

Balancing excellence: Character development and academic support in special sports classes

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the process of character development and academic services implemented in Special Sports Classes (SSC) at State Senior High School 1 Pengasih. It identifies key character values emphasized in student development, including discipline, teamwork, sportsmanship, responsibility, and perseverance, and explores student motivation, academic support, challenges, interactions, and the achievements and expectations of student athletes, teachers, coaches, and program coordinators. Using a qualitative approach, data were collected through observation, interviews, and documentation involving teachers, trainers, students, and SSC administrators. The findings show that student athletes are motivated to enhance their knowledge and skills in sports, develop personal potential, and benefit from structured support within the SSC program. Their interest in joining SSC varies, beginning from elementary to junior high school levels. Academic services are generally supportive, with flexible schedules and additional assistance provided by subject teachers when students miss lessons due to training or competitions. However, scheduling conflicts between training and academic activities remain a key challenge, although these are often mitigated through adaptive learning support. Interactions among teachers, coaches, and students foster positive communication and emotional support, helping students manage stress through constructive strategies. Student achievements have reached the national level, with aspirations extending to international competitions. Nevertheless, academic services are not yet fully optimized, as they do not sufficiently differentiate SSC students from regular or inclusive programs. Additional challenges include the lack of specialized programs and logistical constraints such as long travel distances. These findings provide practical insights and policy recommendations for improving SSC implementation and supporting athlete-centered education.

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1. Introduction

Character education serves as a crucial foundation in shaping a generation with integrity and competitiveness (Ramadhani et al., 2025), particularly within sports classrooms at the senior secondary level where students are in a critical phase of identity formation. In the Special Region of Yogyakarta, SSC programs serve as a strategic platform for producing high-achieving athletes. Nevertheless, success in these programs should not be measured solely by competitive achievements but also by the development of attitudes, values, and ethical behavior among student-athletes (Agama & Pagaralam, 2025; Basith et al., 2025). The development of holistic athletes, integrating performance and character, is essential for achieving optimal outcomes (Nikander et al., 2022).

Furthermore, challenges such as intense competition, demanding training schedules, and adolescent lifestyle influences necessitate a systematic and contextual approach to character development (Müller et al., 2022). According to Maslow, individuals with strong character are those capable of self-actualization in their lives (Thompson et al., 2022). Therefore, educational environments must support not only physical excellence but also psychological and moral development.

Academic support services in SSC play a vital role in helping student-athletes manage the dual demands of sports and academics. These services aim to enhance academic performance, well-being, and learning continuity. Student-athletes require structured guidance to maintain academic eligibility while pursuing athletic excellence. Effective academic support services contribute significantly to academic success and graduation rates (Widyah et al., 2024). Moreover, such services assist students in developing learning skills, improving academic achievement, managing time effectively, and balancing commitments between academics and sports (Liu & Taresh, 2024; Y. Liu, 2024).

In addition, regulatory frameworks emphasize the importance of appropriate academic services tailored to student-athletes' needs, including addressing cognitive challenges and providing classroom support (Roberts et al., 2025). Effective management is also essential in creating flexible and supportive learning environments, improving teacher-student relationships, and addressing behavioral challenges (Müller et al., 2022). Athlete-specific academic services also consider factors such as motivation, gender, ethnicity, and academic performance (Brouwer et al., 2022). Furthermore, the quality of educational services contributes to school branding, particularly in institutions offering flagship programs such as sports and entrepreneurship classes (Gonzalez-Perez et al., 2025).

Despite these developments, there remains a gap between the expected ideal implementation of SSC and the reality in schools. While previous studies have highlighted the importance of academic support, character education, and athlete development, limited research has comprehensively examined how academic services in SSC are managed holistically to integrate academic achievement, athletic performance, and character development. Most studies tend to focus partially on either athletic performance or academic outcomes, without exploring their integration within a structured educational service model.

Therefore, this study positions itself within the current state of the art by examining academic service management in SSC from a holistic perspective. The novelty of this research lies in its integrative approach, which combines academic support services, character education, and student-athlete development into a unified framework within the SSC context. This study seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how academic services can effectively support student-athletes in achieving balanced success.

