



# A JUGGLING ACT





## Acknowledgements

The GPA would like to extend a sincere thank you to all of the student inter-county players who took the time to complete the survey online. A sincere thank you also to the student inter-county players, inter-county managers, Games Development Officers (GDOs) and academic staff who volunteered their time to take part in focus group discussions and interviews. It would not have been possible to publish this report without your valued time and information.

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## FOREWORD FROM THE CEO

In 2015 the first GPA Student Report was published providing an insight into the experiences of third-level student inter-county players. The current report builds on the findings of the original report and represents the GPA's commitment to understanding the needs of our members and supporting them using an evidence-based approach. The current student report, along with the 2015 student report and the ESRI report published in 2018 provide valuable information from the players which will be used to enhance our ability to deliver on our three core pillars of representing the player voice, protecting player welfare and supporting player development.

College can be an exciting, challenging and formative experience for young people. Third level education typically coincides with a new phase of a young person's life bringing with it the development of new social networks, independent living, exploring new experiences and developing new interests. For student inter-county GAA players all of this is combined with contributing to the college sporting community as members of their college teams, as well as representing their counties and clubs in their chosen code. While all of these present hugely positive opportunities, they can also be overwhelming for young student players who are attempting to juggle the demands of a dual career and the associated challenging priorities.

Today, over one third of GPA members are third-level students, each faced with the challenges of managing the demands of being an inter-county player alongside their academic commitments and personal lives. It is widely accepted that being a student-athlete supports the development of valuable transferable skills; being a student inter-county player should not prohibit students from performing to an optimal level academically,

or negatively impact them financially, physically or emotionally. Many students do enjoy simultaneous sporting and academic success and our aim is to maximise the opportunity for this success among all of our student members.

One of the most striking findings of the current report is the similarity to the findings of the previous student report (Lane, 2015) as well as the corroboration of some of the findings of the ESRI report (Kelly et al., 2018). This highlights the crucial need for a collaborative approach from all of the key stakeholders to reduce the challenges student inter-county players encounter as they navigate through their third-level education. I look forward to working with you all as we continue to address this challenge.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all of our student-members who took part in our survey and focus groups as well as the individuals who gave up their time to participate in the stakeholder interviews. I would also like to congratulate, Jennifer and the GPA team on this excellent report. While the intention of this report was to provide an insight into the lives of student inter-county players, the predominant aim was to identify truly actionable recommendations and facilitate solutions that we hope will improve the experiences of our student members and enable them to achieve their personal potential both on and off the pitch.

**Paul Flynn**  
Chief Executive Officer of the Gaelic Players Association  
October 2019

# GPA ROOKIE CAMP



# GPA STUDENT REPORT EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## “A juggling act”: an insight into the lives of student inter-county players

The Gaelic Players Association (GPA) is the official representative organisation for over 2,300 current and former, senior inter-county GAA hurlers and footballers. Its work covers three core pillars: player welfare; player development; and representing player interests.

Today, over a third of GPA members are third-level students (63% of whom are 21 – 24) and each student inter-county player is faced with the specific challenge of managing the demands of being an inter-county player alongside their academic commitments (96% are full-time) and personal lives. This report highlights the challenges experienced by GPA student members and provides recommendations to help them achieve better-balanced lifestyles so they can thrive on and off the field.

Student-athletes all over the world feel similar pressures and there is universal research highlighting these challenges. For example, National Collegiate Athletic Association amateur student-athletes face stresses beyond those of their non-athlete peers. These include regimented

schedules; physical stress and fatigue; practice and game commitments; stereotyping by the media, faculty, and students; and the dual role of student and athlete. Some of these challenges were also reflected in the recent ESRI study published in 2018 on the demands on all senior inter-county players.

The objective of the GPA is to ensure that the commitment of every inter-county player to their on-field career has a positive impact on their lives as a whole. Being a player should help them to develop valuable transferable skills and not prohibit them from performing to an optimal level academically, or negatively impact them financially, physically or emotionally.

Some of the key findings of the report relate to the demands on student inter-county players' time, appropriate prioritisation of playing vs. studies, welfare, and their overall wellbeing.

## KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The key findings have been broken down under 4 main headings - Wellbeing, Academic, Financial and Welfare.

### WELLBEING

#### FINDINGS

- 54%** Over half of student inter-county players regularly feel overwhelmed by their commitments
- 62%** reported that they do not find it easy to manage all of the commitments associated with being a student athlete
- 93%** of student players who had engaged with the GPA's PDP reported that it had assisted them in their off-field lives



#### RECOMMENDATIONS

- A mental health literacy programme will be offered to inter-county squads as part of the new suite of wellbeing programmes.
- All GPA staff and service providers to receive mental health first aid and gambling awareness training.

### ACADEMIC

#### FINDINGS

- 35%** had to repeat a college exam; 11% had to repeat an entire academic year
- 65%** feel their training load negatively affects their academic performance
- 54%** reported they did not receive supports from their college if they were under pressure
- 48%** reported that they felt more like an inter-county player than a student trying to earn a degree



#### RECOMMENDATIONS

- The GPA will share the findings of the current report with the GAA Higher Education Committee and seek to establish representation on the Committee which should facilitate engagement with other entities that impact on the experiences of student inter-county players such as managers and educators.
- The GPA, GAA, other players associations, and educational institutions to explore the development of a cross-sport elite athlete friendly university programme, as well as the ongoing exploration of future scholarship opportunities with third-level institutions.

# FINANCIAL

## FINDINGS

**35%** say more financial support to cover the costs of travel, accommodation and nutrition would be their main priority



**80%** feel being a student-athlete puts financial pressure on their family



**34%** Just over a third are in a position to be able to work part time



## RECOMMENDATIONS

- The GPA is currently developing a new bespoke financial information and advice programme to provide support and guidance on financial planning, budgeting, tax etc.

- The GPA will review the current expenses model in 2019 and continue to work on the implementation of squad charters. The GPA is also currently exploring the development of an internship programme to be piloted in 2020.

# WELFARE

## FINDINGS

**83%** Are playing with at least three teams



**81%** take part in social activities less than most other people their age



**70%** travel home for training 3 or more times per week



**48%** felt confident to talk to their county manager about a reduced training load



## RECOMMENDATIONS

- The GPA are currently working on a Minimum Standards of Care Policy through the GPA Player Safety and Welfare Committee. This policy will focus on improving the overall medical care available to inter-county players. Recommendations include specifying a minimum level of qualification for physiotherapists, doctors, strength and conditioning coaches etc. and clear protocols for emergency situations at all venues.

- The GPA are also represented on the new Fixtures Calendar Review Task Force which was established in June 2019 by GAA President John Horan. The remit of this group is to review the GAA Fixtures Calendar in its entirety; this includes examining the timing of higher education competitions. The GPA will advocate strongly for students and propose eligibility protocols for student players. The committee have been tasked with having a report with recommendations completed by November 2019.

## 2019 FINDINGS SIMILAR TO 2015 FINDINGS

A similar report to the current report was commissioned by the GPA in 2015 and authored by Dr Aoife Lane. Notably, one of the key findings of the current report is that many of the challenges highlighted by the 2015 report are still evident. A number of the findings of the current report closely mirror the findings from the 2015 report and in many cases, there has been an increase in the proportion of students who are experiencing specific challenges.

KEY FINDINGS FROM THE GPA STUDENT REPORT	2015	2019	CHANGE
% of student inter-county players who had to repeat an exam	40%	35%	↓ -5%
% of student inter-county players who had to repeat an academic year	14%	11%	↓ -3%
% of student inter-county players who reported that they find it difficult to manage all of their commitments	58%	62%	↑ +4%
% of student inter-county players who reported that they feel overwhelmed by their commitments (college, sport, relationships, work etc.,)	50%	54%	↑ +4%
% of student inter-county players who reported feeling stressed at least once per month	54%	78%	↑ +24%
% of student inter-county players who would like to spend more time with family & friends	61%	73%	↑ +12%
% of inter-county players who represented at least 3 teams in the previous year	69%	83%	↑ +14%
% of inter-county players who trained at least 4 times per week	89%	81%	↓ -8%
% of inter-county players who were travelling from college to training at least 3 times per week	52%	69%	↑ +17%
% of inter-county players who would like more time to devote to their studies	56%	69%	↑ +13%

It is envisioned that student inter-county players who utilise the tools and services provided by the GPA's Player Development Programme (PDP) will be able to better manage the demands of their dual-lifestyle. Indeed, 93% of student inter-county players who engaged with the GPA's PDP said it has assisted them in their off-field lives. The GPA's PDP offers a range of player development programmes focused on career, education, personal development, and health and mental wellbeing.

Research has demonstrated that it is possible for student-athletes to enjoy simultaneous sporting and academic success if the right supports are available to them. As well as achieving greater life success, they also make a positive contribution to the overall college environment. The

execution of the key recommendations outlined in the report alongside the ongoing support of the GPA PDP can help student inter-county players perform to their personal best in both their on-field and off-field lives.

It is becoming increasingly evident that collaboration is vital; it is imperative that inter-county managers, college managers, third-level institutions, the GPA and the GAA work together to identify solutions to the challenges student inter-county players are facing. A working group where each of the key stakeholder groups are represented should be established with a focus on developing tangible solutions to address the issues highlighted in the 2015 Student Report and again highlighted by the current 2019 Student Report.

# A JUGGLING ACT



# Introduction

## The Gaelic Players Association

The Gaelic Players Association (GPA) is a player's representative organisation for inter-county GAA players. The GPA represents all current and former senior inter-county hurlers and footballers and their work is centred around three core areas of focus; representing player interests, supporting player development and protecting player welfare. The profiles of inter-county GAA players are extremely diverse in terms of age, occupation, education etc., and as a result, their needs, in terms of support and development, are varied depending on their specific circumstances. The GPA provides a range of supports and services aimed at enabling their members to achieve their potential in all aspects of their lives, both on and off the field of play. The GPA membership is comprised of a number of different cohorts of players all of whom are faced with unique challenges associated with managing and coordinating their off-field lives with their on-field careers. Third-level students comprise a large proportion of the GPA membership (over one third of current GPA members are students) and as with each player cohort, third-level students are presented with very specific challenges associated with their status as elite student-athletes.

## Student-athletes

While it is broadly acknowledged that there are numerous benefits associated with being a student-athlete, student-athletes are often considered to be a non-traditional population of students due to their dual status and identity as both an athlete and a student. Many of the positive aspects of being a student-athlete are developed through the experience of balancing both of these, often conflicting aspects of their lives. Issues arise, however, when the balance between the different aspects of a student-athlete's life becomes something that is unattainable due to the overwhelming pressures and demands that they are faced with. There is a plethora of international research highlighting the challenges that student-athletes face and while it could be argued that the majority of this research is based on student-athletes in the US and Australia and is therefore not generalisable to an Irish context, recent Irish studies have corroborated the findings of these studies highlighting that student-athletes in Ireland are faced with similar challenges (e.g., Kelly, Banks, McGuinness & Watson, 2018; Drew & Matthews, 2018; Lane, 2015).

