

Internal Challenges Affecting Academic Performance of Student-Athletes in Ghanaian Public Universities

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Abstract

This paper examined internal challenges affecting academic performance of student-athletes in Ghanaian public universities, using a descriptive survey research design. Proportionate random sampling technique was employed to select Three Hundred and Thirty-Two (332) respondents for the study. The instrument used in gathering data for the study was a questionnaire titled “Questionnaire on Internal Challenges Affecting University Athletes (QICAUA)” structured and developed by researchers. The QICAUA was validated by two jurors in the field of physical education and sport, from Ghana and Nigeria and pilot tested using test-retest method. A reliability correlation coefficient of .85r was obtained from the reliability testing. In all, two research hypotheses were formulated and tested at 0.05 alpha level of significance. Data collected were analyzed using chi-square (χ^2) statistical method. The findings from the study showed that time constraints and physical/emotional strain were significant internal challenges affecting the academic performance of student-athletes in Ghanaian public universities. Based on these findings, the study recommends that Management of universities, university sports administrators and the Ghana Universities Sports Association (GUSA) should collaborate to schedule sports programmes in such a way that student-athletes will have adequate time for both academics and sports; student-athletes should be counselled on how to manage their time effectively on campus; and coaches should ensure that student-athletes are not over worked physically and emotionally during training and competitions.

Keywords: Academic Performance; Challenge; Public Universities; Student-Athlete.

1. Introduction

A student-athlete is a participant in an organized competitive sport sponsored by an educational institution in which he or she is enrolled. Student-athletes must typically balance the roles of being full-time students and at the same time being athletes (Gerdy, 2000). According to Cigliano (2006) participation in university sports, a common human behaviour, is an activity that permeates our society educationally, financially, psychologically, and politically. Student-athletes are seen as a highly visible subgroup of students whose performance and visibility can influence the formation of an institution’s image (Zimbalist, 1999). Manning (2012) argues that the term student-athlete is the only term that employs a dash to explain a student’s role in an extracurricular activity. Manning went further to say that universities do not term students who participate in band activities as “student-musicians” or in debate clubs as “student-politicians.” As such, student-athletes represent a clearly identifiable and unique population. In as much as student-athletes face many of the same challenges as non-athletes, their dual roles can compound these challenges confronted by all university students.

Howard-Hamilton and Watt (2001) categorized the challenges faced by student-athletes based on their unique environmental demands and responsibilities into four components; that is, role conflict, role strain, value alienation and exploitation. Manning (2012) listed depression, isolation, academic inferiority, substance abuse, injury, identity foreclosure, pregnancy, mental health disorders, learning disabilities, hazing, exploitation, and sport retirement as some of the challenges exacerbated by students’ participation in university sports. Simiyu (2010) on the other hand grouped student-athlete challenges into individual/personal and external challenges. Simiyu went further to mention personal involvement in academic oriented activities, time constraints, class attendance, personal goal setting and career choices, physical and emotional fatigue, transition to college environment and academic grades as individual/personal challenges, with the following as external challenges; coach demands, institutional policies, discrimination, marginalization from college mainstream activities, college mission and learning environment, and eligibility demands.

According to Kissinger and Miller (2009), student athletes generally face six distinctive challenges, these are, balancing athletic and academic responsibilities, balancing social activities with athletic responsibilities, balancing athletic success and or failures with emotional stability, balancing physical health and injury with the need to continue competing, balancing the demands of relationships with entities such as coaches, teammates, parents and friends, and addressing the termination of one's college athletic career. Göktaş (2005) mentioned the following as challenges student-athletes are faced with; learning to balance athletic and academic pursuits, adapting to a certain degree of isolation from social and more “mainstream” activities, managing success or lack thereof, attending to their physical health in a more deliberate way as to avoid injury and

subsequent rehabilitation, satisfying multiple relationships, terminating an athletic career, academic difficulties, role conflict, social and leisure challenges, separation anxiety due to athletic career retirement, substance abuse issues, and weight management/eating disorders. Internal or personal challenges are those challenges that emanate from the student-athletes' actions and/or inactions (Simiyu, 2010).

