

Supporting anti-doping via Transforming Athletes' Life Experiences after Doping into Education Resources and Policy Recommendations (TALE)

WP4 – D4.2 Recommendations on education for sanctioned athletes



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Recommendations on Education for Sanctioned Athletes

1. Purpose and Scope

This document presents proposed recommendations to guide sport organisations in the development and implementation of education measures for sanctioned athletes throughout the entire process. It responds to a recognised gap between existing anti-doping education approaches and the lived experiences of athletes affected by anti-doping rule violations. Current education is often perceived as compliance-driven, while athletes highlighted the need for approaches that are more relevant, accessible, and supportive during and after a sanction.

This corresponds to a critical yet underdeveloped area of anti-doping work. Effective education for sanctioned athletes and support personnel is essential for:

- supporting athletes in understanding processes, rights, and responsibilities
- enabling sensemaking, meaningful learning and behavioural change (where applicable)
- preparing athletes for reintegration into sport (where applicable) and society
- strengthening trust in anti-doping systems

2. Background and Rationale

Education is one of the main mechanisms through which athletes are expected to understand rules, navigate procedures, and respond appropriately to anti-doping demands. Yet, sanctioned athletes often encounter anti-doping education only in fragmented and/or compliance-oriented form, or retrospectively in some cases. Evidence from the TALE project indicates that many athletes experienced the anti-doping system as difficult to understand, legally complex, and insufficiently explained, particularly at the point of notification and during the early stages of sanction. In this context, education cannot be treated as a peripheral or one-off intervention but must be understood as a core condition for fairness, meaningful participation, and informed decision-making within anti-doping systems.

A stronger education response is also necessary because **athletes' education needs extend beyond rule awareness**. Interviews with sanctioned athletes suggest that athletes often require support to make sense of what happened, understand their rights and responsibilities, reflect on their decisions and circumstances, and, where applicable, prepare for rehabilitation and reintegration. This is particularly important given that anti-doping rule violations do not arise in identical ways: some involve intentional conduct, while others may involve negligence, misunderstanding, or preventable gaps in knowledge. **Education should therefore be proportionate, relevant, and responsive to the circumstances athletes actually face, rather than limited to generic messages about compliance.**

From an anti-doping system perspective, education also plays an important role in strengthening trust, consistency, and legitimacy. Where communication is unclear, responsibilities are poorly coordinated, or educational materials are inaccessible or disconnected from lived experience, athletes may perceive the system as opaque, punitive, and unresponsive. By contrast, athlete-centred and continuous education can reduce confusion, improve procedural understanding, support fairer engagement with the system, and contribute to both prevention and rehabilitation. A more structured approach to education for sanctioned athletes is therefore needed not only to improve individual understanding, but also to strengthen the credibility and effectiveness of anti-doping governance more broadly.

KEY MESSAGE

Education is not only a tool for compliance. It is a continuous process that enables understanding, supports responsibility, and contributes to long-term behavioural change and trust in sport.

3. Evidence Sources

The recommendations are grounded in qualitative evidence from the Erasmus+ and WADA-funded TALE – *What About Us?* project, complemented by a participatory sense-making process using a World Café method. Evidence is drawn from:

- qualitative interviews with sanctioned athletes, capturing their lived experiences and expressed support needs
- stakeholder perspectives from the World Café, reflecting expectations from clean athletes, sport organisations, and experts

The World Café brought together diverse stakeholders, including:

- sanctioned and non-sanctioned athletes
- representatives from national and international sport organisations
- legal experts
- representatives from human rights institutions

Together, these perspectives highlight that education for sanctioned athletes should not be understood as an isolated or corrective measure, but as a core component of a fair, supportive, and effective anti-doping system.

4. Literacy-based Approach to Anti-Doping Education

Education for sanctioned athletes should be understood as a continuous and supportive process, rather than a one-time intervention. This is particularly important as interviews with sanctioned athletes highlight that many felt unprepared for the anti-doping process, lacking both understanding of the rules and clarity about how violations could occur.

Athlete voice

“What would help... is proper education [...] better knowledge about anti-doping regulations, supplements, nutrition... would make a big difference.”

The conceptual approach adopted here can be understood as a literacy-based approach to anti-doping education. In this context, **education is not limited to the transmission of rules or compliance messages, but is concerned with developing athletes’ capacity to access, understand, interpret, evaluate, and apply anti-doping-related information in real-life contexts.** This includes understanding rights, responsibilities, procedures, risks, and available sources of support, as well as being able to use that knowledge in ways that support informed decision-making and meaningful engagement with the anti-doping system.

