutes per person.

All of the interviews were audio recorded, and the participants were permitted to record the interviews as the interviews were to capture the responses and not be paraphrased. Field notes were also taken, observations were made, and information was collected in the field.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis offers a broad and flexible approach to discovering, analysing and reporting patterns of meaning from qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

This analysis was carried out in six stages:

Stage 1: Get to know or become familiar with the data. The tapes of the interviews were transcribed and reread several times to familiarise ourselves with the data. After a few codes were generated, the next step was the generation of the initial codes. Meaningful portions of text that were related to the research questions were used to create coded text. Then we looked for themes. Thereafter, we scanned for themes. The codes were grouped together in larger sets of codes to identify themes.

Next, Reviewing Themes: Themes were discussed and developed so that they are coherent and consistent throughout the dataset. With this stage, we defined and named the themes.

Themes were well stated and labelled to show the context of the theme. Explanation and Reporting: Themes were explained in the context of the research questions, theories and literature. In this analytical process, the researchers were able to highlight any similarities and themes in the experiences of the participants and to see the whole picture in relation to participants' experiences.

Trustworthiness

The study followed the criteria of trustworthiness that qualitative researchers recommend in order to ensure the quality and rigour of the results. Credibility was strengthened by engaging with participants for an extended period, member checking and the involvement of multiple stakeholder groups.

Transferability where rich descriptions of the research context and participant experiences being supplied to enable readers to make an informed judgement of the generalizability of findings to other settings.

Dependability: A documentation system of research methods, decision-making and analytical processes was kept throughout the study (audit trail).

Confirmability: The researcher kept reflexive notes and made sure that interpretations were based on participants' accounts and not on the researcher's own assumptions.

Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted in accordance with the principles of ethics for studies involving human subjects.

Ethical Approval: Before data collection, ethical approval was given by the relevant University ethics review committee.

Informed Consent: Detailed information on the purpose, procedures, risks and benefits of participation was provided to the participants before participation. All participants gave written informed consent.

Voluntary Participation

There was full voluntary participation. All participants were told that they could leave the study at any time without any consequences.

Confidentiality: The information shared by the participants was kept confidential and used only for academic purposes.

Anonymity: The participants' identities were protected by using pseudonyms and identification codes when transcribing and reporting their data.

Data Security: Interviews were recorded and transcribed, and supporting documents of the research were kept and were only accessible to the researcher.

The study was designed to prevent the physical, psychological, social and professional damage of any participants throughout the research.

Findings

The thematic analysis generated four major themes and nine sub-themes that explain participants' experiences of balancing university football with academic responsibilities. Table 1 presents a summary of the themes that emerged from the interview data before the detailed discussion.

Table 2. Summary of Themes Emerging from the Interviews

Major Theme	Sub-theme	Participants Mentioning Theme (n=20)
Training Demands	Intensive training schedules	18
	Competition-related travel	15
Academic Challenges	Missed lectures	17
	Limited study time	16
Coping Strategies	Time management	14
	Peer academic support	12
Institutional Support	Flexible academic arrangements	9
	Coach and lecturer collaboration	8
	Counselling and welfare support	6

Table 3. Frequency of emerging themes

Theme	Frequency	Percentage
Intensive training schedules	18	90%
Competition-related travel	15	75%
Missed lectures	17	85%
Limited study time	16	80%

Interpretation

Theme 1: Training Demands

The results show that one of the main challenges faced by the University football players was training demands. Of the 20 participants, 18 said that their academic routine was significantly impacted by intensive training. Many said they had less time for studying and doing homework because they had evening training sessions or weekend preparation. In addition, 15 respondents reported having to miss out on many lectures and practicals because of travelling to compete, making it hard to catch up with missing classwork. Participant 7 remarked: They usually begin training at 4:00 p.m. and end late, which means that I am extremely exhausted and can't study that well in the evening.

Participant 12 added: Competition trips can result in missing 2 or 3 days of lectures.

Based on these responses, it can be concluded that training and competition obligations are significant factors for student-athletes in terms of academic pressure.

Theme 2: Academic Challenges

Another main theme was academic challenges. Seventeen participants said they often missed lectures due to training and/or competition schedules and sixteen reported they did not have enough study time during competitive periods. Participants recognised that these challenges had a negative effect on them completing assignments and preparing for examinations and on their overall academic performance.

Theme 3: Coping Strategies

In spite of these difficulties, participants shared some of the strategies they used to manage sport and academic demands. Fourteen of the participants mentioned they adopted effective time management strategies, such as making a weekly study plan and studying during the time they had between classes. Peer academic support is also important, as 12 participants used their classmates to help them with their lecture notes and collaborative learning.

Theme 4: Institutional Support

The amount of institutional support was felt to be less. Nine participants recognised that they have received flexible academic arrangements from lecturers, and eight recognised positive collaboration between coaches and the academic staff. Counselling and welfare services were only mentioned by six of the participants, indicating that in a lot of universities, formal support systems for student-athletes are not in place.