2. Literature Review

In the literature on challenges facing university athletes, time constraints and physical/emotional strain appear to be among the most reported (Gentsch, 2014; Feldpausch, 2011; Simiyu, 2010; Kissinger & Miller, 2009; Thomas, 2008; Morgan, 2005; Göktaş, 2005). On time, Göktaş (2005) opined that one of the most significant challenges facing university athletes was the time needed to effectively combine their dual roles of being students and athletes. Manning (2012) stated that student-athletes are unique compared to non-athletes because with the athletic demands required of them, they must devote a large amount of extra time to their athletic activities in addition to regular class work and allocating enough time to fulfill personal social needs. Kissinger and Miller (2009) citing Etzel (1989), pointed out that successfully balancing the time demands required to tackle all of the multiple activities unique to student-athletes often prove to be too much to handle and leaves athletes susceptible to mental and physical distress.

Morgan (2005) in a study found out that, student-athletes repeatedly expressed the challenge towards the amount of time they had available for academic matters after fulfilling their athletic commitments. Feldpausch (2011) commented that even university athletes with an appropriate balance of academic and athletic motivation have difficulty finding the necessary amount of time to succeed both in the class and on the field. Supporting this stance of time constraints being a serious challenge, McKenna and Dunstan-Lewis (2004) discovered from a study that time commitments and physical exhaustion were the most frequently reported challenges facing student-athletes in universities of the United Kingdom. A research by Aries, McCarthy, Salovey, and Banaji (2004) involving 521 students from an Ivy League university and 353 students from a college revealed that student-athletes had significant difficulty in finding time to study and earn good grades. The researchers concluded that although in the end, most athletes in the study graduated with comparable grades to non-athletes who had similar qualifications, the athletes reported a greater struggle to find time to study and achieve academically. In a case study involving African-American football players at a major college, Singer (2008) revealed that the interviewed African-American football players at that particular college struggled with time demands as they put more time into football than they actually did in school.

Humphrey, Yow and Bowden (2000) reported from a study that more than 40 percent of male athletes and well over fifty percent of female athletes complained of time as the most serious cause of their stress. Most of the respondents in the study, according to the researchers, felt that there was simply not enough time for them to combine academics and sports and to do their best in both areas. This enabled the research team to conclude that time in particular was the most important challenge facing student-athletes. A study by Geiger (2013) revealed that the academic performance of student-athletes was negatively affected by time constraints resulting from demanding sports endeavours, among other things. Godfrey (2010) concluded that the challenge that seems to hurt student-athletes the most academically was time constraints created through sports, making it difficult for athletes to devote time to study or earn good grades.

Simiyu (2012) contends that the emotional and physical strain of sports competitions make studying difficult for student-athletes. Godfrey (2010) argues that time constraints places a heavy demand on the physical and emotional aspects of the student athlete and with little down time for psychological and physical recovery, an athletes' sport could wreak havoc on his/her ability to concentrate on studies. Thomas (2008) is of the view that whilst the physical strain of a student-athlete's season may be easy to conceptualize, the emotional strain is harder to quantify but is as prevalent. Geiger (2013) pointed out that in addition to the pressures of time, general fatigue from training and competition could take a toll on a student-athlete both mentally and physically, which could negatively impact his/her academic performance. In a study, Feldpausch (2011) reported that in addition to time demands, student-athletes also complained of being physically and emotionally exhausted when ever they had to devote time to academics, lessening the quality of academic performance. Godfrey and Satterfield (2009) carried a qualitative study and concluded that student-athletes felt drained physically and emotionally after practicing their sports and were just too tired to focus on any academic work. According to Thomas (2008) the cumulative physical and emotional toll due to sports involvement throughout the academic year in the university could affect the student-athlete's ability to concentrate on studies if care is not taken. Thomas concluded that these physical and emotional strains leave the student-athlete tired all the time which translates to failure to do assignments, dose off in class, miss class to recuperate in bed, poor concentration and mental lapses. Papanikolaou, Nikolaidis, Patsiaouras and Alexopoulos (2003) added that the psychological and physical toll of the sports of student-athletes leaves only a limited amount of energy to devote to academic experiences, and student-athletes also have only few hours of the day to invest in their coursework due to their sports obligations. Ghana, a developing country in West Africa, has a well-structured university sports system overseen by the

Ghana Universities Sports Association (GUSA). As a paid-up member of both the International University Sports Federation (FISU) and the Federation of Africa University Sports (FASU), Ghana has been an active participant in competitions organized by these two bodies for student-athletes (GUSA, 2013; GUSA, 2014). Internally, student-athletes in Ghana are very much engaged in sports competitions at various levels as one would expect. Student-athletes in Ghana are equally challenged in combining their dual roles of being students and at the same time athletes. Although some studies have been conducted on challenges facing university student-athletes in the developed world, particularly in places such as the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Canada etc, literature available shows that in a developing country like Ghana no such studies concerning student-athletes have been conducted. The purpose of this research therefore was to investigate whether time constraints and physical/emotional strain were serious challenges affecting the academic performance of student-athletes in Ghanaian public universities.