A literacy-based approach is particularly relevant for sanctioned athletes because the evidence suggests that many experience anti-doping processes as complex, unclear, and difficult to navigate. Education must therefore do more than communicate prohibitions: it **must support procedural understanding, practical sensemaking, and, where relevant, reflection, behavioural change, and preparation for reintegration.** In this sense, anti-doping literacy includes functional understanding of rules and processes, interactive capacity to seek support and engage with relevant actors, and critical capacity to assess information, reflect on experience, and make informed decisions.

Framing education in terms of literacy also reinforces the idea that education is a continuous and systemic responsibility. Athletes’ ability to act knowledgeably and independently depends not only on individual effort, but also on whether the system provides clear communication, accessible resources, consistent terminology, and meaningful opportunities for learning across the athlete pathway. Anti-doping education is therefore most effective when it strengthens not only knowledge, but also the athlete’s capacity to understand, navigate, and respond to the system in fair, informed, and constructive ways.

Three key principles underpin this approach.

1) Athlete-centred and experience-based

Education should reflect the lived realities of (sanctioned) athletes, including challenges such as stigma, legal complexity, and uncertainty. Interviews show that many athletes struggled to understand:

- how violations occurred
- how the system works
- what their responsibilities were

World Café discussions therefore emphasised a shift from compliance-driven education to approaches grounded in real athlete experiences and narratives.

2) Education as support, not extended sanction

Athletes frequently described feeling judged, dehumanised and unsupported within the process. Education should therefore not be perceived as an extension of punishment, but as a mechanism that reduces confusion, supports informed decision-making, enables fair engagement with the system and contributes to fair and transparent processes.

3) Education as a continuous system responsibility

Findings indicate that gaps in education often result from inconsistent delivery, limited access, and overreliance on informal sources. Education should therefore not be limited to specific moments or individual actors. Rather, it should be embedded across the system, coordinated between organisations, and accessible at all stages of the athlete pathway.

INSIGHT BOX

Education becomes effective when it addresses what athletes actually experience - not only what the anti-doping systems expect them to know.

5. Short-Term Recommendations (Immediate and Feasible Actions)

Short-term actions focus on clarity, accessibility, and immediate support, where implementation is realistic within existing structures. They respond directly to gaps identified in athlete interviews. Partners of this project suggested some of these actions already during the consultation phase of the WADA International Standard for Education 2027 and are pleased to see some of the proposed actions below implemented for the upcoming ISE.

Clarifying roles and responsibilities

World Café discussions revealed ongoing uncertainty about who is responsible for delivering education. As a first step, organisations should establish clear operational responsibilities and ensure coordination across relevant actors, including NADOs, IFs, and national federations.

PROPOSED ACTIONS

- ✓ Define responsible actors for education at operational level as defined in the WADA International Standard for Education 2027
- ✓ Ensure coordination between NADO, IF, and national stakeholders as defined in the WADA International Standard for Education 2027

Ensuring early and accessible education

Education should represent the first meaningful contact post-sanction with anti-doping systems. This requires identifying key target groups and ensuring that athletes and their support personnel receive timely, accessible information.

PROPOSED ACTIONS

- ✓ In general, provide early anti-doping education at entry points as defined in the WADA International Standard for Education 2021
- ✓ Extend education to athlete support personnel as defined in the WADA International Standard for Education 2027
- ✓ Provide early anti-doping education post-sanction

Strengthening athletes' understanding of rights and processes

Interviews consistently show that athletes felt overwhelmed by legal complexity, unsure about their rights and options, and unsupported in navigating the process. Athletes often struggle to understand their rights and responsibilities within anti-doping procedures.

ATHLET VOICE

"I got myself a lawyer... that was the first moment of peace for me."

This highlights the importance of clear, accessible communication and education, particularly around legal processes and expectations and at the beginning of the sanction.

PROPOSED ACTIONS

- ✓ Educate athletes about their rights at an early stage (i.e. immediately after the notification)
- ✓ Provide clear, accessible explanations of procedures at an early stage (i.e. immediately after the notification)

Integrating athlete voice into education

Both interviews and World Café discussions emphasise the importance of moving away from imposed education. Athletes expressed a strong desire to be heard, to contribute and to improving the system based on their experiences. Education should therefore actively integrate athlete perspectives and lived experiences, including where appropriate, real cases, reflections and learning narratives. It should be co-developed with athletes and reflect their perspectives and experiences wherever possible.

PROPOSED ACTIONS

- ✓ Integrate athlete perspectives into education design
- ✓ Use athlete experiences as learning tools

Introducing peer-to-peer learning formats

Peer exchange was identified as a valuable learning approach. Structured peer-to-peer formats can provide safe spaces for dialogue, reflection, and shared understanding.

