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Building high-level sports teams in Chinese universities under sports–education integration: institutional predicaments and pathways of optimization

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Abstract: Since the 2020 turn toward sports-education integration, and especially since revised admission rules took effect in 2024, universities hosting high-level sports teams have found their operating model under strain. The difficulty stems less from insufficient effort than from an unresolved institutional identity: the team must serve competitive performance, campus sports culture, and the national talent pipeline at once, while its structure and evaluation criteria were designed for a narrower purpose. Four predicaments follow—narrowed intake, ownerless governance, unmanaged role conflict, and coaching whose advancement is loosely coupled to its work. Pathways follow, centred on programmatic focus, articulation with schools and clubs, curricular use of athletic expertise, professionalized coaching posts, and evaluation that reads process alongside results.

Keywords: sports-education integration; high-level sports teams; higher education; dual career; student-athletes; governance

1 Introduction

University high-level sports teams in China were established in the late 1980s to cultivate elite athletes inside the national education system. For three decades a workable bargain held: universities gained results, athletes gained degrees, and the sports system gained a destination for retired talent. The 2020 Opinions on Deepening Sports-Education Integration, issued jointly by the General Administration of Sport of China and the Ministry of Education, reframed that bargain as a reconstruction of how young people are educated through sport. A systematic analysis of 105 central youth sport policies from 2013 to 2023 situates the sports-education-integration reform in a shift from reserve-talent cultivation toward a health-first orientation [1].

The 2021 guidance on standardizing examinations and admissions gave the reframing a hard edge. From 2024, cultural examination results come entirely from the national college entrance examination, athletic testing is organized nationally rather than institutionally, and thresholds rise, with differentiated standards by institution type. Song and colleagues read successive adjustments as attempts to reconcile the channel's academic legitimacy with its competitive function [2]. Reporting around the 2024 cycle described a marked contraction in host institutions, with several research-intensive universities withdrawing entirely.

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Policy has thus changed the question asked of universities. How to secure qualified athletes has given way to a harder question: what a high-level team is for, once it cannot operate as an admission route with relaxed academic requirements. Institutions that answer clearly find operational problems tractable; those that do not meet each as a separate crisis. This paper examines four predicaments, develops pathways, and separates evidence from conjecture.

2 Where the difficulty actually sits

2.1 A narrowed intake meeting unprepared feeder relationships

Universities had three years' notice of the tightened standards; the difficulty is that recruitment relationships rebuild far more slowly than policy changes. Most host institutions previously recruited opportunistically, relying on provincial sports bureaus, transitioning athletes, and personal networks. Little of that infrastructure yields candidates who combine athletic certification with an entrance score near the undergraduate line.

Such candidates come from sustained ties to secondary schools that train seriously and hold academic standards—ties that take years and depend on the university offering something in return. Where they exist, usually around one sport with a long history, admission has proved manageable; where recruitment was transactional, the channel thinned quickly. The implementation study of China's 2015 youth football reform explains why: conflicts arose from organizational barriers, resource constraints, and divergent stakeholder interests, obstructing the unified training system envisaged [3]. Reform resets requirements faster than relationships can form.

2.2 A team that belongs to no one in particular

Responsibility for a high-level team at a typical Chinese university is distributed: the physical education department manages training and competition, admissions handles intake, the academic college owns the degree programme, student affairs manages daily life, and finance controls the budget. Each unit performs competently within its own frame; the athlete's overall trajectory falls between them.

The pattern reproduces a feature of the national policy corpus. Analysis of jointly issued youth sport policies finds that co-signature at the formulation stage does not resolve coordination at the implementation stage, because texts demand cross-cutting action without naming a lead body. Ambiguity pushes coordination downward, leaving multiple administrations and no one in charge . Universities get strong signals about goals and weak instruments for coordination.

Comparative literature suggests this is not uniquely Chinese. Expert accounts from European institutions identify a designated coordinating function—someone whose job is the athlete's combined trajectory—as what separates good dual-career provision from provision on paper [4]. Its absence stays invisible, since each unit can show it met its own obligations.

2.3 Role conflict as an individual burden

The most consequential predicament belongs to the athletes. A study of Chinese student-athletes documents distinct challenges from dual membership and draws implications for the administrators who shape that environment [5]. Work on athletes' identities relates athletic and student identities to dual-career competency and burnout: how an athlete construes the two roles bears on whether the combination is sustainable [6].

This work shifts attention from timetabling to meaning. Study-training conflict is usually treated as a scheduling problem, and scheduling remedies—makeup classes, flexible attendance, extended deadlines—are what universities supply. These address the surface while leaving intact the assumption that training and study compete for fixed time. An athlete who internalizes it has little reason to invest in either domain beyond the minimum.

International research points similarly. Focus groups with European university athletes report that they value arrangements treating the two domains as mutually supporting and notice whether institutions regard their athletic

commitment as legitimate [7]. The FEPSAC position statement frames dual careers as a developmental process requiring environmental support rather than case-by-case accommodation [8].