3. Methodology

Descriptive survey research design was used for the study. The population comprised all 1,158 student-athletes from the 7 Ghanaian public universities that participated in the 2014 Ghana Universities Sports Association (GUSA) Games held at the University of Cape Coast. Three Hundred and Thirty-Two (332) respondents were selected from all 7 public universities as the sample using proportionate random sampling technique. The instrument used in gathering data for the study was titled “Questionnaire on Internal Challenges Affecting University Athletes (QICAUA)”. The QICAUA, which comprised 12 “Agree” or “Disagree” items, was adapted from two instruments by Yelk, (2013) and Cigliano (2006). Items from the two questionnaires were re-framed to suit the context of the current study. The instrument was validated by two jurors in the field of physical education and sport, from Ghana and Nigeria. Test-retest method was used to determine the reliability of the instrument. Reliability coefficient result obtained was .85 after pilot testing the instrument. Two research hypotheses formulated, were tested using inferential statistics of chi-square (χ^2) at a .05 alpha level of significance.

4. Results and Discussion of Findings

Hypothesis 1: Time constraint is not a significant challenge affecting academic performance of student-athletes in Ghanaian public universities.

Table 1: Time Constraint as a Significant Challenge Affecting Academic Performance of Student-athletes in Ghanaian Public Universities

S/N	Item	A	D	Row Total	χ^2 cal	DF	Critical Value	Remarks
1.	As an athlete, time spent on training for my sport affects my studies.	231 (69.6)	101 (30.4)	332	57.48	5	11.07	Rejected
2	As an athlete, time spent on travelling for sports competitions affects my preparation for examinations.	229 (69.0)	103 (31.0)	332				
3	As an athlete I miss a lot of Lectures, Quizzes and Class Assignments because of the time spent during training and competitions.	229 (69.0)	103 (31.0)	332				
4	As an athlete, my time management skills are poor.	214 (64.5)	118 (35.5)	332				
5	I have put a lot of time into playing my sport as an athlete than studying.	170 (51.2)	162 (48.8)	332				
6	I spend more time thinking about sport than anything else.	168 (50.6)	164 (49.4)	332				
	Column Total	1,241	751	1,992				

χ^2 cal = 57.48; critical value = 11.07; df = 5; p < 0.05

Results in Table 1 show a calculated chi-square value of 57.48 against a critical value of 11.07 with degree of freedom of 5 at 0.05 alpha level of significance. Since the calculated chi-square value is greater than the critical value, the null hypothesis which stated that time constraint is not a significant challenge affecting student-athletes in Ghanaian public universities, is rejected. This means that time constraint is a serious challenge affecting the academic performance of student-athletes in Ghanaian public universities.

Hypothesis 2: Physical/emotional strain is not a significant challenge affecting academic performance of student-athletes in Ghanaian public universities.

Table 2: Physical/Emotional Strain as a Significant Challenge Affecting Academic Performance of Student-athletes in Ghanaian Public Universities

S/N	Items	A	D	Row Total	X ² cal	DF	Critical Value	Remarks
1.	I get so tired after training that I sometimes miss lectures.	229 (69.0)	103 (31.0)	332	32.47	5	11.07	Rejected
2	I sleep during lectures because of tiredness and bodily pain sustained from training.	172 (51.8)	160 (48.2)	332				
3	I hardly contribute during lectures because of tiredness any time I train for my sports.	175 (52.7)	157 (47.3)	332				
4	I can hardly concentrate during lectures because of tiredness after training.	168 (50.6)	164 (49.4)	332				
5	I get emotional fatigued after competitions such that I can hardly study for some time.	172 (51.8)	160 (48.2)	332				
6	The stress and anxiety of travelling to and from competition affects my studies.	178 (53.6)	154 (46.4)	332				
	Column Total	1,094	898	1,992				

χ^2 cal = 32.47; critical value = 11.07; df = 5; p < 0.05

Results in Table 2 show a calculated chi-square value of 32.47 against a critical value of 11.07 with degree of freedom of 5 at 0.05 alpha level of significance. Since the calculated chi-square value is greater than the critical value, the null hypothesis which stated that physical/emotional strain is not a significant challenge affecting student-athletes in Ghanaian public universities, is rejected. This means that physical/emotional strain is a significant challenge affecting the academic performance of student-athletes in Ghanaian public universities.