Discussion and Conclusion

This research shows that the football coach's function in the lives of college athletes is multifaceted. Coaches, on the other hand, are vital developmental agents who contribute in more than just a technical and tactical preparation role in football. Football was seen as a vehicle for building discipline, leadership, teamwork, resilience and personal development among participants. The results of this research conform to the ideas of the Student Involvement Theory, which states that the quality and quantity of a student's engagement in educationally meaningful activities affect his/her personal and intellectual growth (Astin, 1999). Therefore, organised football activities can be a valuable learning opportunity, in addition to formal school education. The results also indicate, however, that the demands of coaching and competitive football can place significant strains on the student-athletes, especially when they are combined with the demands of the academic program and the preparation, competition, and travel schedule. It was reported by the participants that they had to sacrifice their time for learning in the academic field, missed lectures, experienced fatigue and problems in preparing for academic evaluations. The challenges indicate that although football has developmental advantages, when the demands of sport are too great and there is no proper institutional support, it can have negative impacts on students' academic engagement and educational experiences. This result corresponds with the literature on dual career, where they emphasise the need for a balance between athletic development and academic progress with the help of appropriate support systems (Aquilina, 2013; Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019).

The research also indicates that success in the classroom is not the only type of success for students. Participants defined success as: personal growth, relationships, leadership ability, confidence development, and future job preparation. This broadening of vision is consistent with the modern vision of higher education, which values the overall growth of the student and goes beyond merely academic results (Tinto, 2012). Being involved in the university football program can then help to build up transferable skills, social networks, and experiences that will help students in their future careers (Kuh, 2008; Eime et al., 2013).

However, the developmental advantages of involvement in football highly rely on institutional infrastructure that provides support. If coaches, academic departments, and university administrators are not in sync, student-athletes can become overwhelmed with the conflict between their sporting and academic pressures. Furthermore, universities must have a holistic approach to supporting student-athletes that involves academic advising, flexible academic scheduling during competition, communication between coaches and the academic staff, and athlete wellness programs.

Finally, the present study shows that university football is not only a leisure activity but also an important development environment for students, which helps to develop their comprehensive development. But the potential of football as education has to be realised in the context of the creation of structures within universities which will allow student-athletes to manage the dual pressure of sport and study.

Policy Implications

The results of this study have significant implications for policy in higher education in Ghana, especially for dual career student-athletes in Ghanaian universities. The evidence shows that football coaching has a clear impact on the developmental opportunities and academic challenges student-athletes undergo. This underlines the importance of universities to shift from informal to formal and institutionalised dual career policies.

The Social Ecological Theory (Sallis et al., 2021) states that student-athlete success can be attributed to the individual athlete in addition to the organisational and policy environments. Hence, universities should develop formal structures to include academic planning in sport programming. This involves academic flexibility policy – scheduled adjustments to timetables, make-up lectures, extension to assignments, etc. during competitions.

As well, there needs to be a structured working relationship between coaches and academic departments to minimise academic disruption as a result of training and travel timetables. A coordinated communication system would ensure that the student-athletes are not academically disadvantaged because of their sporting commitment. In addition, there is a need for mentoring programmes to be institutionalised between academic advisors and sports coordinators in order to provide guidance to student-athletes on how to effectively manage competing demands. Universities should establish formal dual-career policies that integrate academic advising, flexible scheduling, athlete monitoring and communication between coaches and academic departments (Storm & Eske, 2022; Xabier et al., 2022).

While these policy directions support international calls for dual-career support systems that recognise and facilitate sporting excellence and academic success (Fletcher et al., 2022; Navarro et al., 2023), this is especially important in Ghana where support systems are not formalised and are inconsistent.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the role of the football coach is complex and dual in terms of influencing the life experiences of university student-athletes. On the other hand, it is a great developmental platform, which helps build discipline, leadership, teamwork, resilience, and growth. The results are aligned with the principles of Student Involvement Theory that posits that students' active involvement in structured activities is correlated with increasing student development (Astin, 2021).

Conversely, football coaching adds a considerable amount of time pressure that diminishes academic learning time, especially when the training and competition circumstances are very demanding. This is exacerbated by a lack of institutional support systems, which adds to academic stress, inability to attend lectures and fewer opportunities to study.

But the researchers' study also offers evidence that student success is not only academic. Participants described success as more than just a job, but as personal growth, social capital, leadership and readiness for a future career. It is in keeping with modern views on higher education, which call for holistic student learning, over against narrow academic indicators (Tinto, 2022). Therefore, university football should not be viewed merely as

extracurricular participation but as a developmental environment capable of contributing to student learning, employability skills and holistic development when supported through appropriate institutional structures (Kuh, 2008; Eime et al., 2013).

In conclusion, the research findings support the necessity of universities to create enabling environments to coordinate and balance the sporting and academic demands on student-athletes in order to best develop them for success.

Author Contributions

Author 1: (Dr Ebenezer Kingsley Armoh): Conceptualisation, study design, data collection, data analysis, interpretation of findings, manuscript drafting, and final manuscript preparation.

Author 2 (Priscilla Armoh Agyapomah): Literature review, methodological guidance, data analysis validation, critical revision of the manuscript, and supervision of the research process.

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