Research conducted by Van Rensburg, Surujal, and Dhurup (2011) has shown that university student-athletes face stresses beyond those of their non-athlete peers, including regimented schedules; physical stress and fatigue; practice and game commitments; stereotyping by the media, faculty, and students; and the dual role of student and athlete. Similar findings were highlighted by Martin and Andersen (2014) and Brewer and Petrie (2014) in research conducted with National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) student athletes. Although not identical, NCAA athletes are similar to inter-county GAA players in that they are also amateurs (Kelly et al., 2018). It would appear evident from the recent Irish studies cited above that these issues faced by NCAA athletes are also prominent concerns in the lives of student-athletes in Ireland, particularly student inter-county GAA players.

## GPA Player Development Programme

The GPA Player Development Programme (PDP) exists to provide support for players to empower and equip them with the tools and confidence to improve and enhance their lives off the field of play. It is hoped that by engaging with the GPA's PDP services and supports players will be in a better position to manage the demands of a dual career as an amateur athlete and subsequently perform to their personal best both on and off the field. The GPA endorses a holistic view of players lives and promotes their development and welfare as both inter-county players and people. As part of their work to support student inter-county players, the GPA award student scholarships to their student members to support their academic development and to ease the financial burden associated with pursuing further education while also representing their county in their chosen code at the highest level. It is recognised that players' on-field performances are inextricably linked to their performances in their careers, education, relationships and their emotional wellbeing. The GPA espouse the view that providing student players with the supports necessary to attain their goals in all aspects of their lives will have numerous benefits for both the inter-county games and the individuals involved in playing those games.

## GPA Student Report

The GPA recognise that the best way to understand the needs of their student members is to ask them directly about their experiences of maintaining their dual careers. In light of this, in order for student inter-county players to be eligible for the GPA Student Scholarship, they are required to complete a survey where they are asked a series of questions related to their commitments as both a student and an inter-county player. The following sections of this report provide a summary of the findings of this Student Scholarship Survey which is based on the experiences of student inter-county players in 2018 and provides an insight into the challenges they face while navigating the numerous demands of their dual careers. Recommendations about how some of these challenges can be addressed are also provided at the end of each section. In line with the GPA's holistic view and in order to obtain a more in-depth insight into the experiences of student inter-county players, the information collected as part of the GPA Student Scholarship Survey is supplemented by information obtained from focus group discussions with inter-county players and interviews with other key stakeholders such as inter-county managers, Games Development Officers (GDOs) and academic staff. This report will build on the findings of the previous student report published in 2015 and represents a continuation of the GPA's evidence-based approach.



# Methodology

## Quantitative

As part of the annual GPA Student Scholarship application process, inter-county players who are third-level students are required to complete a survey examining their experiences of being a student-athlete in order to be eligible to receive the scholarship. The online survey was completed by students over a period of three weeks from October – November 2018.

## Qualitative

Regional focus group discussions were carried out with student inter-county players (n = 24) in Dublin, Belfast, and Limerick and interviews were conducted with key stakeholders including inter-county managers, academic staff and GDO's (n = 8).



## Sample

A total of 488 third-level student inter-county players completed the GPA Student Scholarship Survey based on their 2018 experiences. The student inter-county players were all males and ranged in age from 18 – 33 years, with an average age of 22 years. The tables and graphs in this section provide an overview of the demographic profile of the participants with information related to their playing careers and third-level education outlined.

## Survey Design

The survey consisted of 40 closed questions where students were asked about their experiences and commitments associated with both their third-level education and their inter-county careers. The survey contained one open ended question where students were asked how the GPA could support them better as a student.

The data collected as part of the Student Scholarship Survey is supplemented by data collected through the GPA Grant Survey. This supplementary data provides information directly related to player wellbeing and athletic identity. The GPA Grant Survey was completed by the same student GPA members over a four-week period from December 2018 to January 2019.

## Student Demographics

As highlighted below in Figure 1, the majority of student inter-county players were aged between 21-24 years of age and just under one quarter were aged between 18-20. It is worth noting that due to their age these players may be playing U20, senior inter-county, college and club football or hurling.

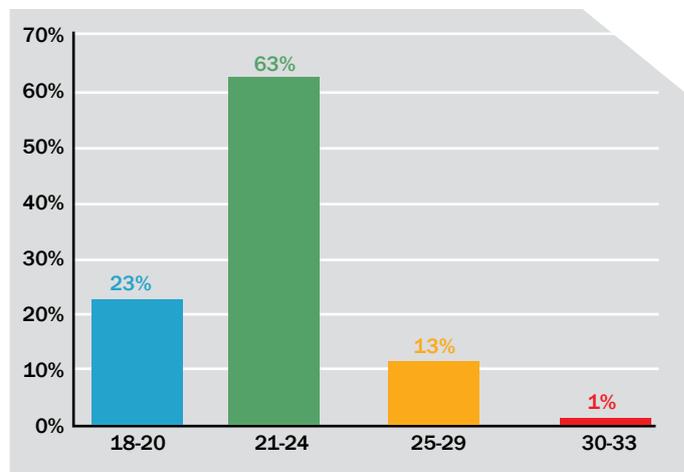


Figure 1. Age of student inter-county players

As illustrated in Figure 2 below, there was quite an equal split between students who were playing either hurling or football. Notably, only 1 respondent was in a position where they could maintain playing both codes, hurling and football.

## Breakdown of Codes

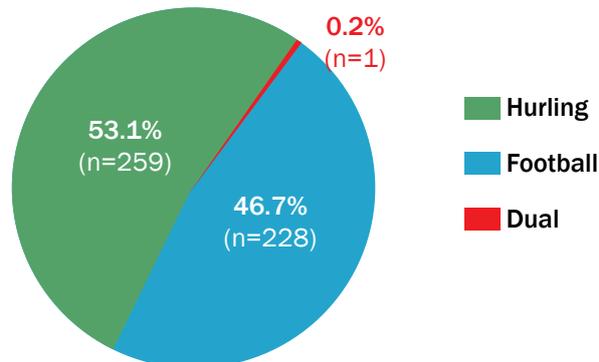


Figure 2. Proportion of student inter-county players from each code

As illustrated in Figure 3 below, in relation to football, each of the four divisions were quite evenly represented with the highest proportion of student inter-county players (31%) playing in Division 3. One quarter were representing their counties at the highest level playing in Division 1. In terms of hurling, the highest proportion (43%) of student inter-county players were competing at the highest level in the Liam MacCarthy competition, with one fifth competing in the Christy Ring competition.

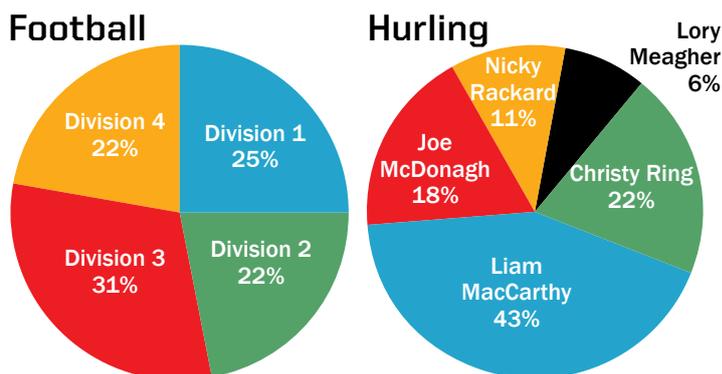


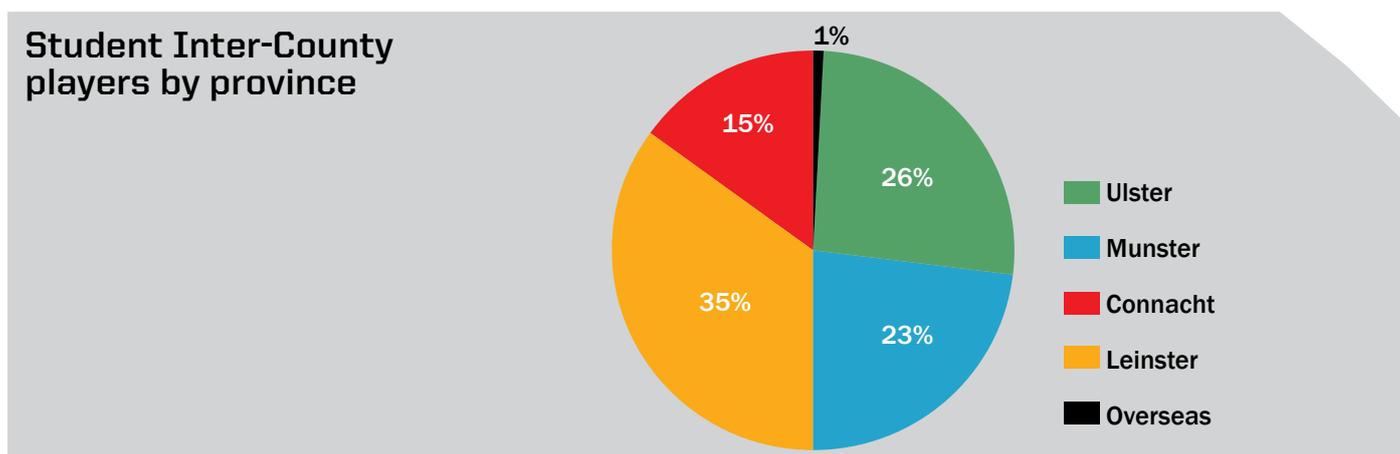
Figure 3. Breakdown of competitions student inter-county players were involved in (football & hurling)

As outlined in Table 1 below, student inter-county players from 32 counties responded to the survey with almost all counties represented by students from both codes. Student inter-county players from the teams based in the UK (London, Lancashire and Warwickshire) made up 1% of all participants. A breakdown of student inter-county players per

province is displayed in Figure 4 below, with Leinster being the province with the highest proportion of student inter-county players represented by over one third of survey respondents, while Ulster was represented by one quarter of student inter-county players.

**Table 1. Breakdown of counties represented per code**

County	Hurling		Football		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Antrim	4	1.54	10	4.39	14	2.87
Armagh	5	1.93	9	3.95	14	2.87
Carlow	7	2.70	2	0.88	9	1.84
Cavan	6	2.32	6	2.63	12	2.46
Clare	14	5.41	9	3.95	23	4.71
Cork	10	3.86	7	3.07	17	3.48
Derry	5	1.93	13	5.70	18	3.69
Donegal	5	1.93	9	3.95	14	2.87
Down	12	4.63	7	3.07	19	3.89
Dublin	15	5.79	6	2.63	21	4.30
Fermanagh	6	2.32	5	2.19	11	2.25
Galway	7	2.70	4	1.75	11	2.25
Kerry	11	4.25	7	3.07	18	3.69
Kildare	7	2.70	8	3.51	15	3.07
Kilkenny	13	5.02	0	0.00	13	2.66
Lancashire	2	0.77	0	0.00	2	0.41
Laois	10	3.86	6	2.63	16	3.28
Leitrim	9	3.47	10	4.39	19	3.89
Limerick	15	5.79	11	4.82	26	5.33
London	2	0.77	2	0.88	4	0.82
Longford	4	1.54	7	3.07	11	2.25
Louth	2	0.77	8	3.51	10	2.05
Mayo	6	2.32	8	3.51	14	2.87
Meath	4	1.54	6	2.63	10	2.05
Monaghan	4	1.54	9	3.95	13	2.66
Offaly	7	2.70	7	3.07	14	2.87
Roscommon	5	1.93	4	1.75	9	1.84
Sligo (1 Dual Player)	7	2.70	13	5.70	21	4.30
Tipperary	13	5.02	4	1.75	17	3.48
Tyrone	4	1.54	6	2.63	10	2.05
Warwickshire	1	0.39	0	0.00	1	0.20
Waterford	6	2.32	3	1.32	9	1.84
Westmeath	10	3.86	4	1.75	14	2.87
Wexford	11	4.25	12	5.26	23	4.71
Wicklow	10	3.86	6	2.63	16	3.28
<b>Total</b>	<b>259</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>228</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>488</b>	<b>100.00</b>



**Figure 4. Breakdown of student inter-county players per province**

## College Course Information

An overview of the level of study, time commitments and field of study for the student inter-county players who completed the survey is provided in Table 2 below. The majority (72%) of students were undergraduate students as would be expected considering the age-range of the respondents involved, with an average age of 22 years.