Null hypothesis 1, which stated that time constraint is not a significant challenge affecting student-athletes in Ghanaian public universities, was rejected, implying that time constraint is a serious challenge affecting the academic performance of student-athletes in Ghanaian public universities. Majority of respondents (69.6%, 69.0%, 69.0%, 64.5%, 51.2%, 50.6%) agreed that time constraints was indeed a serious challenge confronting them. Similar findings have been reported in studies by Singer (2008), Morgan (2005), McKenna and Dunstan-Lewis (2004), Aries, McCarthy, Salover, and Banaji's (2004), and Humphrey, Yow and Bowden (2000). The findings of this study also agree with the position taken by Geiger (2013) who revealed that the academic performance of student-athletes was negatively affected by time constraints resulting from demanding sports endeavours and also that of Godfrey (2010) who concluded that the challenge that seemed to hurt student-athletes the most academically was time constraints created through sports, making it difficult for athletes to devote time to study or earn good grades. The opinion by Göktaş (2005) that one of the most significant challenges facing university athletes was the time needed to effectively combine their dual roles of being students and athletes sits well with the findings of this research.

Null hypothesis 2, which stated that physical/emotional strain is not a significant challenge affecting student-athletes in Ghanaian public universities, was rejected, implying that physical/emotional strain is also a significant challenge affecting the academic performance of student-athletes in Ghanaian public universities. Results also revealed that majority of the student-athletes (69.0%, 51.8%, 52.7%, 50.6%, 51.8%, 53.6%) were of the view that the physical/emotional strain of participating in sports was also a serious challenge affecting them. The findings of this study agree perfectly with Feldpausch (2011) who reported from a study that in addition to time demands, student-athletes also complained of being physically and emotionally exhausted when ever they had to devote time to academics, lessening the quality of academic performance. Godfrey and Satterfield (2009) also reported similar findings from their qualitative research, that student-athletes felt drained physically and emotionally after practicing their sports and were just too tired to focus on any academic work. Geiger's (2013) comments that general fatigue from training and competition could take a toll on a student-athlete both mentally and physically, and this could negatively impact his/her academic performance, Simiyu's (2012) contention that emotional and physical strain of sports competitions make studying difficult for student-athletes, and the position taken by Papanikolaou et al. (2003) that the psychological and physical toll of the sports of student-athletes leaves only a limited amount of energy to devote to academic experiences, are all in line with findings of this study. Thomas (2008) concluded that the cumulative physical and emotional toll due to sports involvement throughout the academic year in the university, which leaves the student-athlete tired all the time, can translate to the following; failure to do assignments, dose off in class, miss class to recuperate in bed, poor concentration and

mental lapses. This conclusion mirrors the views of student-athletes in Ghanaian public universities on the physical/emotional challenge facing them.

It is important to point out that, university student-athletes across developed and developing countries are all faced with the challenge of time in combining their dual roles of being students and athletes and also they all suffer from the physical/emotional strain of participating in sports. These challenges have the potential of seriously affecting the academic performance of the student-athletes if care is not taken. Secondly, the fact that student-athletes may be performing well academically compared to non-athletes on university campuses does not mean that the athletes are not facing challenges. Aries et al. (2004) agree with this position in their conclusion from a study that although most athletes graduated with comparable grades to non-athletes who had similar qualifications in the end, athletes usually reported greater struggles to find time to study and achieve academically.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

It was concluded based on the findings of this study that time constraint and physical/emotional strain were serious challenges affecting academic performance of student-athletes in Ghanaian public universities. Recommendations made include the following; that management of the various public universities, university sports administrators and the Ghana Universities Sports Association (GUSA) should collaborate to schedule sports programmes within each academic year in such a way that student-athletes have adequate time to study and make good grades and at the same time participate in their various sporting activities; university sports administrators should counsel student-athletes on how to manage time available to them on campus to ensure that their academic work and sports pursuits do not suffer; and coaches in the public universities should also ensure that student-athletes are not over worked during preparations for competitions or during competitions, so that the athletes do not get physically and emotionally exhausted, since such tiredness can affect their academic performance.

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