This study focuses on describing the strategies of character development and academic services implemented in Special Sports Classes (SSC) at State Senior High School 1 Pengasih, Kulon Progo, Indonesia. It explores the key character values emphasized in student-athlete development, particularly in the context of balancing academic responsibilities and athletic commitments. The study also analyzes the challenges faced by the school in fostering these character values, especially within the demanding environment of sports-oriented education.

Furthermore, this research examines student-athletes' motivations, the implementation of academic services within SSC classrooms, and the various challenges and conflicts that arise during the learning process. It also investigates the patterns of interaction among stakeholders, including teachers, sports assistants, coaches, and principals as the persons in charge of SSC programs. In addition, the study highlights student-athletes' achievements, behavioral development, and positive intentions as outcomes of the educational process.

By integrating these components, this research aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how character development and academic service strategies are implemented in Special Sports Classes (SSC) settings. The introduction is therefore designed not only to present a general overview, but also to clearly articulate the complexity of the problem, the context of the study, and the contribution this research seeks to make to the development of sports-based education. Based on this background, the study seeks to answer several key questions, including how academic support is implemented in SSC at the senior secondary level, what challenges are encountered in

managing academic services for student-athletes, how these services support the balance between academic achievement, athletic performance, and character development, and what model of academic service management can be developed to enhance the effectiveness of SSC programs. In line with these questions, the objectives of this study are to analyze the implementation of academic services in SSC, identify the challenges in managing academic services for student-athletes, examine the role of academic services in supporting holistic student-athlete development, and develop a conceptual model for effective academic service management in SSC.

2. Method

2.1. Research design

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach to examine character development and academic services in the Special Sports Class (SSC) at State Senior High School 1 Pengasih. This approach focuses on exploring the meaning of the experiences and perspectives of individuals and groups involved in the SSC program. Qualitative research aims to understand social behavior and describe problems in depth through inductive and interpretive analysis.

2.2. Research Participants

Participants in this study included SSC administrators, coaches, mentor teachers, and student athletes directly involved in the program. Participant selection was conducted purposively and evolved throughout the research process until data saturation was reached, when the information obtained was repeated. Data was also obtained from observed activities and supporting documents such as strategic plans, personnel data, activity photos, and school achievement data.

2.3. Data Collection Instruments

Data collection was conducted through participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation, the primary techniques in this study. Observation was used to gain a contextual understanding of social interactions occurring within the school environment. Semi-structured interviews allowed researchers to explore information in depth, while documentation was used to complement and strengthen the data from the observations and interviews.

2.4. Research Procedures

The research procedure was carried out through several systematic stages to ensure the orderliness of the research process. These stages included pre-fieldwork with initial observations and informant selection, followed by fieldwork through interviews and documentation. Data reduction, narrative presentation, and conclusions were drawn to discover the meaning of the collected data.

2.5. Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis was conducted simultaneously during the data collection process and after the data was fully collected. Analysis techniques included data reduction to simplify information, presenting data in narrative form, and drawing conclusions based on identified patterns. Data validity was strengthened through triangulation of sources and techniques, ensuring that the research results were valid and meaningful.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Implementation of academic support in special sports Classes

The results of the study show that academic support in the Special Sports Class (KKO) program is implemented flexibly and adaptively according to the needs of student-athletes. (Dong et al., 2024). This flexibility is evident in the tolerance for late assignment submissions and the provision of opportunities to catch up on material missed due to practice or competition, as expressed: "If we are excused for practice or competition, the teacher usually gives us the opportunity to catch up on material missed" (Student-Athlete 1). This finding indicates that academic support has been implemented through learning adjustment mechanisms, although it has not been systematically institutionalized.

In addition, teachers also play an important role in providing motivational support to student-athletes in maintaining the continuity of the learning process. This is reflected in the informant's

statement: "Teachers often give encouragement so that we remain focused on studying even though we are tired after practice" (Student-Athlete 3). This condition shows that academic support is not only instructional but also includes psychological aspects that strengthen students' learning commitment (Bate & others, 2024). From the teachers' perspective, learning flexibility is seen as a form of adjustment to the special conditions of student-athletes who have dual responsibilities. One teacher stated: "We understand their conditions as athletes, so there is tolerance in submitting assignments, but they still have to be responsible" (Subject Teacher 2). Thus, the current implementation of academic support still relies on individual teacher policies and is not yet based on a structured system.