Table 2. Breakdown of Third-Level College Information

Demographics		
Course Level	N	%
Undergraduate	350	71.7%
Postgraduate	135	27.6%
Apprenticeship	3	0.6%
	<b>488</b>	

Time Commitment	N	%
Part-Time	18	4%
Full-Time	470	96%
	<b>488</b>	

Field of Study	N	%
Arts/Humanities/Law/Social	36	7.38%
Business/Accounting/Finance	140	28.69%
Education/Teaching	97	19.88%
Engineering/Construction	76	15.57%
Healthcare	32	6.56%
Sciences	49	10.04%
Sport Related	47	9.63%
Technology/Computing	11	2.25%
	<b>488</b>	

The area of Business/Accounting/Finance was the most popular field of study with almost 30% of student inter-county players studying a business-related course, as illustrated in Figure 5. The next most common field of study was Education/Teaching with one fifth of student inter-county players studying a course in this field.

## Fields of Study

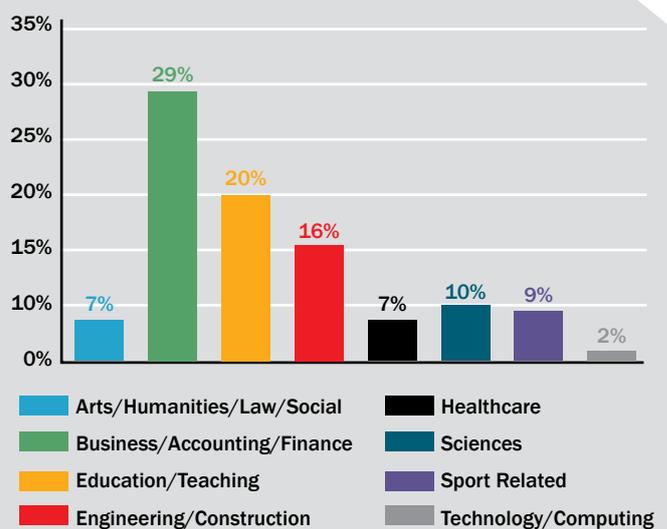
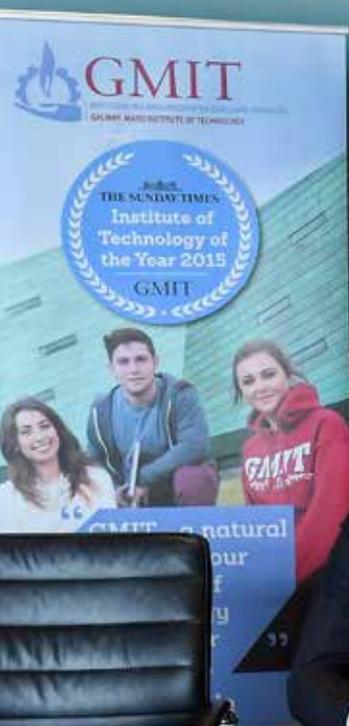


Figure 5. Breakdown of students per field of study

In relation to course time commitments, the vast majority of students were enrolled in a full-time course (see Figure 6 below).



Figure 6. Proportion of student-athletes enrolled in full-time and part-time course



## Findings

# STUDENT INTER-COUNTY PLAYERS' WELLBEING

### Student-athletes and wellbeing

In the past, it has been posited that athletes were less likely to experience mental health difficulties compared to the general population as participating in sport was seen to be a protective factor with benefits such as increased self-esteem and social connectedness. In recent years this view has been challenged with research suggesting that athletes are no less likely than the general population to experience mental health difficulties (Gulliver, Griffiths, Mackinnon, Batterham, & Stanimirovic, 2015; Rice, Purcell, De Silva, Mawren, McGorry, & Parker, 2016). It is widely acknowledged that athletes are faced with numerous and varied challenges as a result of their involvement in sport at an elite level such as overtraining, coach pressure, expectations, organisational demands and the fear of failure or loss of athletic identity through injury or retirement (Fletcher & Hanton, 2003; Hammond, Gialloredo, Kubas, & Davis, 2013; Purvis, Gonsalves, & Deuster, 2010; Putukian, 2016; Rao & Hong, 2016; Stambulova, Alfermann, Statler, & Cote, 2009; Weigand, Cohen, & Merenstein, 2013). Student-athletes are in a unique situation as they are confronted with all of the challenges outlined above in conjunction with the additional demands associated with combining demanding academic schedules with their commitments as an athlete (Brand, Wolff, & Hoyer, 2013; Sudano, Collins, & Miles, 2017). The additional pressure that student-athletes face as they try to perform to their potential in both their academic and sporting careers can lead to an increased risk of mental health difficulties (Moreland, Coxe & Yang, 2017). While all of the research cited above has been carried out with athletes outside of Ireland, the findings of the Student Scholarship Survey highlight that student inter-county GAA players are faced with a number of the same challenges and pressures.

### The Irish context

In a recent Irish study carried out by Drew and Matthews in 2018, 45% of student-athletes reported symptoms of depression and/or anxiety outside the normal range. In the same study, almost one third (31%) of student-athletes reported moderate to severe symptoms of depression and/or anxiety, suggesting that mental ill-health is common among student-athletes in Ireland. The ESRI report examining the impact of playing senior inter-county Gaelic Games, also published in 2018, found that GAA players mental wellbeing was somewhat below that of the general population, particularly when compared with those of a similar age (Kelly et al., 2018). The 2016 GOALS study carried out by the NCAA in the US suggests that 30% of student-athletes self-reported that they were overwhelmed in the previous month. In comparison to this, over half (54%) of student inter-county players who responded to the GPA Student Scholarship Survey self-reported that they regularly feel overwhelmed

**45%**

of student athletes reported symptoms of depression and/or anxiety outside of the normal range

(Drew & Matthews, 2018)

**54%**

of student inter-county players regularly feel overwhelmed by their commitments

**62%**

of student inter-county athletes reported they do not find it easy to manage all their commitments - college, sport, work, relationships

by their commitments, while a further 30% were undecided. Notably, the majority of students (62%) reported that they do not find it easy to manage all of the commitments associated with being a student-athlete such as college, sport, work and relationships. It is also of note that these figures show a slight increase compared to the figures reported in the previous GPA Student Report by Lane (2015).

### General emotional health and wellbeing

**81%**

take part in social activities less than others their age

The majority of student inter-county players reported that they were happy (83%) and enjoyed life (85%) most of the time; however, almost 40% of students also reported that they felt stressed once a month, while a further 40% reported that they felt stressed more than once a month. Almost three quarters (74%) of students stated that they had difficulty concentrating at least once a month and over 60% of students reported that they had difficulty sleeping at least once a month. When asked if the college they were attending provided support for students who were under pressure with college assignments, exams and projects, due to their inter-county commitments, over half of students reported that they did not receive any support. Despite all of the time demands and commitments student-athletes are faced with, almost 70% of student inter-county players reported that they were satisfied with their emotional health and wellbeing. Interestingly, despite almost three quarters (73%)

of students stating that they would like more time to devote to their family and friends and the vast majority (81%) of students stating that compared with other people their age they take part in social activities less than most, over 60% of students stated that they were satisfied with their personal relationships.

The impact of inter-county commitments on relationships was a theme that pervaded throughout the focus group discussions, as illustrated by one student who stated:

**73%**

of student inter-county players would like more time to devote to their family and friends

“ I think the whole family and friends thing is a massive one for me anyway, so say I am away in college, so getting home on a Friday evening and going training and you're finished at half 9 or 10 and you might see the girlfriend for a little while then the following day like if you have a match Sunday, the Saturday is kind of revolving around like we said earlier preparing for the match on Sunday, so I think there is a big massive strain on family and friends. I think that's a big one for me, you'd be trying to stay on top of your study too. ”

Masters, hurler

The culture of professionalism and the associated impact on students' social lives was highlighted by a number of students across all focus groups. This was illustrated by one student who said:

“ I think that's probably the hardest thing actually seeing all the lads go out, like you win a game and you're expected to stay in so you can play the next game, it's like a tradition that you're not allowed enjoy yourself after playing a game then you see rugby lads at elite level like going out the week before a game, like they win a game, they celebrate, they get back at it, it's like a tradition in the GAA where you're not allowed do that, it's just so game focused and you see all your mates going out and if you were to go out and even enjoy yourself once you get punished big time for it. ”

Masters, hurler

**56%**

of student players are playing with 3 teams

**20%**

of student players are playing with 4 teams

**22%**

of students surveyed had engaged with the GPA's Player Development Programme

**93%**

of those who availed of the GPA Player Development Programme reported it assisted them in their off-field lives

**40%**

of respondents got less than 7 hours sleep

An acknowledgement of the pressurised environment they are operating in as elite athletes and the impact this can have was highlighted as something that should be considered throughout the key stakeholder interviews:

“ I think you do need to be aware that these are young people as well who have not developed all their life skills at that stage but they are working in a really cut throat environment and living in it and sometimes it can be quite ruthless and they are competing at a high level and that's not always straightforward - they may not have got to the stage yet where they can manage to cope with it and that's something to be aware of. ”

Academic staff member

Cultivating sources of emotional support within teams (from teammates or other sport staff) through improving team cohesion and/or providing opportunities for emotional support from sport staff may further assist student-athletes to reduce the burden of combining sport and education. Such interventions may prove especially fruitful in light of findings that top performers' resilience to sport-related stressors is partly due to their perceived level of social support (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012).

## Wellbeing and sport

The majority (60%) of student inter-county players stated that they were satisfied with their sporting career, with 30% undecided about this. The majority (56%) of student players were playing with 3 teams, and over one fifth of students were playing with 4 teams. Three quarters of students were playing with their college team with 45% of students reporting that they felt under pressure to represent their college team. Interestingly, less than half of student inter-county players (47%) reported that they felt confident to speak to their county manager to request more flexibility to undertake individual training sessions at their college base to reduce travel time and allow more time for rest and recovery. Notably, the vast majority (83%) of student inter-county players agreed with the statement “I feel bad about myself when I do poorly in sport” and a further 60% agreed that they need to participate in sport to feel good about themselves.

The challenges associated with balancing all of the different aspects of their lives to ensure they are in a position to perform to their best in terms of their sporting career was highlighted throughout the interviews with GDOs, inter-county managers and academic staff:

“ It's challenging, there are lots of different priorities.....you are dealing with 19 to 23-year olds typically and there's a lot going on for them so it's a real juggling act for them to try and be at the level they need to be at from a nutritional, sleep, relaxation all those kind of things, it's very difficult for them to get the balance right I would say. ”

Academic staff member

## Sleep

Over one third of student inter-county players reported that they woke up feeling fresh and rested less than half of the time with the majority (50%) of student-athletes getting between 7 to 8 hours sleep. Research has shown that domains of athletic performance (e.g., speed and endurance), neurocognitive function (e.g., attention and memory), and physical health (e.g., illness and injury risk, and weight maintenance) can be negatively affected by insufficient sleep or experimentally modelled sleep restriction (Simpson, Gibbs, & Matheson, 2017). Over 40% of respondents got less than 7 hours sleep which is below the 8-10 hours' sleep recommended for athletes (Samuels & Alexander, 2013).

