Perceptions of Student-Athletes on the Student-Athlete Academic Support Services at a South African University of Technology

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ABSTRACT

Student-athletes at university are a unique population that is faced with the challenge of balancing both their academic and sport commitments. Academic support services, specifically, designed for student-athletes need to be provided by the university in order to assist student-athletes to equally achieve both their academic and sport goals. The primary aim of this study was to determine the perceptions of student-athletes surrounding the effectiveness of student-athlete academic support services at a South African University of Technology. A quantitative approach was used in a form of a structured questionnaire with (n=249) student-athletes. A simple random sampling method was used to sample (n=249) student-athletes who participated in one of the High-Performance Programmes. Data were analyzed using Strata Version 15 and presented in a form of descriptive and inferential analysis. The findings revealed a negative perception of the academic support services' effectiveness in assisting student-athletes to achieve their academic goals. The overall findings of this study have practical implications for providing a well-structured academic support service to student-athletes that will aid student-athletes to achieve their academic goals.

INTRODUCTION

University student-athletes are from a young age and under excessive pressure to shine and compete successfully in provincial, national and international levels of high-profile competitive sport [1-3]. However, it is important to note that before they become athletes, they are students first. In other words, a university student-athlete first registers academically, before becoming an athlete. With that assertion, it is very clear that a university student-athlete has two pivotal roles to accomplish, namely an academic role and a sporting role [4,5]. In terms of academic role, a student-athlete is required to pass their modules to achieve their academic goals. When it comes to sporting goals, a student-athlete is required to perform well on the field to accomplish their sporting goals. Furthermore, for a university, the accomplishment of student-athletes, both on and off the field, is fundamental in the portrayal of a good image and brand in terms of sport and academics [3,4].

It has thus become evident that managing both roles, academic and sport has and is a challenge for student-athletes [6-8]. As a result, one of the roles tends to suffer significantly and that role most often is academic. Studies [1-3,5,9] show that once the student-athletes are academically registered at universities, they have a habit of placing more focus on their sporting activities, hence neglecting their academic duties which leads to poor academic performance. Similarly, Huml and Nite [8] in their research on student-athlete support services also have indicated that many student-athletes view themselves as athletes first and then students second. Reasons for this phenomenon, are based purely on academic challenges faced. These academic challenges

that student-athletes encounter include but are not limited to: a) personal involvement in academically-oriented activities, b) The difficulty in attending classes due to academic and sport commitment time clashes, c) Time management and/or d) The transitioning from high school to the university environment [4,10,11].

With this said, these challenges lead to one main outcome, that of the student-athlete being excluded academically and hence not being able to further participate or represent the university in their sport code. Therefore, universities need to ensure that a well-structured student-athlete academic support service is made available for all student-athletes that are participating in sport [12,13]. Academic support services for student-athletes include but not limited to tutoring services, student-athlete academic mentoring, student-athlete academic course, student-learning assistance and support programmes [14,15]. These academic support services need to be well-coordinated but more so, tailored to meet every student-athletes' academic need [11,16]. This may assist student-athletes to find the balance between their academics and sporting lifestyle as university students.

Moreover, this study is guided by Student Involvement Theory (SIT), developed in 1984 by Alexander Astin, that outlines that when students are fully involved and are diligent, the likelihood to achieve their goals is higher [17]. This study, therefore, used the SIT as the theoretical framework to inform the university administrators and faculty personnel about the reasons for less academic involvement by student-athletes which is mostly due to their sporting commitments so that the university management entities can design effective educational programmes specifically for student-athletes to assist them to be more involved so that they can achieve their academic goals [17].

Against this background, the primary aim of this study was to determine the perceptions of student-athletes surrounding the effectiveness of student-athlete academic support services at a South African University of Technology (UoT).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research design

This study utilized descriptive research design. The rationale for using descriptive design for this study was concerned with examining the perceptions of student-athletes on the effectiveness of academic support services [18,19]. Furthermore, this research design allowed the researcher to go deep into several variables identified which are further explained in this paper [18,19].

Population and sampling

The target population for this study included student-athletes who participated within one of the High-Performance Programmes (HPPs) sport codes (Football, Hockey, Soccer, Netball, Rugby and Cricket) at a South African UoT. A probability sampling in a form of simple random sampling was used whereby student-athletes from each respective HPP were randomly selected as to give every student-athlete an equal opportunity to participate in the study. The Directorate of Sport and Recreation's database of the UoT revealed that there were a total number of (n=700) student-athletes for the 2018 academic year. The calculated recommended sample size of the population of (n=700) student-athletes, considering 95% confidence interval and a 5% margin of error, was that of (n=249) student-athletes [20].

