

THE CONVERSATION

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What comes after the Paralympics? How sport and study can enhance each other

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The author, Bridie Kean, at the London Paralympics in 2012. Australian Paralympic Committee, CC BY-SA

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I was 13 when the Australian Gliders wheelchair basketball team won silver at the Sydney 2000 Paralympic Games. Seeing amputees, just like me, compete so fiercely on the world stage ignited my dream to become a Paralympian.

Eight years later I was a Glider competing at my first Paralympic Games. We won a Bronze medal and I left Beijing determined to go two better in the London Games.

For four years I worked tirelessly towards the goal of Paralympic success. Four years would be converted into a tournament with eight games, determining our placing on the world stage.

Eight games later we were Silver medallists. My entire London experience was nothing short of remarkable, but the next challenge emerged on the plane home.

Four years of preparation, eight games, silver medal; what next? Regardless of the result and whether you win gold or under-perform, it can be a challenging for athletes to assimilate back into post-Paralympic life.

Dual pathways in sport and education

Returning to university studies provided much-needed structure for me after London. In fact, education grounded me after both the Beijing 2008 and London 2012

Paralympic Games.

I started my student-athlete experience in February 2008, where I combined wheelchair basketball training and my Bachelor degree in an Adapted Athletics program at the University of Illinois.

In season, we trained each weekday and went to classes. An average day kicked off at 6am on court, followed by scheduled classes, afternoon lifting sessions and usually finished with study.

On the weekends we travelled around the United States representing the University of Illinois in the intercollegiate wheelchair basketball competition.

Each season our team goals were working toward a National Championship and high grade point averages. It was a heavy workload made possible by the supportive, structured program that aimed to support us to achieve excellence in in both sport and study.

After graduating from the University of Illinois I spent my final year before the London Paralympic Games studying for a Master of Public Health at the University of Queensland. While no longer in a structured dual sport-study program, studying continued to provide me with a focus outside of sport towards London.



USC SEEDS program directors and athletes Back L-R: Dr Florin Oprescu, Bridie Kean; Front L-R: Steven Elliott, James Hill
Photo courtesy of University of the Sunshine Coast, Author provided

Student athletes

A majority of Australian Olympians are already studying. Australia's Winning Edge also acknowledges the vital role of achieving balance in study and sport and as such has developed the Elite Athlete Friendly University Network to promote universities that employ policies and practices that support elite athletes in the pursuit of dual sporting and academic goals.

The network encourages universities to support athletes while at university by providing guidance on how to succeed in both sport and study.

Balancing sport and study may be conducive to performance at the Olympic Games. In the London Olympic Games, student-athletes won 63% of medals while making up only 40% of the overall team. However, the benefits for athletes may extend beyond medal performance.

A study exploring the motivations of athletes for pursuing dual pathways in Europe found several motivations. One stemmed from the value of performance, acknowledging they could be complimentary and result in higher performance in both domains.

Other motivations included the reality that not all athletes will earn enough money from sport to sustain their financial futures. This has also been acknowledged in sport policy research as a post-career stressor faced by athletes.

In my case, I pursued dual pathways for both these reasons. University studies and life gave me a balance away from the basketball court and I was also preparing for life after sport, while I was playing sport.

Supporting excellence

The value dual pathways had in my life as an athlete also led me to pursue the area through research. I found the majority of research currently explores the experience of dual pathways in Olympic and able-bodied athletes, with limited information available on how to support para-athletes.

My PhD research project looks at which structures can best support para-athletes to balance sport and study. The findings have informed the development of the USC SEEDS program, which will help para-athletes strive toward success on the Paralympic world stage and their future post-sporting careers.

The program involves collaboration with Basketball Australia and the Queensland Academy of Sport and Centre of Excellence for Applied Sport Science Research.

In my PhD research I found the main elements that enable para-athletes to achieve excellence in both sport and study are scholarships, academic support and access to centralised facilities.

Australian universities and programs such as the USC SEEDS can offer dual pathways by creating the optimal training environment for sport and study.

While this week we will be watching the four years of preparation convert to success for our Australian Paralympics, it is my hope programs such as the USC SEEDS will provide balance and supportive environments for our athletes continuing on to Tokyo to balance high performance training with educational pathways.

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