## GPA's support for student inter-county players

Just over one fifth (22%) of students who completed the survey reported that they had engaged with the GPA's Player Development Programme (PDP); the majority (93%) of those who had previously engaged reported that it had assisted them in their off-field lives. While this is a promising finding it also highlights that over three quarters of student players had not accessed the GPA's Player Development Programme and thus had not received any of the support available through this channel. This is



something that the GPA are actively working to address by promoting the relevant services available to students, raising awareness of the supports through squad visits and the development and roll out of a new 'Rookie Camp' specifically aimed at targeting student inter-county players who have recently embarked on their senior inter-county careers. The inaugural GPA Rookie Camp was held in December 2018 and was attended by over 60 student inter-county players aged between 18 – 24, with 26 counties represented at the one-day event. An evaluation of the Rookie Camp found that 100% of attendees would recommend attending the Rookie Camp in 2019 to a teammate.

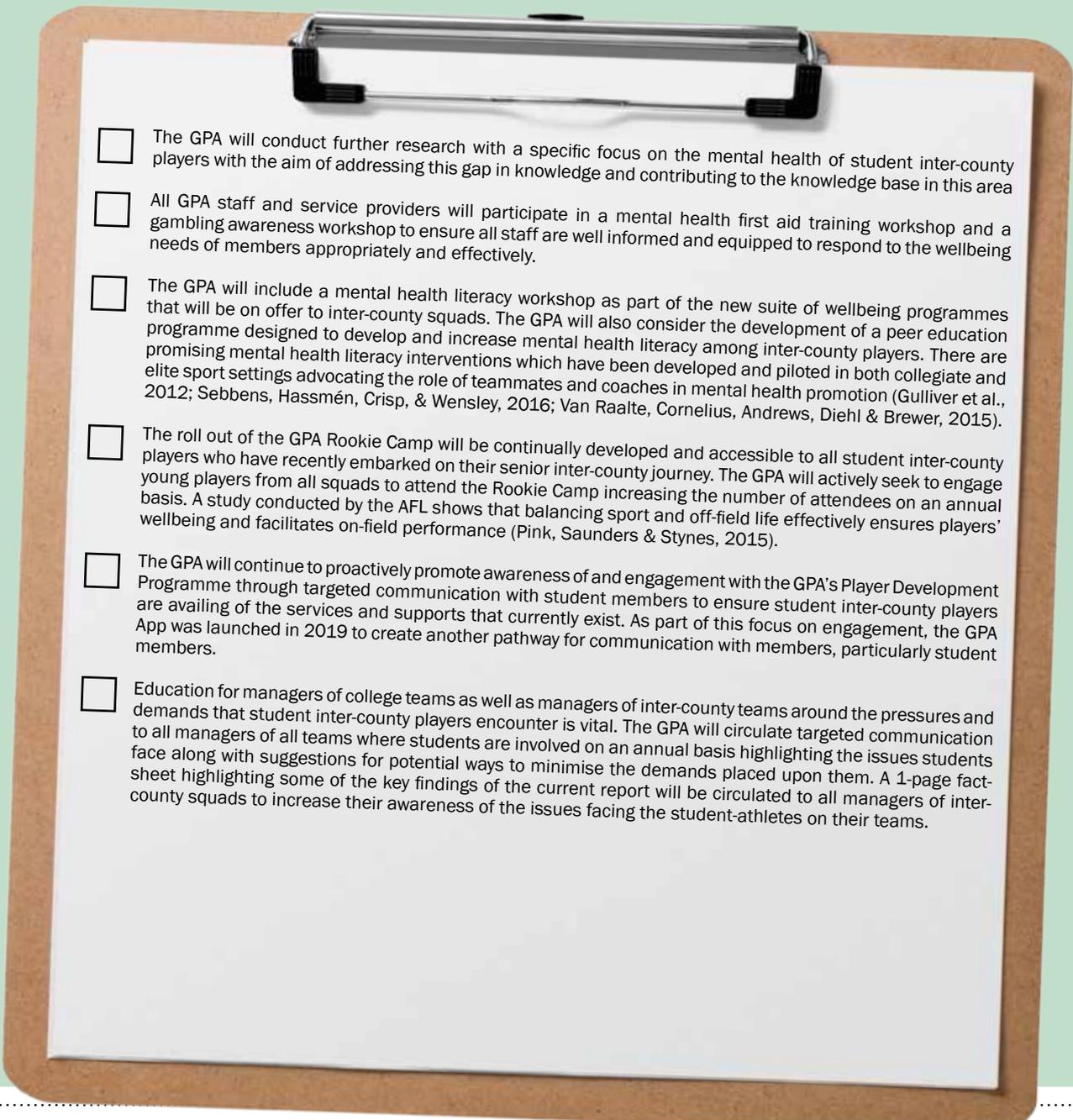
Indeed, one of the predominant themes to emerge from the interviews and focus groups was the idea of allowing things to reach 'crisis point' and not seeking support until the last minute rather than being proactive and communicating with support structures in a timely manner. This was acknowledged as an issue by students, inter-county managers, GDOs and academic staff. Almost all participants alluded to the fact that there are numerous supports available for student inter-county players but they often do not engage with or avail of these supports until it is too late and this often leads to trying to "put out fires at the end of the year" that could have been avoided if issues were communicated earlier.

The benefits of engaging with the supports that are currently available were highlighted in the focus groups by some of the students who found them extremely helpful in terms of supporting them with managing all of their commitments:

“I think just engaging with the player development officer is important and if more GAA college students did it they would have a better plan than like the career development coach helped me to set out a plan for me for the 4 or 5 weeks ahead and I felt that by doing that I had a lot more clarity and I was hitting the targets as I went along you know rather than just leaving it all until the last minute.”

Third year undergrad, footballer

## RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 
- The GPA will conduct further research with a specific focus on the mental health of student inter-county players with the aim of addressing this gap in knowledge and contributing to the knowledge base in this area
  - All GPA staff and service providers will participate in a mental health first aid training workshop and a gambling awareness workshop to ensure all staff are well informed and equipped to respond to the wellbeing needs of members appropriately and effectively.
  - The GPA will include a mental health literacy workshop as part of the new suite of wellbeing programmes that will be on offer to inter-county squads. The GPA will also consider the development of a peer education programme designed to develop and increase mental health literacy among inter-county players. There are promising mental health literacy interventions which have been developed and piloted in both collegiate and elite sport settings advocating the role of teammates and coaches in mental health promotion (Gulliver et al., 2012; Sebbens, Hassmén, Crisp, & Wensley, 2016; Van Raalte, Cornelius, Andrews, Diehl & Brewer, 2015).
  - The roll out of the GPA Rookie Camp will be continually developed and accessible to all student inter-county players who have recently embarked on their senior inter-county journey. The GPA will actively seek to engage young players from all squads to attend the Rookie Camp increasing the number of attendees on an annual basis. A study conducted by the AFL shows that balancing sport and off-field life effectively ensures players' wellbeing and facilitates on-field performance (Pink, Saunders & Stynes, 2015).
  - The GPA will continue to proactively promote awareness of and engagement with the GPA's Player Development Programme through targeted communication with student members to ensure student inter-county players are availing of the services and supports that currently exist. As part of this focus on engagement, the GPA App was launched in 2019 to create another pathway for communication with members, particularly student members.
  - Education for managers of college teams as well as managers of inter-county teams around the pressures and demands that student inter-county players encounter is vital. The GPA will circulate targeted communication to all managers of all teams where students are involved on an annual basis highlighting the issues students face along with suggestions for potential ways to minimise the demands placed upon them. A 1-page fact-sheet highlighting some of the key findings of the current report will be circulated to all managers of inter-county squads to increase their awareness of the issues facing the student-athletes on their teams.

# ACADEMIC EXPERIENCES OF STUDENT INTER-COUNTY PLAYERS

## The college experience

Based on the findings of the GPA Student Scholarship Survey it appears that the overall third-level 'college experience' is a positive one for inter-county student players, with 84% acknowledging that overall, they do experience enjoyment from their time as students. Similarly, an overwhelming majority (88%) of students were happy with their course choice; however, a minority (6%) of individuals who are enjoying the overall college experience, are not satisfied with their current college course. On the other hand, 61% of students who are not finding fulfillment in their college experience are feeling satisfied with their college course. This finding emphasises the importance of taking a holistic view and of gaining a rounded college experience outside of the solely academic frameworks.

The impact of inter-county commitments on their college experience was highlighted by a number of players in the focus groups. A sense of being constrained by rules and restrictions was something mentioned by a number of the students with one of them suggesting that their experience was:

“different to any other college experience, there's restrictions on everything we do because of our commitment.”  
**Third year undergrad, footballer**

This was further elaborated on by one of the other students who explained:

“It's different from most of the usual students, for most lads you know before Christmas you get your chance to be a student but gone by there like I was playing with my club there until November and then you have exams and assignments due in December and then next thing you know your league starts up in January and you know that's been constant there for my last 4 years in college, it's been the same thing really, so you get your odd chance to go out and socialise but its restricted too like so it's not the average college life but eh to me its grand and for most lads its fine but it is different.”  
**Masters, footballer**

In the focus group discussions students referred to the fact that they are constantly faced with important decisions and forced to choose between the many different aspects of their lives but many of them appear to accept that those decisions are part and parcel of being an inter-county player. As one student stated:

“I think you have to make tougher choices and you have to make them more often I think than just full-time college students, they don't have that maybe in the back of their mind all the time or they don't have to base decisions or choices off it and it's one big factor all the time like whether you're going out or socialising, I think it's the choices and the decisions you have to make.”  
**Final year undergrad, footballer**

There was also an acknowledgment from all of the interview participants that student inter-county players have a somewhat different college experience than the general student population in that:

“they have less time to dedicate towards study, less time to dedicate to down time or a social life and there are more demands on their time.”  
**GDO**

This was highlighted by an inter-county manager who suggested:

“They have a busier lifestyle, they have a lot more to manage in terms of their time trying to sort out stuff for getting back for training, getting their gym done, obviously trying to meet their deadlines for college work and attending classes and I'd suggest that they have to spend more time preparing for a healthier lifestyle, nutrition, being prepared with food, bringing food with them etc. compared to non-student athletes and they have that commitment to commuting for training which maybe other students wouldn't have.”  
**Inter-county manager, football**

**61%**

of students who are not finding fulfillment in their college experience are feeling satisfied with their course

**35%**

have had to repeat a college exam

**11%**

have had to repeat a full academic year

There was recognition across all interviews with key stakeholders that the social aspect of student inter-county players' college experience differed largely from the experiences of the general student population and their opportunity to live the 'student life' was limited by their involvement in inter-county. This echoes the views shared by the students throughout the focus groups. As one inter-county manager stated:

“From a social point of view, I suppose you could say they are maybe not as socially active in college compared to other students who don't have the inter-county commitments.”  
**Inter-county manager, hurling**

This was echoed by one of the GDOs who suggested that:

“You're probably not as socially active as a student if you are playing and also any free time you have you probably have to devote to your studies more so than building other networks and interactions so that probably has a knock on effect, so it is very different and also you are living a different type of life as regards your diet, your discipline and your structure, so yeah it is different you're not always able to live like other students. If you were away from home as a student quite often you would stay there for the week, if you're an inter-county player you probably have to deal with things like travel, getting back, toing-froing between different things, team meetings, team sessions so it's very very different.”  
**GDO**



## Potential barriers to academic success - athletic identity

In attempting to ascertain the basis for these concerning figures, it might be helpful to explore some of the areas that may be prohibiting student inter-county players from performing to an optimal level academically. As outlined in the EU Guidelines on Dual Careers of Athletes report (2012), the combination of education and training often becomes complicated when athletes would like to combine higher education with their sports career. Notably, almost half (48%) of student inter-county players reported that they felt more like an inter-county player than a student trying to earn a degree. Furthermore, over half (52%) of respondents to the GPA Student Scholarship Survey indicated that sport influenced their course choice, and almost 60% of student-athletes reported that they spend more time thinking about their sport than anything else.