3.2. Challenges in managing academic services for student-athletes

The research results indicate that the main challenge in managing academic services is the time conflict between academic activities and sports training (Russu et al., 2023). Student-athletes revealed: "Sometimes the training schedule conflicts with school assignments, so we have to choose which comes first" (Student-Athlete 2). These findings show a misalignment between the academic system and the sports training schedule. Besides time conflicts, physical fatigue is also a significant obstacle in the learning process of student-athletes. This is reflected in the statement: "After training, I'm usually already tired, so it's hard to focus on studying at home" (Student-Athlete 4). This condition indicates that the high physical load directly affects the quality of student academic engagement.

From an institutional perspective, this study found that there is not yet a specific curriculum designed to meet the needs of student-athletes. The program coordinator stated: "Actually, there is not yet a special curriculum for sports classes, so it is still the same as regular classes" (Program Coordinator). These findings confirm that the challenges faced are not only individual but also structural within the education system.

3.3. The role of academic services in balancing academic achievement, sports, and character

Research results show that academic services play a role in maintaining the balance between academic achievement and student-athletic achievement. A coach stated: 'We always remind them that sports achievement is important, but education must not be neglected either' (Coach 1) (Kuroda et al., 2023; T. Liu & Taresh, 2024; Y. Liu, 2024). This statement indicates a collective awareness of the importance of dual achievement for student-athletes. Student-athletes also show active efforts to maintain academic performance amidst sports demands (Al-Gindy et al., 2020; Ramadhani et al., 2025; Roesminingsih et al., 2023; Sentryo et al., 2024). This is reflected in the statement: 'We try to keep our academic grades, even though our main focus is also on sports' (Student-Athlete 5). These findings indicate that students have adaptive capacity in managing the dual roles they undertake.

In addition, academic services also contribute to the character development of student-athletes. A student stated: "Here we learn discipline, responsibility, and how to manage time" (Student-Athlete 2). Thus, academic services not only support cognitive aspects but also shape character relevant to students' lives

3.4. Academic service management model to improve the effectiveness of the KKO program

Based on the research findings, a more structured academic service management model is needed to improve the effectiveness of the KKO program (Agama & Pagaram, 2025; Alswelmin, 2026; Kurniawan & Utomo, 2021; Kuroda et al., 2023). This need is emphasized by an informant who stated: 'Actually, a clearer system is needed so that it does not just rely on each teacher's policy' (Program Coordinator). This statement indicates the urgency of developing an integrated academic service system. The model proposed in this study includes flexibility in academic scheduling, the development of a differentiated curriculum, and strengthening collaboration among stakeholders (Halimah et al., 2025; Koç, 2024; Lopez & Bauyot, 2025; Romadhon & Aslan, 2025).

One of the teachers stated: "If there is an official guideline, it will be easier for us to provide fair services to student athletes" (Subject Teacher 2). This shows that the existence of formal guidelines will enhance the consistency of academic services. In addition, this model also emphasizes the importance of integrating character development into academic services. This approach is expected to support the balance between academic achievement, sports performance, and students' character development. Thus, the developed model has the potential to become a conceptual framework in strengthening the KKO program at the secondary education level.

These findings indicate that the problems faced are not only individual in nature but also systemic in program governance. In the context of balancing academic achievement, athletic performance, and character development, academic services have been proven to act as a holistic support mechanism. These services not only maintain students' academic continuity but also strengthen character values such as discipline, responsibility, and time management. Thus, academic services function as a link between the cognitive, physical, and affective development of student-athletes.

Based on the overall findings, this study develops a conceptual model for managing academic services that includes schedule flexibility, differentiated curriculum, stakeholder collaboration, and academically-based character development. This model is designed to address the gap between academic and athletic demands that student-athletes have faced so far. Thus, the proposed model has the potential to improve the effectiveness and sustainability of the KKO program more systematically.