PROPOSED ACTIONS

- ✓ Set up peer-to-peer learning formats
- ✓ Facilitate dialogue between athletes

Training key actors in communication

Education was also identified as necessary for arbitrators, legal units, and Doping Control Officers (DCO). Organisations may provide training on:

- communication
- athlete interaction
- process explanation

PROPOSED ACTIONS

- ✓ Train key actors in communication and athlete interaction
- ✓ Develop simple guidance materials (e.g. “How to notify an athlete or other person about an alleged anti-doping rule violation”)

PRACTICAL TAKEAWAY

Small improvements - such as clearer communication, defined responsibilities, and early engagement - can have immediate impact on athlete understanding and trust.

6. Medium-Term Recommendations (System Development)

Medium-term actions focus on strengthening structures, quality, and consistency within education systems.

Moving towards athlete-centred evaluation of education

Participants emphasised the need to move beyond compliance-based monitoring towards evaluation approaches that reflect athlete perspectives. Education should be assessed based on relevance, accessibility, and practical impact.

PROPOSED ACTIONS

- ✓ Introduce athlete-centred evaluation approaches
- ✓ Include athlete feedback in assessing education

Establishing structured stakeholder involvement

Education systems should incorporate structured involvement of athlete representatives, including cross-federation perspectives. This increases relevance and strengthens trust in educational processes.

PROPOSED ACTIONS

- ✓ Involve athlete representatives in education governance
- ✓ Establish cross-federation evaluation groups

Ensuring consistency and accessibility of educational material

Inconsistent messaging was identified as a challenge. Improving on the use of shared terminology and accessible materials (as indicated by the WADA ISE) can help ensure that education is coherent and understandable across contexts.

PROPOSED ACTIONS

- ✓ Ensure semantic consistency across materials
- ✓ Improve accessibility of education resources

Strengthening preventive education

Interviews highlight that a significant number of athletes - particularly in unintentional cases - felt that violations could have been prevented through better and more relevant education. Athletes specifically pointed to a lack of knowledge about supplements, a limited understanding of anti-doping programmes and an overreliance on coaches or other external advice.

ATHLETE VOICE

"Better knowledge... would make a big difference."

Preventive education should therefore be practical and context-based, focused on real decision-making situations and designed to support independent and informed choices.

PROPOSED ACTIONS

- ✓ Strengthen preventive education content
- ✓ Address real-life decision-making contexts

Supporting education for all actors in the system

A key message from the discussions was that education should not be limited to athletes. Linked to better training related to communication as outlined above, a broader range of actors, including DCOs, support personnel, and organisational staff, must be included to ensure a consistent system-wide approach.

PROPOSED ACTIONS

- ✓ Implement education across all stakeholder levels
- ✓ Ensure that all key actors have access to tailored education

INSIGHT BOX

Education is most effective when it is shared across the anti-doping system, not limited to athletes alone.

7. Long-Term Recommendations

Long-term actions focus on embedding education as a core and sustainable component of sport systems.

Integrating education into professional and academic pathways

Participants proposed embedding anti-doping education within academic programmes and professional training structures, ensuring long-term integration beyond sport-specific initiatives.

PROPOSED DIRECTIONS

- ✓ Develop academic-level anti-doping education
- ✓ Integrate into professional training pathways

Developing train-the-trainer programmes

Building capacity requires structured approaches to knowledge transfer. Train-the-trainer programmes can help ensure that education is scalable and sustainable across different contexts.

PROPOSED DIRECTIONS

- ✓ Establish train-the-trainer structures
- ✓ Build capacity and collaboration at national and international levels

Promoting athlete development beyond compliance

As stated in the ISE 2027, education should not only aim to prevent violations but also support broader athlete development. Interviews show that many athletes struggled with identity loss, lacked alternative career options, and faced difficulties transitioning beyond sport.

Education can therefore play a key role in supporting:

- self-management and decision-making
- values and integrity
- identity beyond sport
- long-term resilience

PROPOSED DIRECTIONS

- ✓ Integrate life skills and self-management into education
- ✓ Promote athlete independence and resilience

Developing shared knowledge systems

Sustainable education requires accessible and shared resources. Establishing knowledge bases for educational materials can support consistency and long-term use.

PROPOSED DIRECTIONS

- ✓ Develop centralised knowledge resources
- ✓ Ensure long-term accessibility and sharing

Aligning incentives with effective education

Participants suggested exploring mechanisms to link resources or funding with the quality and effectiveness of education programmes, encouraging long-term commitment.

PROPOSED DIRECTIONS

- ✓ Explore funding models linked to education effectiveness

LONG-TERM PERSPECTIVE

Education should contribute not only to compliance, but to stronger, more resilient athletes who are able to make informed and independent decisions.