Research suggests that where an individual over-identifies with their role as an athlete it is often at the expense of their social development and wellbeing (Brewer et al., 1993). It is also highlighted in the literature that athletes with over-developed athletic identities are less prepared for life after their sporting careers (Baillie & Danish, 1992, Lavalee & Robinson, 2007). Often referred to as 'identity foreclosure', it can lead to athletes abandoning academic qualifications, employment opportunities and emotional relationships in order to pursue sporting success (Baillie & Danish, 1992; Brewer et al., 1993). Some studies have shown that student-athletes often begin their college career with 'vague or non-existent' career goals while they invest heavily in their athletic roles (Lally & Kerr, 2005). The vast majority of respondents to the Student Scholarship Survey reported that they consider themselves an athlete and 70% of respondents reported that other people see them mainly as an athlete.

This sense of identifying more as an inter-county player and the reasons associated with it were discussed throughout the focus group discussions with one student suggesting:

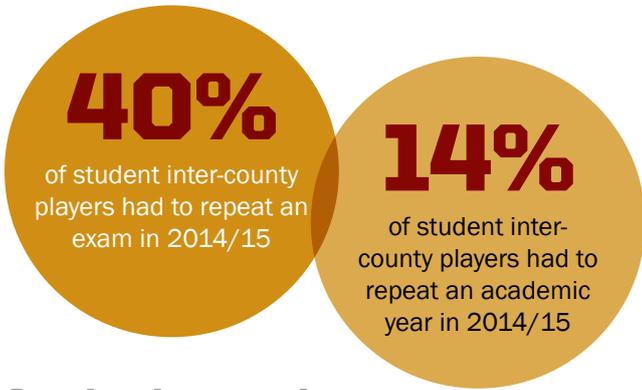
“ I suppose for these 3 or 4 weeks and the 2 or 3 weeks before Christmas that's when you really feel like a student I suppose but the rest of the year is consumed by inter-county hurling or football. ”  
**Second year undergrad, hurler**

This was expanded upon by another student who stated:

“ I suppose it probably just goes back a lot to the commitments of inter-county sport like I mean when you wake up in the morning your breakfast is geared around your training, at night you're packing your bag and you're getting your gear ready, like in a way you do so much and so much goes into it that it just naturally takes up your mind, like everything you eat, your recovery, like everything is just based around inter-county football more so than being a student and I suppose that's the way it is really. ”  
**Final year undergrad, footballer**

Similar views were expressed by GDOs, academic staff and inter-county managers throughout the interviews:

“ When you're in an inter-county environment because of the level it's at now there's huge demands on you to make you live that experience every day, so every day you wake up you're probably thinking of your diet, your training, what you have to get done today - your recovery or whatever it is, so you are probably fitting your studies around your playing career rather than vice versa. ”  
**Inter-county manager, football**



## Academic experiences

While the Student Scholarship Survey findings indicate that student inter-county players are enjoying their overall college experience and this is a hugely positive finding, there is also evidence to suggest that there are still a number of barriers preventing student inter-county players from succeeding in their academic endeavours, when compared with their peers among the general population. Over one third (35%) of students surveyed stated that they had to repeat a college exam and 11% were in a position where they were required to repeat a full academic year. While these figures have slightly decreased compared to previous years, 40% and 14% respectively in 2014-2015, these proportions are well above those of the general student population according to figures provided by the Higher Education Authority (2.9% of the general student population were repeat students in 2015/2016; Liston, Pigott, Frawley & Carroll, 2018) and the recent report by the Union of Students in Ireland who found that 13.5% of participants were repeating one or more elements of their course (Price & Smith, 2019). The potential implications of this are cause for concern with the recent study by Price and Smith (2019) highlighting that those students who were repeating one or more elements of their course were more likely to be on the extremely severe end of scales measuring anxiety, depression and stress, and were less likely to be within the normal ranges when compared with those who had not repeated any element of their course.

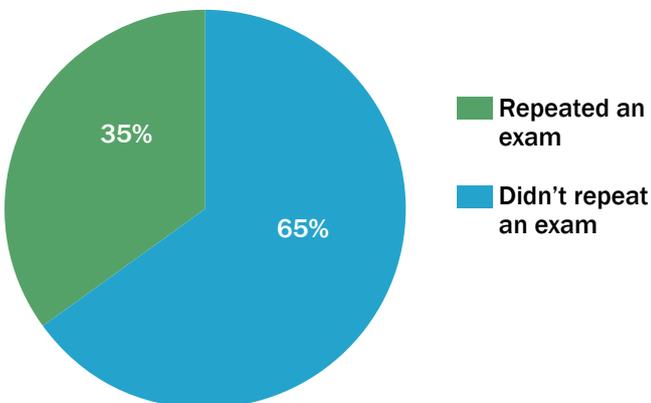


Figure 7. Proportion of student-athletes who repeated a college exam

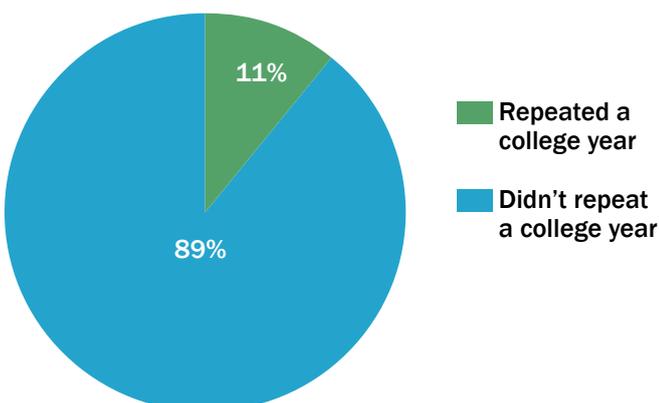


Figure 8. proportion of student-athletes who repeated a college year



While almost three quarters (72%) of players disagree that sport is the only important thing in their life, over half (55%) of student inter-county players stated that sport is the most important part of their life. There was some concern expressed throughout the interviews by inter-county managers, GDOs and academic staff in relation to the structure and lifestyle that some students may be living, with one academic staff member suggesting that:

“ There are some students who are almost living the life of a professional athlete but there is something about that that doesn't add up because they don't have a career as a professional athlete ”

**Academic staff member**

This was elaborated on by one of the GDOs who stated:

“ It's almost that the student goes too far towards that sort of lifestyle, they almost see themselves as being a professional athlete and that impacts negatively on their student work. ”

**GDO**

The potential implications of this are that:

“ They are going to have a poorer degree, they are going to have a poorer initial career structure at least where they are not going to be getting on as well as their peers, they are going to be depending on their inter-county and their GAA ability to enhance their chances of a job and a career much more than they should be because they are putting all their eggs in the GAA basket. ”

**Academic staff member**

**48%**

of student inter-county players feel more like an inter-county player than a student

**52%**

indicated that sport influenced their course choice

**60%**

of student inter-county players spend more time thinking about their sport than anything else

## Potential barriers to academic success - time

Over two thirds (69%) of students reported that they would like to devote more time to their academic studies, while almost 60% of students stated that they would like to devote more time to their sport. These findings, which would appear to be conflicting, highlight one of the main issues that student inter-county players are faced with – a lack of time to balance both aspects of their dual careers. While almost two thirds (65%) of students felt that their training load negatively affected their academic performance, it is notable that under half (48%) of student players agreed that they felt confident to speak to their county team manager to request a reduced training load to enable them to spend more time on their academic commitments.

The above information demonstrates that a significant proportion of players are struggling to balance their academic and sporting commitments and so it is unsurprising to observe that over three quarters of players experience stress more than once a month. As highlighted previously in this report, student players admit to regularly feeling overwhelmed and have difficulty managing all of their competing time commitments.

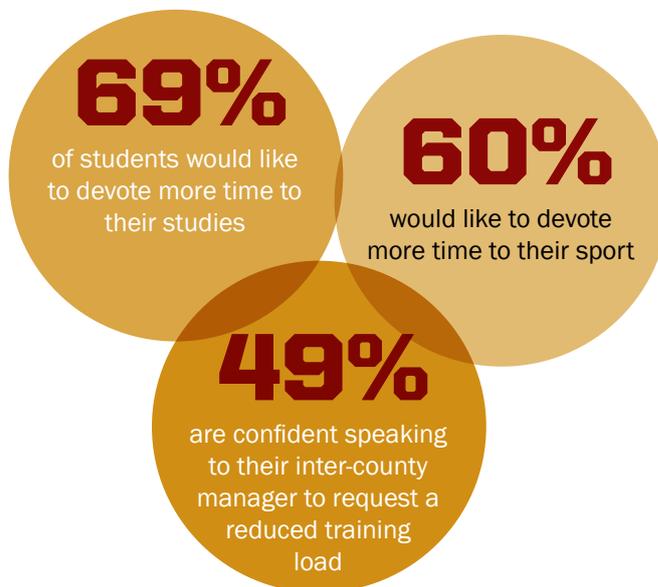
The impact of travel commitments on time to complete academic work was highlighted throughout the focus group discussions, as illustrated by one student who stated:

“The travel and how time consuming it is - you take 5 hours in the car and then another 2 hours training then food after, that's 8 hours out of your day, it just leaves no time to do academics so I'm finding that tough.”  
Masters, footballer



## Role of college & inter-county managers

Encouraging and supporting managers to offer flexibility for student inter-county players may be vital to their success in their sporting and academic pursuits. Facilitating good communication between managers and athletes and fostering a positive manager-player relationship can assist student-athletes to better manage combining their sport and education (Cosh & Tully, 2015; Gearity & Murray, 2011). Interestingly, less than half of student players (47%) reported that they felt confident to speak to their county manager to request more flexibility to undertake individual training sessions at their college base to reduce travel time and allow more time for rest and recovery. Similarly, less than half (49%) of respondents agreed that they were confident to speak to their county team manager to request a reduced training load to allow them to spend more time on their academic commitments.



