Mary top Hong Kong athletes have completely devoted themselves, from a very young age, to scaling new heights in sports achievements, often at the expense of formal academic education. In view of this, the UGC launched the ‘SALSA’ Scheme in February 2022 for local elite athletes to pursue dual career pathways in sports and university education. The Scheme was built on the Memorandum of Understanding signed between the Hong Kong Sports Institute (HKSI) and the eight UGC-funded universities. Not only will the SALSA scheme facilitate the admission of exceptional athletes to UGC-funded universities on an individual basis in order to meet the academic entrance requirements, but it will also offer the student-athletes personalized learning support tailored to meet their specific needs.

Strong support from universities

The UGC-funded universities welcome the SALSA Scheme because it allows them to optimize their existing admission and learning support programmes for top athletes and helps attract athletes to pursue university education locally rather than abroad. For instance, under an “Elite Athlete Friendly University”, The Education University of Hong Kong (EdUHK) has admitted over 110 elite athletes to its different academic programmes since 2012 including track and field, cycling, water polo champion Wong Kam-po and Olympic medalist Sarah Lam Wai-yan. Undergraduate programmes popular with elite athletes cover health education, physical education and sports science. Some of them have gone on to pursue postgraduate studies.

To further expand the admission pathways for local athletes, EdUHK entered into agreements with HKSI and The Sports Federation & Olympic Committee of Hong Kong in 2014 and 2021 respectively. These allow flexible admission of athletes nominated by the two partnering institutions. “We are committed to promoting athletes’ dual career pathways,” says Professor May Cheng, Associate Vice-President and Chair of Professor Teacher Education at EdUHK. She adds that UGC’s SALSA Scheme would further strengthen the link to student-athletes and help them continue their university education. “Student-athletes’ perseverance and dedication help make a positive impact on other students, and their experience and exposure create a more diverse, dynamic and inspirational learning environment for all,” says Professor Cheng.

Student-athletes can, for example, adjust their study load and extend the study period based on their training and competition schedule. Learning support includes a complete package of distance-learning resources, in-person and online exchange and group sessions, counselling, and academic advisors who pay special attention to student-athletes’ dual- track academic and sports developments. EdUHK also offers the “EdUHK-Friendship University Fund” which provides Olympians with full and half scholarships for undergraduate and postgraduate study.

Top athletes committed to dual-track pathways

EdUHK has already established a network of top athletes-friendly non-government organisations and private enterprises which offer internship opportunities and priority recruitment. The UGC’s SALSA Scheme has been a major success in attracting and retaining top athletes. The UGC’s SALSA Scheme has been a major success in attracting and retaining top athletes. Hong Kong badminton star Reginald Lee Chun Hei was selected as a top athlete under the SALSA Scheme, which he described as a “sense of pride that some top athletes are studying locally rather than abroad.”

In support of the SALSA Scheme, heads of the eight UGC-funded universities signed signing documents with the Secretary-General of the UGC, Professor James Tang (second row, right), in the presence of the Chairmen of the UGC, Mr. Pak-fai Tong (second row, second left).