Data collection procedures

Data collection involved a survey method in a form of structured questionnaires (data collection instrument) adapted from Thorburn [21] 'Student-athlete's perception of the effectiveness of the student-athlete support services. Trained post graduate students from the UoT were the research fieldworkers for this study who distributed a total number of (n=280) questionnaires to student-athletes at their respective training fields. The estimated time to complete the questionnaire was 15-20 minutes. Out of (n=280) questionnaires distributed to student-athletes within the HPPs, the total number of (n=235) were returned measuring an achieved response rate of 84%. Furthermore, the structured questionnaire was divided into two

sections. Section A incorporated the general demographics of the student-athletes. Section B of the questionnaire outlined academic challenges that student-athletes encounter, the effectiveness of academic mentors, tutors, first-year orientation programmes, academic staff members and the Student Development and Support (SDS).

Section B2 (V35-V53) and section C (V56-V80) were measured on a 4-point-Likert scale with Not Applicable as a separate option off the scale and it ranged as follows: 1= Not effective, 2= Somewhat effective, 3= Effective, 4= Extremely effective, and 5= Not applicable. The not applicable (n/a) was included to allow the respondents to have more freedom when answering the questions as well as improving the robustness of the survey. In addition to that, the number "5" on not applicable (n/a) was assigned for statistical purposes, not for the order of the scale.

Validity and reliability

Validity is concerned with the research tool measuring what it intends to measure and allows the researcher to draw good conclusions from the sample studied [22]. Construct validity and content validity were used in this study. Prior to the fieldwork, construct validity was used to ensure that the instrument measures what was intended to measure and no other variables [22,23]. Content validity refers to the extent to which a research tool or instrument represents all the facets of a given construct or it is relevant to the targeted construct is it designed to measure [22,23]. In this study, content validity was achieved in two ways. Firstly, during the formulation phase of questions to be included in the survey, a panel of experts within the UoT's Department of Marketing, Supply Chain and Sport Management familiar with construct examined what the specific items intended to measure. Secondly, the survey instrument for this study had undergone the test-retest method with a small set of people from the target population where these people were not otherwise involved in the study.

According to Vijayalakshmi and Sivapragasam [22], reliability is defined as "a degree to which outcomes are consistent over time, meaning, the total population of the study is considered as reliable provided that outcomes of a study can be reproduced under a similar research methodology". This study adapted the quantitative data instrument scale which has achieved a Cronbach coefficient alpha of 0.7 and modified accordingly to fit the research objectives of this study. The newly adapted questionnaire measured 0.94, suggesting a relatively high internal consistency across the scale.

Data analysis

Strata Version 15 was used to analyze data and were presented using descriptive analysis and inferential analysis. Descriptive analysis was presented in a form of frequencies, mean, and standard deviation. Additionally, both mean and standard deviation were used as the measures of central tendency and central dispersion, respectively. Inferential analysis was presented using a non-parametric test known as Pearson Chi-Square.

Ethical aspects of the study

This study was conducted with the ethical guidelines laid out by the UoT's Research Ethics Committee. Ethical clearance was obtained through the UoT's Faculty of Management Sciences Committee of Research and Innovation (FCRI) and Research Ethics Committee (REC) (Ref #: REC/2018/03/012 Faculty Ref no#: FCRE2018/FR/01/010-MS (2)).Before conducting the study, permission to undertake the research among student-athletes at the UoT was solicited from a number of entities namely: Directorate of Sport and Recreation, the UoT's Department of Marketing, Supply Chain and Sport Management, the Faculty of Management Sciences Ethical Committee (FEC), and REC for final ethical approval. Furthermore, consent forms outlining the voluntary participation, risks associated with this study, right to withdraw by participants and guaranteed anonymity of participants' information were all explained to the participants.

RESULTS

This study used the quantitative research to answer the following research questions:

Q1: What academic challenges do student-athletes encounter?

Q2: What is the student-athletes' perceptions on the effectiveness of academic support services at a South African UoT?

The results answering the above research questions are outlined below using the descriptive and inferential analysis.

Descriptive analysis

To better comprehend what student-athletes go through in terms of academics, the question on what academic challenges were encountered was posed. For this question, out of the total sample size (n=235), only 232 respondents' answers were deemed valid with (n=3) missing cases.