The results of this study indicate that academic services in the Special Sports Class (KKO) program have been implemented adaptively through flexible learning and interpersonal support from teachers (Al-Gindy et al., 2020; Ramadhani et al., 2025; Roesminingsih et al., 2023; SENTRYO et al., 2024). These findings reinforce the view that student-athletes require a flexible learning system to balance academic demands and sports training. The flexibility provided, such as tolerance for late assignments and remedial opportunities, is a concrete manifestation of student-centered learning. However, this practice remains individualized and dependent on the policies of each teacher, thus not yet reflecting a structured and sustainable academic service system.

The main challenges identified were time conflicts between academic and training schedules, as well as physical fatigue, which impacted learning quality (Chand & Kumar, 2025; Chen & Qin, 2024; Y. Liu, 2024; Thompson et al., 2022). This situation aligns with the dual career concept, which emphasizes the complexity of students' dual roles as both students and athletes. The lack of synchronization between the academic system and the training program indicates a structural gap in the management of the KKO program (Widiyanto et al., 2026). Furthermore, the lack of a specific curriculum for student-athletes reinforces the indication that the education system still focuses on a general approach, rather than on the differentiation of student needs.

Despite facing various challenges, academic services have proven to play a significant role in maintaining a balance between academic achievement, sports, and character development. Values such as discipline, responsibility, and time management develop naturally through integrated learning and training experiences (Firman et al., 2025; Rață et al., 2022; Sasson & Yehuda, 2023). This demonstrates that KKO serves not only as a platform for developing sports talent but also as a space for holistic character development (Bisa, 2023; Brunson & Walker, 2022). Thus, academic services play a strategic role as a bridge between the cognitive, affective, and psychomotor aspects of education (Mukherjee & Kittur, 2025; Yasmin et al., 2023).

This study has several limitations that should be considered. First, the study was conducted at a single school, so the generalizability of the results is limited to similar contexts. Second, the qualitative approach used relies heavily on the subjectivity of informants, despite data triangulation. Third, this study did not quantitatively measure the impact of academic services on students' academic achievement or athletic performance. Therefore, the results of this study emphasize contextual understanding rather than broad generalizations.

Based on the research findings, it is recommended to develop a more systematic and integrated academic service model within the KKO program. Schools need to design a differentiated curriculum that specifically accommodates the needs of student-athletes, including schedule adjustments, evaluation systems, and learning assistance services. Furthermore, collaboration between teachers, coaches, parents, and policymakers is needed to create a supportive educational ecosystem. Future research is recommended to use a mixed methods approach to more comprehensively assess the effectiveness of academic services, and to involve more institutions to obtain a more generalizable and applicable model.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings of this study show that character development in Special Sports Classes (SSC) at State Senior High School 1 Pengasih has been implemented through a structured yet adaptive approach that integrates discipline, sportsmanship, teamwork, and responsibility into daily training and learning activities. Student-athletes are primarily motivated by the desire to enhance their competencies, compete at various levels, and prepare for future careers, including opportunities in institutions such as the National Police and TNI. The cultivation of character is strongly rooted in discipline as the core value, supported by consistent training routines, technical mastery, and meaningful interactions with coaches and mentors.

However, the study also reveals significant challenges, particularly in balancing academic responsibilities with intensive training schedules, limited academic support systems, and logistical constraints such as transportation. Although the school has provided supportive measures such as lesson clinics, mentoring, and flexible learning opportunities academic services for SSC students have not yet been fully differentiated from regular classes. This indicates a gap between policy expectations and practical implementation.

Therefore, this study emphasizes the need for a more comprehensive and differentiated curriculum model that accommodates the unique needs of student-athletes. Strengthening collaboration among teachers, coaches, and parents, as well as developing specialized academic programs and assessment systems, are crucial steps forward. By doing so, SSC programs can more effectively foster both academic success and athletic excellence, while sustaining strong character development as the foundation for long-term achievement.

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- Author contribution** : The first author conceptualized the study, developed the methodology, collected data, and drafted the manuscript. The second author analyzed the data and revised the manuscript. The third author supervised and validated the findings. The fourth author managed the project, provided resources and funding, and reviewed the manuscript.
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