2.4 Coaches at the margin of the academic personnel system

Coaching sits awkwardly inside academic personnel rules. Coaches are usually employed on teaching posts and evaluated for promotion against criteria built for physical education instructors: teaching hours, articles, grants. Recruitment travel, technical work, and athlete welfare convert poorly into any of them. A coach who invests heavily in the team accumulates professional risk; one protecting promotion prospects has reason to treat it as a side duty.

The role's demands extend beyond technical instruction. Research on the competencies Japanese collegiate coaches need for dual-career support identifies capacities outside conventional preparation, including athletes' academic and career development [9]. Because the reformed regime makes recruitment harder and enlarges the coach's role in feeder schools, the gap between what the post demands and what evaluation rewards has widened.

3 Directions for reconstruction

3.1 Deciding what the team is for, sport by sport

A university running six or seven teams at a level none can sustain has prioritized breadth; the reformed environment rewards the opposite. A defensible starting point is a written mission statement for each sport. A team built for national-level performance needs recruitment reach, competition budget, and sports-science support; a team anchoring campus sports culture needs a different configuration and investment scale; a team supporting a sports science or coaching programme belongs near it and should be judged partly by that contribution. Explicit purposes allow coherent allocation and let a university close a team without admitting failure.

3.2 Building articulation rather than conducting searches

Recruitment now works best as the visible end of a longer relationship. Universities with viable intake maintain standing arrangements with a few secondary schools and clubs: coaches contribute technical support, facilities host camps, sports-science services reach school programmes, and school coaches get training. These exchanges build a shared talent pool and give partners reason to sustain athletic and academic standards. Where they are absent, the frictions documented in youth talent-system reform surface exactly when a cohort must be recruited.

Aligning fields of study with incoming athletes' academic profile is part of the same design. Where athletic experience counts as background—in sports science, rehabilitation, physical education, or sports management — requiring matched enrolment becomes an asset. Discretionary athletic admission is best reserved for exceptional cases and governed by transparent criteria, given the history that motivated the reform .

3.3 Designing academic provision that uses athletic expertise

The most promising response to role conflict is curricular design that treats competitive experience as an intellectual resource. Training logs, monitoring data, and injury histories are legitimate material for physiology, biomechanics, data analysis, and psychology coursework. An athlete analysing their own training load in a statistics assignment does university-level work with knowledge only they possess. Such provision relocates athletic identity inside the academic role, the configuration identity-based accounts would predict to lower burnout risk.

Practical supports should target identifiable frictions: study plans revised each season; credit accumulation flexible enough for training camps and away fixtures; mentors responsible for a few athletes; assessment scheduled around the competition calendar. Studying Swedish university student-athletes, Linnér and colleagues find that dual-career satisfaction relates to the fit between an athlete's goals and available support, which argues for individualized agreements [10]. Career transition support belongs in the same package, since dual careers outlast competition .

3.4 Making coaching a profession with a visible ladder

A distinct coaching post series—promotion weighted toward athlete academic outcomes, retention, and development, with recruitment and welfare counted as workload—removes a disincentive that exhortation will not dislodge. Joint appointments with provincial teams and clubs expand technical capacity and give coaches mobility. Continuing education matters too, since dual-career support requires guidance that technical preparation does not supply .

3.5 Governance and evaluation

Coordination problems of this kind respond to modest structural remedies: a standing committee representing the physical education department, the colleges enrolling athletes, admissions, student affairs, and finance, meeting on the academic calendar rather than in response to incidents; a shared record of each athlete's progress, training load, and injury status, accessible to those with a legitimate interest; and a coordinator with an explicit brief for the athlete's combined trajectory. Where ambiguity about leadership persists, the remedy is a document naming the lead body, supporting bodies, and the boundaries of their mandates.

Evaluation deserves particular attention because it determines what the rest of the system optimizes for. Ranking host institutions by medals produces predictable behaviour: resources concentrated on athletes near the podium, tolerance of academic underperformance, recruitment aimed at short-term results. Reading graduation rates, academic standing, retention, post-graduation destinations, and campus participation alongside results lets institutions invest in what integration was meant to strengthen.

4 Discussion

Several propositions here rest on reasoning rather than direct evidence. That curricular integration of athletic experience alters engagement is plausible given identity-based accounts of role conflict and dual-career findings on mutually supporting domains, but remains untested in a Chinese comparison group. That concentration beats breadth fits the withdrawal seen since 2024, though the counterfactual is unexamined. That a coaching post series changes behaviour is an inference from incentives needing longitudinal evidence.

One limitation deserves acknowledgement. Much of the dual-career literature cited here comes from European and Japanese systems, where participation is organized differently and university ties to elite sport are looser. The mechanisms—a coordinating function, identity configuration, coaches' competencies—are plausibly transferable; the institutional forms through which they operate probably are not.

One neglected question concerns distribution. The reform raised the academic threshold for entry, yet which sports, regions, and family backgrounds gain or lose access has received little attention. If it concentrates opportunity among students whose families could already secure coaching and academic preparation, a policy justified partly by fairness may produce outcomes that complicate the case.

The reform has removed the conditions under which a high-level team could function as an appendage to the university. The teams likely to endure are those treated as academic units with a stated purpose, staffed by people whose careers depend on the work, serving students whose athletic and academic lives form one trajectory. That is a demanding standard, and also what integration was meant to describe.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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