The complexity of this issue was highlighted in the focus group discussions by one student who suggested:

“Managers will tell you your education is important and to get your studies etc., but if you're missing training it's just going to work against you so I find that tough, the travelling and then trying to find time to get the book work done while trying not to miss training and then there's nights when you have missed it and it works against you then; although managers might not say it out loud, if you're missing training then it's not helping your case for getting playing.”  
Masters, footballer

Some students felt that communication with managers was particularly difficult and one student highlighted some of the challenges:

“It's not feasible even questioning a manager, you can't do it because the amount of players ahead of you who are that bit older who have done it and have been in your situation and the manager will just say well why are they able to do it and you're not.”  
Masters, hurler

There was an agreement across the focus groups with students that managers did not seem to really understand the challenges they were facing and that this made things especially difficult for them:

“I suppose just an understanding from some managers and a recognition of how tough college can be at certain times throughout the year is needed. On Tuesday night it's easier for a lad to call up and say I'm working I can't get off I'm in a meeting here this evening than it is for a lad to say I've an assignment due here in two hours' time or an exam or something big like a presentation tomorrow you know? I don't know, like it's been said already that it's a perception that 'oh he's in college he's only fluting about' you know or whatever, so I think there's a bit of a perception there from managers or even fellow players as well.”  
Masters, hurler

There was the suggestion that support for managers is also something that is needed and that educating them and raising their awareness of the issues facing student inter-county players is something they would benefit from and this in turn would benefit the students. As one inter-county manager stated:

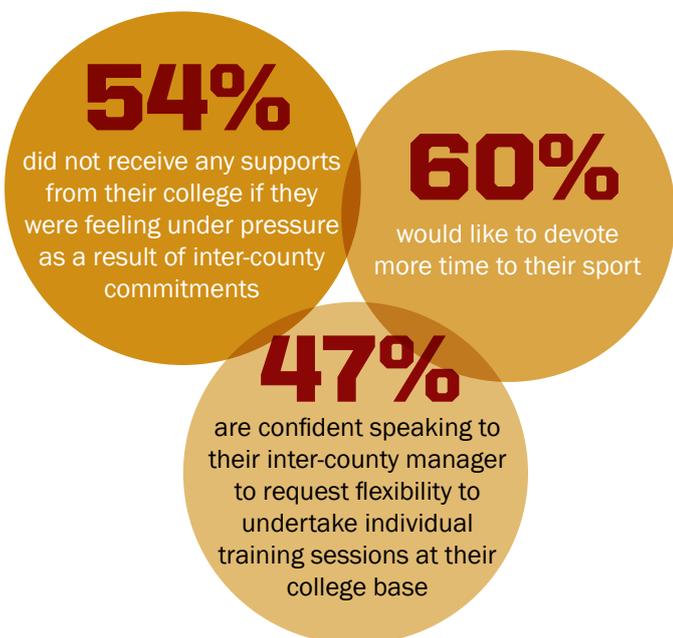
“It's something, I'll be honest, I think it's probably something that a lot of managers may need themselves as well and the support for managers to recognise the demands that are actually on players, maybe there's not enough information going directly to managers.”  
Inter-county manager, hurling

The availability of a support network where student-athletes can obtain practical and emotional support is crucial to enabling them to navigate the challenges associated with combining sport and education (Cosh & Tully, 2015). The GPA recognises the significance of this support and is actively working towards engaging more students and raising awareness about the supports and services available to student inter-county players among managers.

## Benefits of student athletes within the university sector

Inter-county student players are unique in their status as distinguished from the general student population - players combine their academic workload with intensive sporting commitments which requires an average of over 30 hours per week as indicated by recent research published by the ESRI (Kelly et al., 2018). Due to their amateur status this commitment is provided without financial reward and out of respect for the amateur ethos which enshrines the GAA. While many players encounter significant challenges in managing the balance between their on and off-field careers, inter-county student players can contribute positively to the overall academic environment through the transferrable skills developed in an elite sporting environment. Indeed, according to the NCAA GOALS Study (2016) carried out in the US, 90% of student-athletes credit their college athletics experience with having a positive impact on increasing their personal responsibility, honing their teamwork skills, and enhancing their work ethic. Student-athletes also reported that playing sports at a high level while in college has a positive impact on their leadership skills, their values and ethics, self-confidence, time management, understanding of diverse cultures, study skills and commitment to volunteerism (NCAA GOALS study, 2016).

Previous studies conducted by Beyer and Hannah (2000) and Smart and Wolfe (2000) suggest that student participation in sport also provides university-wide benefits which range from a positive influence on the general welfare of a university, institutional loyalty and unity, increasing revenue and prestige to the institution's reputation, and in turn, enhance student applications, enrolment, fundraising and sponsorship. It therefore becomes vital that in order to profit from the potential benefits of student participation in sport, universities take cognisance of the importance of student-athletes' wellbeing and opportunity to succeed in both a sporting and academic context. Given that student-athletes are reporting developing these valuable skills through combining their sporting and academic careers as well as the benefits they bring to the broader university community, it would be in everyone's best interests, students, managers, universities etc., to maximise the opportunity for the development of these skills and their subsequent positive impact on the overall college environment.



## Support for students

Research has demonstrated that it is possible for elite athletes to achieve simultaneous sporting and academic success (Henry, 2013). However, to achieve such success elite student-athletes generally require specific support and flexibility in their academic pursuits (Aquilina, 2013). As outlined above a large proportion of student inter-county players feel regularly overwhelmed by their multiple commitments and find it difficult to manage all of the different aspects of their lives. In terms of support, under half (46%) of students reported that their college provides supports for them if they are feeling under pressure with their college commitments as a result of their inter-county commitments. Over half (54%) of all students reported that they did not receive any supports from their college; however, it should be noted that the majority

(57%) of students were satisfied with the academic support that their educational institute provided them with. This finding suggests that further exploration of the kind of supports that student inter-county players require is needed.

The conflicting requirements of sport and education, a general lack of time for social and personal relationships and high pressure due to expected consistent exceptional performance in sport make the requirement for structured academic support services absolutely essential. Many international sports federations have recognised the need to support elite student-athletes to achieve academic excellence while pursuing a sporting career. These measures promote the implementation of dual careers, but also indirectly support the strategies of Member States on education (highly qualified workforce, the prevention of early school leaving) and sport (EU Guidelines on Dual Careers of Athletes, 2012).

## Elite Athlete Friendly University Programme

Initiatives such as the Elite Athlete Friendly University Programme introduced by the Australian Institute of Sport, supported by Government, have provided significant support for student-athletes. The value of combining both sport and higher education to achieve greater life success is well recognised across the university and sporting sectors by developing new, or promoting existing policies and practices which assist elite student-athletes to undertake sporting opportunities whilst pursuing and achieving academic excellence. Recognised by the leading player associations across Australian sport and adopted by over 40 universities in the country, including the University of New South Wales and the University of Western Australia, athletes benefit through the appointment of a specific contact person within the university. This person is expected to provide support with:

- Advice and guidance to student-athletes on academic planning
- Support in negotiating necessary flexibility to meet academic requirements
- Advocacy for the student-athlete within the university environment
- Support in negotiating and/or implementing student cross institutional study or credit transfer arrangements
- Provision of advice and support to local Athlete Wellbeing and Engagement Manager or related personnel

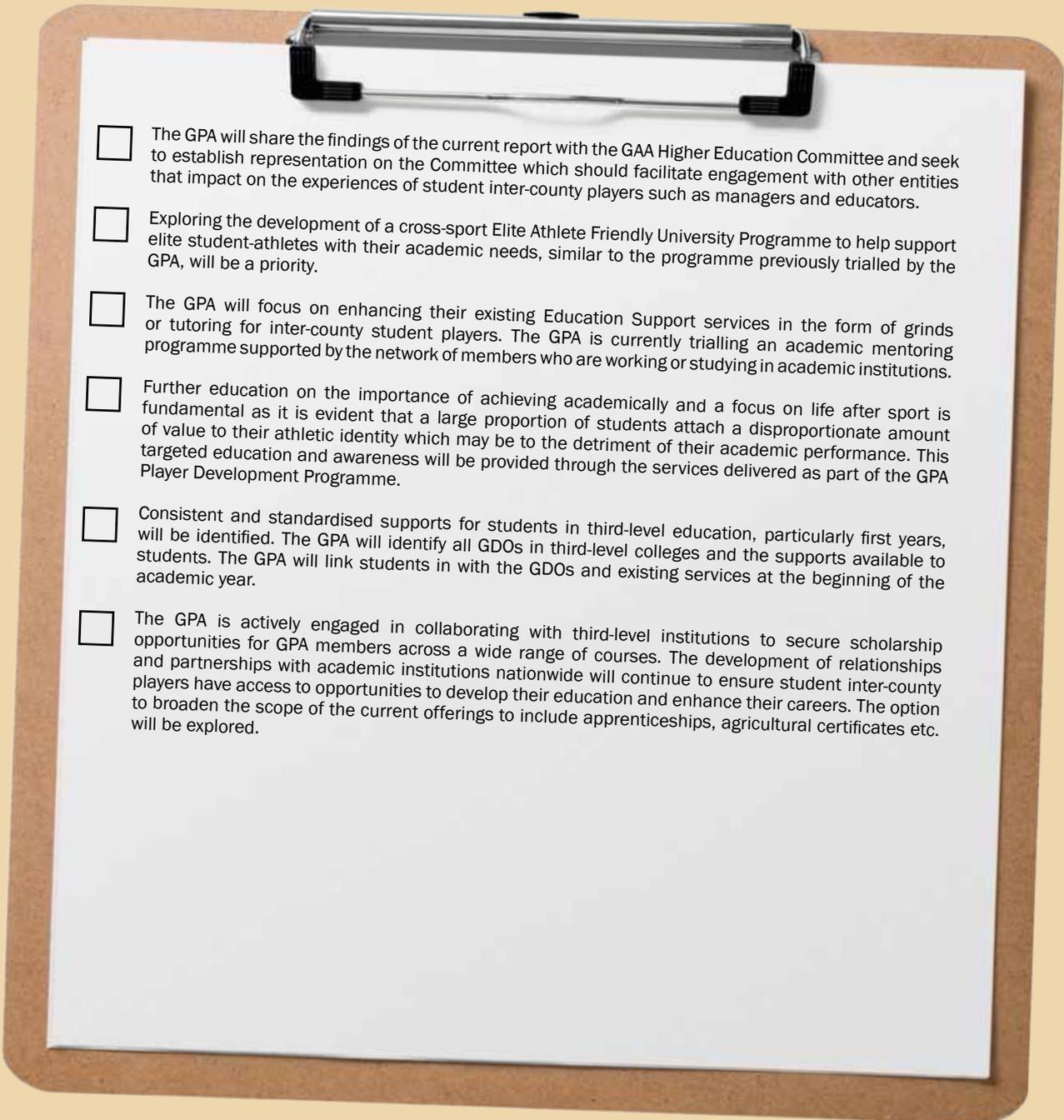


The model provides flexibility to allow student-athletes to tailor academic study load to integrate with their sporting commitments while also providing a means to negotiate lecture, tutorial and practical timetables to accommodate sporting commitments. The GPA previously piloted an Elite Athlete Friendly Institution Protocol as a response to the concerning findings of the previous GPA Student Report (see Lane, 2015). While there was initial success with the implementation of support structures and a designated contact within a number of institutions to support students' academic needs, the lack of support from IUA accredited Universities created a barrier for further roll out of the protocol among the wider third-level hubs. The findings of this report, which closely mirror the findings of the previous GPA Student Report, along with the evidence from the successful models implemented by other international sporting federations suggest that there might be benefit in revisiting the matter. In order to maximise the potential for success, exploring collaboration

with other players associations might be the best route forward along with obtaining support for the initiative from Government level.