Figure 1 outlines finding an academic mentor (n=219; 94.4%) to help with academic challenges as the main challenge for student-athletes. Student-athletes further reported in being assigned an academic tutor (n=215; 92.67%) as the second most experienced academic challenge. When it comes to group assignments, (n=210; 90.52%) of student-athletes reported facing a challenge to completing group assignments with their classmates due to their sporting commitments and demands.
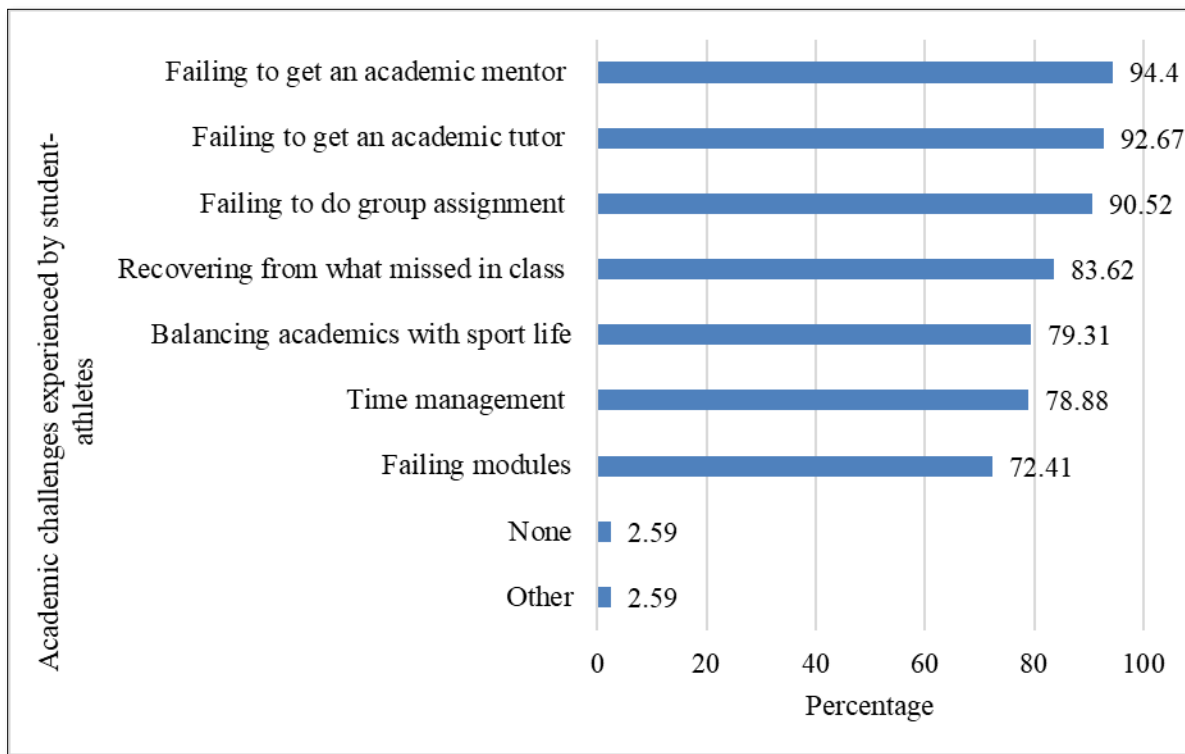

Figure 1. Academic challenges experienced by student-athletes.

The implementation of much-needed recovery plans (n=194; 83.62%) for student-athletes was further highlighted as a prime challenge due to missed classes because of sporting commitment. The fifth reported academic challenge experienced by student-athletes is that of balancing both their academics and sporting life (n=184; 79.31%). Respectively, time management (n=183; 78.88%) and failing modules (n=168; 72.41%) were highlighted as other academic challenges faced. Six respondents (n= 6; 2.59%) reported 'other' challenges in the form of limited sick tests available to student-athletes per year and a further 6 (2.59%) respondents indicating that they did not have any academic challenges.

Furthermore, a 4-point Likert scale was used to determine the perceptions of student-athletes on the effectiveness of academic support services for student-athletes. The items were measured on a 4-point-Likert scale with Not Applicable as a separate option off the scale and it ranged as follows: 1= Not effective, 2= Somewhat effective, 3= Effective, 4= Extremely effective, and 5= Not applicable (it is important to note that the number "5" was assigned to this option for statistical purposes, not for the order of the scale). Moreover, in this study, the not applicable (n/a) option was provided to the respondents to indicate questions that were not applicable to their cases and to give them more freedom when answering the questions as well as improving the robustness of the survey. However, when reporting these data, it was treated as a missing value.

