

UGC launches “Student-Athlete Learning Support and Admission” Scheme to optimise elite athletes’ dual-track development in sports and university education

In recognition of the outstanding sports achievements of top athletes in Hong Kong, the University Grants Committee (UGC) has announced the launch of the “Student-Athlete Learning Support and Admission” (SALSA) Scheme under which a maximum of HK\$100 million is earmarked to provide one-stop support for student-athletes for the academic period from 2022/23 to 2024/25.

Many 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 by waiving the academic entrance requirements, but it will also offer the student-athletes personalised learning support tailored to meet their specific needs.



Vice-Chancellor and President of The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) Professor Rocky Tuan (centre) pictures with student-athletes. CUHK will launch its own SALSA Scheme to support outstanding athletes who aspire to pursue dual-track career developments.

Due to their intensive training and competition schedules, it’s difficult for elite athletes to meet the universities’ regular study schedules, says Dr Trisha Leahy, Chief Executive of HKSI. “By providing more personalised and flexible academic support to student-athletes, the SALSA Scheme empowers them to continue pursuing their sporting careers and university education simultaneously.”

UGC Chairman, Carlson Tong Ka Shing, echoes Dr Leahy’s sentiment. “It allows athletes who do not have the required qualifications to enter university. Meanwhile it enables the universities to further support outstanding athletes who intend to pursue dual-track development in the system.”

Under the holistic scheme, each university will receive HK\$1 million for central support each academic year. An additional \$150,000 will be allocated for individual support for each eligible student-athlete who is pursuing a bachelor’s degree programme. The funding is for dedicated support to student-athletes at the central and individual levels, such as through the appointment of student-athlete support coordinators to provide one-stop guidance and assistance for student-athletes from admission to graduation. The universities will also hire additional personal teaching assistants to enhance academic support for each student-athlete. The Scheme will benefit outstanding athletes entering university from 2022/23 Academic Year onwards as well as top student-athletes already studying at university.

Strong support from universities

The UGC-funded universities welcome the SALSA Scheme because it allows them to optimise their existing admission and learning support programmes



EdUHK President Professor Stephen Cheung Yan-leung (centre), joined by Carlson Tong (first right) and Dr Trisha Leahy (first left), officiates at the launch ceremony of the “Elite Athlete Friendly University Fund”, established by the University in 2021.



Student-Athlete Learning Support and Admission Scheme
February 2022

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



Carlson, Tong Ka Shing
UGC Chairman

The SALSA Scheme allows athletes who do not have the required qualifications to enter university and enables the universities to further support outstanding athletes who intend to pursue dual-track development in the system.

for top athletes and helps attract athletes to pursue university education locally rather than abroad.

A forerunner as an “Elite Athlete Friendly University”, The Education University of Hong Kong (EdUHK) has admitted over 110 elite athletes to its different academic programmes since 2010, including track cycling world champion Wong Kam-po and Olympic medallist Sarah Lee Wai-sze. 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 pathway,” says Professor May Cheng, Associate Vice-President cum Registrar and Chair Professor of Teacher Education at EdUHK. She adds that UGC’s SALSA Scheme would further strengthen the support 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 loads and extend the study period based on their training and competition schedules. Learning support includes a complete package of distance-learning resources, in-person and online exchange and group sessions, counselling, and academic advisers who pay special attention to student-athletes’ dual-track academic and sports development. EdUHK also offers the “Elite Athlete Friendly University Fund”, which provides Olympians with full and half scholarships for undergraduate and postgraduate study.

Top athletes committed to dual-track pathways

Current student-athletes and elite athletes starting their university education this year agree that both their sporting careers and education require equal commitment.

Bronze medalist in the Badminton Men’s Singles WH2 event at the Tokyo 2020 Summer Paralympics, Daniel Chan Ho Yuen, enrolled in 2016 in the Bachelor of Arts (Hons) in Physical Education and Recreation Management at Hong Kong Baptist University (HKBU), when he was 31. “I aspire to develop a career in sports management, particularly for Para athletes, after I retire from competitive sports. Professional academic qualification will make people more convinced about my capabilities and professionalism,” Chan says.



Daniel Chan Ho Yuen (Photo credit: Hong Kong Sports Association for the Physically Disabled).

Chan’s study at HKBU is tailored to fit his hectic schedules of training and competitions. A mentor/ advisor is assigned to help him catch up with his study. “I have the first-hand experience of attending evening classes after a full-day of exhausting training. Striking a balance is essential,” Chan says, adding that the additional support from UGC’s SALSA Scheme will help.

Minnie Soo, who became a full-time athlete when she was 15 in 2013, started her self-study for GCE A-level Exams when she took breaks from training because of injuries in 2020. “As I seized the opportunity available through the UGC’s SALSA Scheme, I am able



Minnie Soo Wai Yam (Photo credit: Hong Kong Sports Institute).

to get into the School of Science at HKUST one year ahead of my original plan,” says the 23-year-old. “The process was smooth and I was able to choose the programme I wanted.”

“I have always been interested in physical science and enjoyed studying,” Soo notes. “I look forward to practical research and working in a team.”

Hong Kong’s first gold medalist in the BWF World Junior Championships (men’s doubles), badminton athlete Reginald Lee Chun Hei aims to enrol in an undergraduate programme of sports management. Although Lee expects to be preoccupied with training for the Paris 2024 Summer Olympics, he is confident that the dual-track development will work, thanks to the learning support from the UGC’s SALSA Scheme and flexibility in study requirements.



Reginald Lee Chun Hei (Photo credit: Hong Kong Sports Institute).

EdUHK has also established a network of top athletes-friendly non-government organisations and private enterprises which offer internship opportunities and priority recruitment.

The UGC’s support enables The University of Hong Kong (HKU) to go beyond its existing “HKU Sports Scholarship Programme” to launch a new top athlete admission scheme, namely the “Top Athletes Direct Admission Scheme”, which admits outstanding athletes without considering their academic results, says Professor Bennett Yim, Director of Undergraduate Admissions at HKU.

The selected top athletes will be considered for programmes of Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Science, Bachelor of Business and Administration, and Bachelor of Social Sciences.

On top of the UGC support, HKU’s assistance for elite student-athletes includes academic and residential scholarships, financial support for international exchange and overseas training, as well as customised training at HKU’s Centre for Sports and Exercise.

HKU also connects the athlete-freshmen with senior student-athletes to help incoming student-athletes adapt to university life.

“Student-athletes will be welcome and supported by their fellow classmates because many students feel a sense of pride that some top athletes are studying together with them,” says Professor Yim.



HKU Director of Undergraduate Admissions Professor Bennett Yim (first left) introduces the university’s new “Top Athletes Direct Admission Scheme”, which admits top athletes based mainly on sports achievements from 2022/23 Academic Year onwards.



Scan to learn more

Student-Athlete Learning Support and Admission Scheme: www.ugc.edu.hk