8. System Risks

Without improved education approaches, risks include:

- continued lack of practical understanding of rights and responsibilities among athletes
- preventable anti-doping rule violations
- reduced trust in anti-doping
- inconsistent education quality
- missed opportunities for behavioural change (where warranted)

9. Key Recommendations

Taken together, the evidence, conceptual approach, and phased recommendations above point to a clear conclusion: education for sanctioned athletes must be understood as a structured, athlete-centred, and system-wide responsibility. The following recommendations translate these insights into practical priorities for policy and implementation.

Key recommendation 1: Develop athlete-centred education approaches that respond to lived experience and practical understanding needs, rather than relying only on compliance-driven messaging.

Key recommendation 2: Embed education as a continuous and system-wide responsibility across the athlete pathway, rather than treating it as an isolated intervention delivered at a single moment.

Key recommendation 3: Integrate athlete perspectives, including those of sanctioned athletes, into the design, delivery, and evaluation of education measures to improve relevance, credibility, and trust.

Key recommendation 4: Design education to support both prevention and rehabilitation, including understanding of rights, responsibilities, decision-making, reflection, and - where relevant - behavioural change.

Key recommendation 5: Establish clear responsibilities and coordination mechanisms across NADOs, IFs, national federations, and other relevant actors to ensure consistent and accessible education provision.

Key recommendation 6: Prioritise realistic short-term implementation steps, including clearer communication, earlier engagement, and more accessible educational resources, as a foundation for longer-term system development.

10. Contribution to Further Development

These recommendations provide a conceptual and practical basis for the further development of structured education programmes for sanctioned athletes. They translate the current evidence base into an initial set of directions that can support reflection, policy dialogue, and early implementation, while recognising that further refinement will be needed as knowledge, practice, and stakeholder engagement evolve. In this sense, the recommendations are intended not as a

final model, but as a proposed foundation for more coherent, relevant, and effective education responses across anti-doping programmes.

As a proposed framework for further development, their purpose is to identify the core domains that require attention if education for sanctioned athletes is to move beyond fragmented or compliance-only approaches. This includes the need to clarify responsibilities, improve accessibility, strengthen athlete-centred design, embed education across the system, and ensure that educational measures are responsive to both prevention and rehabilitation needs. By doing so, the recommendations support organisations in moving toward a more coordinated model in which education is understood not as an add-on to sanctioning, but as a core element of fair and effective anti-doping practice.

They are intended to guide practical implementation at NADO and federation level, support alignment across stakeholders, and contribute to the development of a more detailed and operational education framework in subsequent project phases. Given the range of actors involved—including athletes, support personnel, anti-doping organisations, legal actors, and sport governing bodies—a clearer shared framework can help reduce inconsistency, improve coordination, and create a more transparent basis for future development.

Importantly, further development should also strengthen system-level capacities for monitoring, evaluation, and learning. At present, education for sanctioned athletes is often discussed as a general need but is less often documented in a way that allows organisations to assess who receives education, what type of education is provided, when it is delivered, and whether it is perceived as accessible, relevant, and useful. A more effective system will require better capture of education provision across the athlete pathway, including education delivered at the point of notification, during sanction, and in preparation for possible reintegration. Such information would support quality improvement, enable comparison across settings, and help identify where gaps in delivery or access persist.

A related priority is the development of stronger evidence on educational impact. Future work should therefore support more systematic approaches to evaluating whether education contributes to improved understanding of rights and responsibilities, better navigation of anti-doping procedures, reduced confusion, enabled more informed decision-making, and, where applicable, meaningful reflection and behavioural change. This is especially important if education is to be treated as a substantive component of prevention, rehabilitation, and trust-building rather than merely as a formal requirement. In this sense, improved monitoring and evaluation are systemic conditions for a better education system, allowing organisations to assess not only whether education is delivered, but whether it is functioning as intended.

This recommendation set should therefore be understood as an iterative contribution rather than an endpoint. Subsequent project phases may build on it by testing practical applicability, identifying implementation priorities, clarifying minimum standards, and further specifying which educational elements should be mandatory, recommended, or context dependent. Future development may also be strengthened by additional athlete feedback, comparative policy learning, and the continued integration of lived experience into education design and evaluation.

In this way, the recommendations contribute not only to immediate discussion and refinement, but also to the longer-term development of a more detailed, operational, and evidence-informed

education framework for sanctioned athletes. Ultimately, their value lies in helping anti-doping and sport systems recognise education as a continuous system responsibility - one that supports understanding, fairness, prevention, rehabilitation, and trust across the full athlete pathway. As a direction for future research, the scope could be expanded to athletes' wider personal environment, including athlete support personnel, parents, and sport physicians, to inform dedicated policy recommendations for these groups in subsequent project phases.