It is important to note that in this study, a score of 1.0 to 2.0 indicated a negative student-athlete perception towards the effectiveness of academic support services for student-athletes. In addition to that, a score of 2.1 to 4.0 indicated positive student-athlete perception effectiveness of academic support services for student-athletes.

The academic support services included academic tutors, academic mentors, first-year orientation programmes, academic department and Student Development and Support (SDS). Furthermore, mean scores as the measure of central tendency were computed to summarize the data for the academic support services variables. Standard deviation scores as the measure of dispersion were computed to understand the variability of scores for the academic support service variables.

Table 1 outlines the valid responses on the perceptions of effectiveness of the academic support services. The mean scores with their corresponding standard deviation for academic support services measured as follows: academic tutors (n=201, M=1.22, SD=0.62), academic mentors (n=203, M=1.21, SD=0.61), first-year orientation programme (n=213, M=1.25, SD=0.65), the academic department (n=223, M=1.29, SD=0.62), and SDS (n=187, M=1.52, SD=0.74). An overall finding, based on the mean scores, can be concluded that most respondents perceived academic support services to be ineffective in providing the academic support to student-athletes (M<2.0). Also, a low standard deviation score outlines that there were no variations among the respondents regarding their perceptions of academic support services' effectiveness.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the overall perceptions of student-athlete support services.

Student-athlete support services	N	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)	Minimum	Maximum
Academic tutors	201	1.22	0.62	1	4
Academic mentors	203	1.21	0.61	1	4
First-year orientation programmes	223	1.29	0.65	1	4
The academic department	223	1.29	0.62	1	4
Student Development and Support (SDS)	187	1.52	0.74	1	4

Inferential analysis

Pearson's Chi-Square test was used to further illustrate the significant differences between the variables of academic support services. The choice for using these non-parametric tests was due to the skewness of data in this study. In other words, for this study, the data resulted in skewed distribution, otherwise known as asymmetrical, hence, making it difficult to use parametric tests [24,25]. In this study, the null hypotheses (H_0) were tested, and alternative hypotheses (H_1) results based on the tests are presented below. Moreover, for this study, when the p-value is less than 5% (p<0.05) at 95% confidence interval, the null hypothesis is rejected [26]. However, when the p-value is greater than 5% (p>0.05) at 95% confidence interval, the null hypothesis is retained or accepted [26].

Hypothesis 1

H_0: There is no statistically significant difference between student-athletes' year of study and their perceptions on the academic tutors' effectiveness.

H_1: There is a statistically significant difference in student-athletes' year of study and their perceptions on the effectiveness of academic tutors.

As indicated in **Table 2**, all areas that academic tutors cover when assisting students reported a p-value of greater than ($p>0.05$), indicating no significant difference. In other words, all student-athletes from the first year to the fifth year perceived the effectiveness of academic tutors the same way. Therefore, there was enough evidence to accept the null hypothesis.

Table 2. Relationship between a year of study and perceptions about academic support services' effectiveness.

Academic support services	Year of study	Rank mean	p-value	Chi-square	DF
Academic tutors	1st year	103.82	0.42447	4.034	5
	2nd year	97.04			
	3rd year	104.61			
	4th year	95.88			
	5th year	86.5			
Academic mentors	1st year	105.55	0.71802	2.198	5
	2nd year	97.2			
	3rd year	102.46			
	4th year	98			
	5th year	88.5			
Student Development and Support (SDS)	1st year	108.41	0.47499	3.97	5
	2nd year	94.96			
	3rd year	104.41			
	4th year	96.21			
	5th year	87.5			

Hypothesis 2

H_0: There is no statistically significant difference between student-athletes' year of study and their perceptions of the academic mentors' effectiveness.

H_1: There is a statistically significant difference between student-athletes' year of study and their perceptions of the academic mentors' effectiveness.

As it is shown in **Table 2**, all areas that academic mentors cover when assisting students reported a p-value of greater ($p>0.05$) outlining no significant difference. This implies that perceptions of student-athletes from the first to the fifth year do not vary concerning the areas that academic mentors assist them in. Thus, there was adequate evidence to accept the null hypothesis.

Hypothesis 3

H_0: There is no statistically significant difference between student-athletes' year of study and their perceptions of the SDS's effectiveness.

H_1: There is a statistically significant difference between student-athletes' year of study and their perceptions of the SDS's effectiveness.