As outlined above over half of student inter-county players do not believe they receive any support if they are under pressure with college assignments or exams due to their inter-county commitments. Furthermore, when asked how the GPA could support them better, a number of players expressed a wish for more academic support in the form of grinds, tutoring or additional help with course work. In order to enable student-athletes to reach their full potential and to be successful in both aspects of their dual careers, a degree of flexibility and support from educational institutions is vital in assisting students to catch up on missed study periods and time lost through their sporting commitments (Cosh & Tully, 2015).

## RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 
- The GPA will share the findings of the current report with the GAA Higher Education Committee and seek to establish representation on the Committee which should facilitate engagement with other entities that impact on the experiences of student inter-county players such as managers and educators.
  - Exploring the development of a cross-sport Elite Athlete Friendly University Programme to help support elite student-athletes with their academic needs, similar to the programme previously trialled by the GPA, will be a priority.
  - The GPA will focus on enhancing their existing Education Support services in the form of grinds or tutoring for inter-county student players. The GPA is currently trialling an academic mentoring programme supported by the network of members who are working or studying in academic institutions.
  - Further education on the importance of achieving academically and a focus on life after sport is fundamental as it is evident that a large proportion of students attach a disproportionate amount of value to their athletic identity which may be to the detriment of their academic performance. This targeted education and awareness will be provided through the services delivered as part of the GPA Player Development Programme.
  - Consistent and standardised supports for students in third-level education, particularly first years, will be identified. The GPA will identify all GDOs in third-level colleges and the supports available to students. The GPA will link students in with the GDOs and existing services at the beginning of the academic year.
  - The GPA is actively engaged in collaborating with third-level institutions to secure scholarship opportunities for GPA members across a wide range of courses. The development of relationships and partnerships with academic institutions nationwide will continue to ensure student inter-county players have access to opportunities to develop their education and enhance their careers. The option to broaden the scope of the current offerings to include apprenticeships, agricultural certificates etc. will be explored.

# STUDENT INTER-COUNTY PLAYERS & FINANCE

As part of the research carried out by the ESRI a number of workshops were held with third-level Games Development Officers (GDOs) and inter-county players (Kelly et al., 2018). A number of the issues highlighted by GDOs were reiterated by the players in the player workshops and these similar issues have again been highlighted by students who completed the Student Scholarship Survey based on their experiences in 2018. One particularly prominent issue raised by all groups was the financial implications of playing senior inter-county football or hurling. This has been a consistent and ongoing issue for players and it is something that is a particularly prominent issue for student inter-county players. The financial commitments associated with playing inter-county football and hurling such as increased spending on food/diet, nutrition, mileage and gear, places increased financial pressure on students. This is exacerbated by the fact that they are unable to secure part-time employment that makes it possible for them to fulfil their inter-county commitments.

## Student inter-county players and part-time work

A report detailing the findings of the sixth Eurostudent survey of higher education students in Ireland published in 2016 highlights that 46% of full-time undergraduate students and 45% of postgraduate students were employed (Harom & Erskine, 2016). The recent study conducted by the Union of Students in Ireland found that 48% of students were in employment (Price & Smith, 2019). This is in contrast to the findings of the GPA Student Scholarship Survey which indicate that only 34% of student inter-county players are working part-time. The financial pressure associated with being a student inter-county player was highlighted throughout all of the focus group discussions. The issue was succinctly outlined by one 2nd year student hurler who stated, "it is very hard to train and study let alone find time for a part time job".

This was further elaborated on by another student who felt:

“the GPA do well for students but I think money is a major issue for students as it is very difficult to have a part time job, playing senior hurling/football and be a full-time student. I don't think it is viable as spending time with family and friends is very important.”

Third year undergrad, footballer

It should also be noted that even for those who are working part-time, the time they can devote to this work is limited by their inter-county commitments with many players unable to work on days when they have a match. As a consequence of the time demands associated with being a student inter-county player and not having the time to work part-time, student inter-county players are reliant on funding through scholarships and family support to cover the general costs of education such as

fees, accommodation and living expenses. Indeed, 80% of those who were not working part-time stated that this put financial pressure on their family. The recent report by the Price and Smith (2019) found that students who were dependent on financial assistance from others had high levels of anxiety, depression and stress. The following quotes from some of the survey respondents provide an insight into the impact of this on their lives:

“I feel not being able to work at the weekends because we would be training Friday and Saturday it puts money pressure on myself and my parents.”

Second year undergrad, hurler

“At the moment, my biggest problem would be the financial side of things. I am trying to save for the books that I need for my course but cannot afford them just yet. I have a sister in third-level education as well so cannot rely on my parents to totally fund both of us.”

Third year undergrad, footballer

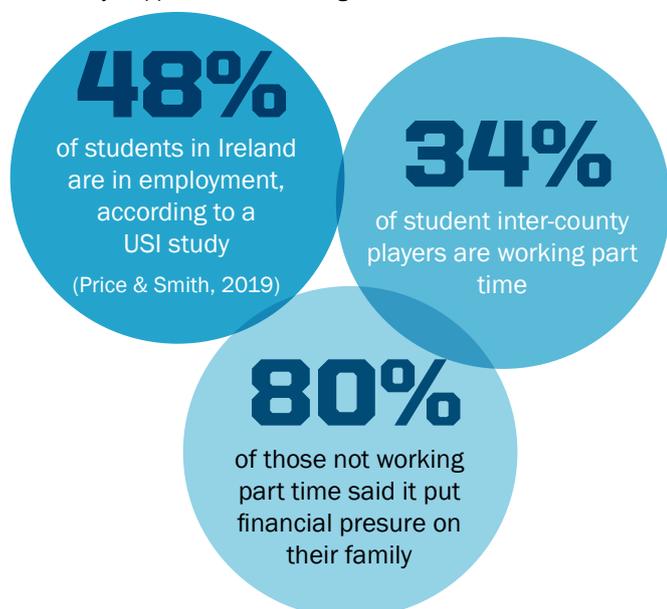


## Finance - predominant priority for student inter-county players

When students were asked a general question about how the GPA could support them better, the predominant theme that emerged was the issue of finance, with over one third (35%) of students stating that they would benefit most from more financial support above support in any other area. For the general student population in Ireland, accommodation is the largest single monthly expenditure, accounting for over 40% of all expenditure (Harom & Erskine, 2016). The GPA Student Scholarship Survey revealed that over half (51%) of student inter-county players were not living at home; thus, they were faced with the associated accommodation costs, travel costs and increased cost of living. Indeed, among the general student population, students living with their parents incurred lower costs of living in all areas of expenditure with the exception of transportation (Harom & Erskine, 2016). It could be argued that transportation is not an area of exception for student inter-county players as they regularly travel home for training and matches. Notably, over half (58%) of students surveyed reported that they were travelling home for training three times per week. While it is acknowledged that the existing expenses scheme goes some way towards reimbursing students for the costs incurred as a result of travelling to and from training, it appears that it is not sufficient to meet the financial needs of student inter-county players. The quotes below illustrate some of the financial issues student inter-county players highlighted in response to the question 'how can the GPA support you better as a student?':

“I feel receiving things like the grant are a massive help. It gives me more time to eat out during the day on the college campus instead of returning home to cook. It also helps cover me with diesel costs for driving home to training. It helps pay for my gym expenses too in college to keep my fitness at an optimum.”

Third year undergrad, hurler



“ Ensure county board pays players expenses on time. Many times, last year expenses did not arrive in adequate time and I was asking my parents for loans throughout the college year for petrol and the upkeep of the car. Travelling in an old petrol Corsa consumed €30 per trip and this ultimately added up. ”

**Second year undergrad, footballer**

Finance, in particular the costs associated with travelling to training, was highlighted as a major issue across all focus groups, with one student stating:

“ Sometimes even if you're trekking up to training during the week and you're putting €30 or €40 diesel in the car like and that's your money for the week for food as well so sometimes you are definitely scraping the bottom of the barrel but you're always constantly trying to figure out how to get the right balance of work/college and training. ”

**Second year undergrad, hurler**

Another student highlighted the contrast between student players and those who are working full-time:

“ Like you can definitely see the contrast going in the car to training, like there's two boys who work with us and there are two of us who are in college like and you know the two boys would be like “oh grand we got the expenses there that's grand” like whereas the two of us would be nearly looking at the bank account every day waiting for it to come in like so you know it's very different in that regard. ”

**Final year undergrad, footballer**

A study conducted with student-athletes in Australia found similar findings with the issue of financial stress due to their involvement in sport emerging as a predominant theme for participants, in particular the lack of time for paid employment and over-reliance on financial support from parents were highlighted as additional pressures on top of the pressure associated with playing sport at an elite level and excelling academically (Cosh & Tully, 2015). Furthermore, nutrition was another area where students felt they were struggling due to the financial aspect of healthy eating. Notably, 60% of student inter-county players reported that the biggest barrier to them achieving their optimal dietary intake was cost. Time demands are also implicated in relation to nutrition with

almost one third of students citing a lack of time as a barrier to adequate nutrition. This was also highlighted in the focus group discussions with one student stating:

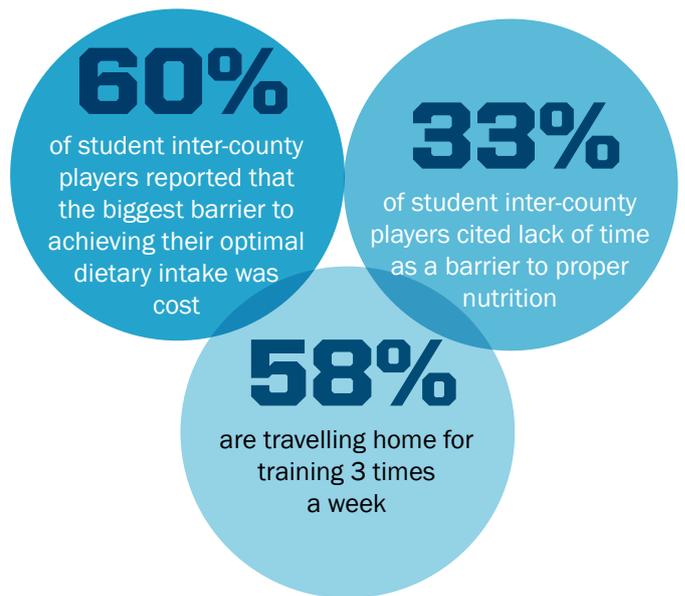
“ Number one it can be financially tough like the lads touched on it there with the travelling and stuff like that if you're away at college and even just funding your nutrition and stuff like that it can be very financially tough. ”

**Third year undergrad, footballer**

The financial challenges highlighted by the students themselves through the survey and the focus groups were also mentioned by the GDOs and inter-county managers:

“ Students are students and they are spending a lot of time in sport so they don't have the time for part-time work so some of them would be under financial troubles and under pressure all the time with finances. ”

**GDO**



## RECOMMENDATIONS:

- The development of an internship programme utilising the resources of the GPA network is currently being explored with a view to providing opportunities for part-time employment and career development for student inter-county players. This will be piloted and based on the results the internship programme may be rolled-out across the GPA network; thus, providing flexible employment opportunities for students with employers who understand their sporting commitments.
- The development and implementation of a graduate programme is currently being explored by the GPA. This will provide recent graduates with the opportunity to obtain relevant employment and to develop and enhance their transferable skills in a working environment while pursuing their playing career.
- The GPA will explore the potential for student concessions sponsored by supermarkets and subsidised meal deals based on nutrition plans for teams that can be tailored towards their training.
- The GPA will continue to work with teams on the implementation of squad charters to ensure players entitlements to mileage expenses and nutrition expenses are being adequately fulfilled. A review of the current expenses model will be carried out with the view to exploring how the model can be improved to reduce the financial pressures students currently experience.
- The GPA is currently developing a new bespoke financial information and advice programme to provide members with support and guidance on financial planning, budgeting, tax etc.