As depicted in **Table 2**, all areas that SDS covers when assisting student-athletes reported a p-value of greater ($p>0.05$) indicating no significant difference. Meaning, the perceptions of student-athletes from the first to the fifth year do not differ regarding the aspects that SDS covers. Therefore, there was sufficient evidence to accept the null hypothesis.

DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to determine the perceptions of student-athletes surrounding the effectiveness of student-athlete academic services at the South African UoT. This study outlined that without the allocation of academic tutors to student-athletes, poor academic performance is evitable. This finding posits the findings of Hooper [27], Huml [28], Koehler [29] as well as Condello [30] which all outlined that academic tutors play a significant role in assisting student-athletes to achieve their academic work. Furthermore, when it came to academic tutors, the quantitative results of this study highlighted that academic tutors were found to be ineffective in assisting student-athletes with their academic work which consisted of completing the modules that student-athletes found challenging on, class activities missed due to class absenteeism, and revision for the semester and sick tests and exams. This finding is opposed to previous studies' findings by Tashenberg [31] and Paule-Koba and Tashenberg [32] which have reported positive perceptions of student-athletes when it came to the effectiveness of academic tutors in assisting student-athletes with their academic work. In addition, this present study further outlined that there was statistically no significant difference between the student-athletes' year of study and their negative perception of the effectiveness of academic tutors when it came to providing academic assistance to student-athletes. This suggests that all first-year student-athletes and senior student-athletes had the same perceptions with regards to the academic tutors' effectiveness. This finding is not consistent with the study of Huml, Hancock and Bergman [33] who found that first-year student-athletes possessed more positive perceptions with regards to the effectiveness of academic tutors than senior student-athletes.

Academic mentors play a pivotal role in assisting student-athletes to manage their time effectively and also assisting student-athletes throughout their academic journey. In this study, quantitative results found that academic mentors are ineffective in helping student-athletes with time management, keeping on task, remaining organized and encouraging student-athletes to balance both academic and sport responsibilities. This outcome dissents the findings of Tashenberg [31] and Paule-Koba and Tashenberg [32] who found that student-athletes were satisfied with the services that academic mentors provided to them.

First-year orientation programmes presented at UoT were unsuccessful in terms of introducing and empowering student-athletes with decision-making regarding their academic involvement and life skills, outlining the various obligations and responsibilities of the student-athletes required of them to pass the course/qualification as well as informing or familiarizing student-athletes with the channel of communication or standing plans when it comes to seeking academic support. This finding differs from the findings of Vermillion [34] which reported the positive perceptions of student-athletes surrounding the effectiveness of first-year orientation programmes offered to first-year student-athletes.

The results of this study highlighted that the academic departments are not as effective in helping student-athletes as they are with non-student-athlete students, when it comes to career counselling and assigning academic tutors and mentors to student-athletes. This finding varies from the findings of Tashenberg [31] and Paule-Koba and Tashenberg [32] whose studies yielded findings that student-athletes were satisfied with the academic support services provided by their respective academic departments.

Furthermore, the study's findings showed that the Directorate of SDS is ineffective in terms of offering support services such as the career counselling, study counselling and support, personal counselling and therapy, the student learning center social support and psychoeducation, life skills and student profiling for early identification of academic risk factors to student-athletes. This finding is inconsistent with the findings of Tashenberg [31] and Paule-Koba and Tashenberg [32] who reported that student-athletes were satisfied with the services that academic advisors within the university provided them.

CONCLUSION

Achieving both academics and sport responsibilities is of paramount importance for student-athletes. To achieve academic responsibilities, students are required to put in effort and time towards educational activities. However, with student-athletes being a unique population at the university in having to deal with both academic and sport demands, they are unlikely to be more involved in their academic work. Consequently, their academic roles are neglected and tend to suffer significantly. Therefore, student-athlete academic support services that can assist student-athletes to achieve their academic goals need to be available to all student-athletes at the university. However, these academic support services need to be well-coordinated and collaborated by management entities at universities in order to deliver effective and efficient support services.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

To assist student-athletes achieve both their academics responsibilities, the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) may consider the following recommendations:

a) Assigning academic tutors specifically to student-athletes who will aid them with academic activities that they have missed in class due to sporting commitment

b) Assigning academic mentors specifically to student-athletes who will help them with the balancing of academic and sport responsibilities

c) Establishing first-year orientation programmes specifically for new first-year student-athletes which will provide important details regarding the student-athlete support services

d) Providing student-athletes specifically with physical resources such as the internet labs, study areas and tutorial rooms.

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