# STUDENT INTER-COUNTY PLAYER WELFARE - FIXTURES & COMPETITION STRUCTURES

## Training load, team membership & travel commitments

A consistent area of concern is the potential vulnerability of student-athletes to physical and psychological burnout. This has become more of an issue in GAA in recent years with the emergence of sports conditioning as a major component of inter-county training which is something that is adding substantially to players' overall training load (Kelly et al, 2018). In terms of player welfare this is a key issue to examine and in turn identify means by which to reduce the possible risk of burnout for student inter-county players, particularly since the findings of the ESRI report highlight that players aged 18 to 21 had especially high levels of overall Gaelic game time commitment in 2016 due to the number of teams they were involved with. As part of the Student Scholarship Survey, students were asked about the number of teams they played with during 2018. Notably, the majority of students were involved with 3 or more teams in 2018 with over half (56%) of students indicating that they had played with three teams during the 2018 season and over one fifth (21%) of students reporting that they were involved with four teams. A breakdown of the number of teams that student inter-county players played with in the 2018 season is provided in Figure 9 below, interestingly only 1% of students reported being involved with one single team.

### Team Membership

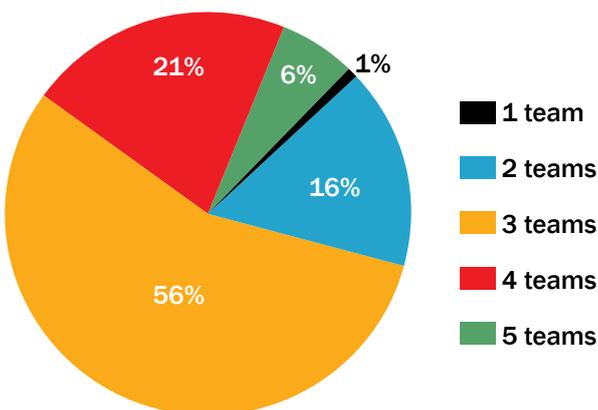


Figure 9: Number of teams student inter-county players were involved with in 2018 season

Figure 10 below illustrates the particularly high levels of time commitment that these players were required to devote to Gaelic games during the 2018 season. Almost two fifths (37%) of players surveyed were training 5 times per week, with a further two fifths (40%) training 4 times per week. The associated travel commitment is also a concern, with over half of players (58%) travelling home for training 3 times per week and over 10% travelling home four or more times (see Figure 11)

### No. of weekly training sessions

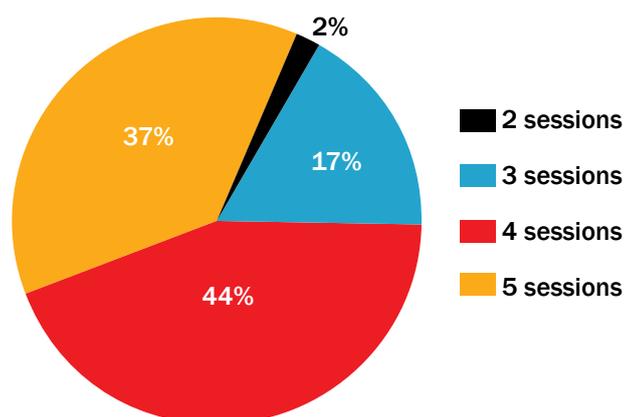
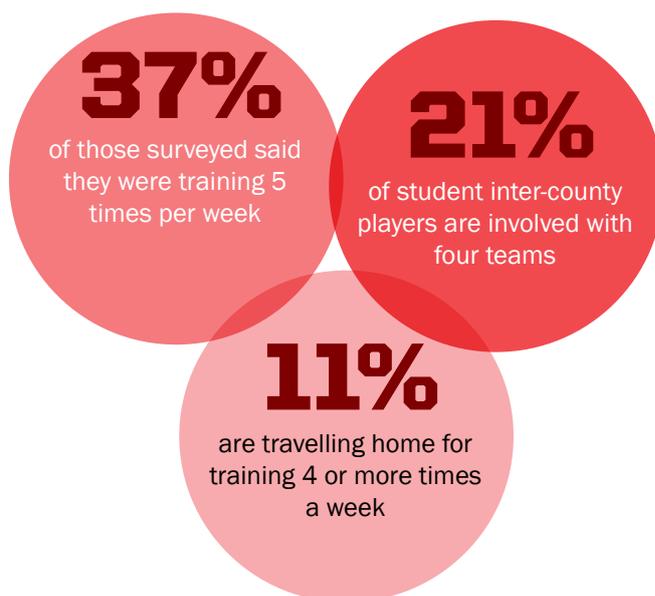


Figure 10: No. of training sessions per week



### No. of times returning home

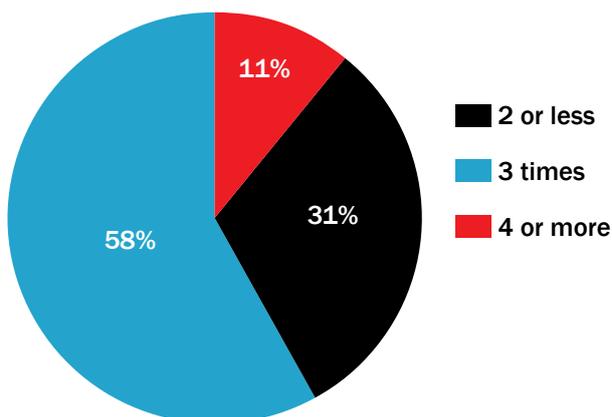


Figure 11: No. of times required to return home for training or games per week

Travel was highlighted as one of the most predominant challenges for student inter-county players across all of the focus group discussions. One of the students who was due to travel home for training the evening of the focus group discussion stated:

“The travel is definitely the hardest part for me anyway, we'll be leaving now at about half 4 and we won't be back until around half 1 tonight like with training this evening – I don't know how you fix that.”

Final year undergrad, footballer

The associated planning, organisation and time management required due to the level of travel was outlined by one student who suggested:

“Yeah, the travel as well, they are long nights coming back up after, especially during the winter when it's rotten weather and everything and coming up to exams trying to get the balance right and trying to get the sessions off that you need off – it's hard trying to balance it and work it out yourself.”

Third year undergrad, hurling

The ESRI report(2018) highlighted that the average travel time for players per training session was 2 hours in 2016 and unsurprisingly, it was greater for players resident outside of their home counties (2.7 hours). As outlined previously in this report over half of the student inter-county players surveyed were not living at home. The authors of the ESRI

report suggest that the volume of travel combined with the high level of training commitments could potentially place players at an increased risk of injury and/or suboptimal performance (Kelly et al., 2018). Throughout the focus group discussions, it emerged that younger players may be more at risk of injury and burnout as they try to fully commit to college, county and study, which often involves training and travelling multiple times a week. This was highlighted by one student who stated:

“ I think lads in their first year they would feel like they have to be at everything. I've seen it a lot where lads come in in their first year and then end up getting injured because they are trying to do everything and please everyone and I think that's something that needs to be looked at, especially lads in their first year you know? I try to say to a few of them there is no need for you to be here tonight you know they might have played a college game the night before and then they are coming out the next night banjaxed and trying to train and you just want to say you know you're just going to pull up here at some stage soon, it's crazy what you're doing. ”

**Masters, footballer**

## Time demands

The fact that the time demands being placed on players as outlined above are unsustainable is not new knowledge but the current report, the ESRI report (2018), and the previous report by Lane (2015) provide evidence to support what the players themselves and the GPA as a representative organisation have been highlighting for a number of years. A previous report commissioned by the GPA and authored by Lane (2015) brought the issues to the fore reporting that almost 70% of students were members of three or more teams, almost 90% were training at least four times per week, and over half of students were travelling to training from college at least three times per week.

It should be noted that based on the findings of the 2018 Student Scholarship Survey there have been increases in these figures with over 80% of students reporting that they were members of three teams or more in 2018, and two thirds of students reporting that they were travelling to training from college at least three times per week. There has been a decrease in the proportion of students who reported that they were training at least four times per week, although this decrease is minimal with the figure for 2018 being 81% of students.

The realities of this were highlighted in the focus group discussions where one student stated:

“ It's just kind of the nature of the county set up too though, you know you are going to be on the road 5 days a week and then the days you're not you know you're recovering or getting ready for games like so you know so a lot of it is around planning and having understanding people around you like because I think it's just the nature of it like you know, there's nothing you can do about it really you're going to be on the road 5 days a week really. ”

**Masters, hurler**

In response to the findings of the 2015 report conducted by Lane and in an attempt to address the issue of overactivity among the student athlete group, changes were made to both club and inter-county minor and U20 (football only) grades in the 2017/18 season preventing U20 games (football) from clashing with Higher Education (HE) and senior inter-county competitions in February/March. However, this has not alleviated the burden as the specific cohort of players who are playing for both their county and their college team are still faced with possible overload scenarios, continuing to be involved with a minimum of two, but potentially up to four teams (County/College/Club).

**81%**

are training at least four times per week

**53%**

are in favour of moving the higher education competitions to before Christmas



## Fixtures & competition structure

The issue of fixtures and the challenges fixtures place on student players is something that was highlighted by the ESRI report and the previous student report. It has again been highlighted by the Student Scholarship Survey, the focus groups and interviews with key stakeholders. The pressures placed on students as a result of these issues were highlighted by one of the students who stated:

“ For me it was more so in January exam time, it was starting off peak time with both county and college so it was literally just all of a sudden a boom of everything is under pressure and you don't really have a say in what you're going to do, the only thing I heard from my manager was send us on your schedules for exams and they don't consider, especially like first and second year wasn't too bad, but in final year it's assignment after assignment, like 3 a week, and they are expecting you to send on just your exam schedule so they can accommodate around it and not even accommodate you, it's change training schedules so you can make training and do your exams. ”

**Masters, hurler**

This was echoed by one of the inter-county managers who highlighted that:

“ We are going to hit massive games again on May 12th and 19th of this year and that is right slap bang in the middle of 3rd level exams when the demographics of the people who are playing the games are 3rd level students and with their love of the games too and their commitment to their counties as well, the knock on effect or the follow on from that is that they are going to lean towards performing as a player more than performing as a student – hence the number who are having to repeat exams because they are making sacrifices during that crucial exam period to play hurling or football and they are making those sacrifices during that period rather than focusing on their exams because that's what they want to do but then they have to go and repeat and that's because of again not really thinking through when they are putting fixtures on. ”

**Inter-county manager, hurling**

The impact of this clash was outlined by one of the students who added:

“ So, championship starts now in May and sure the exams are starting then too so you're missing the last few practice matches coming into it so they'll let you off but you're kind of shooting yourself in the foot. ”

**Final year undergrad, hurler**

The vast majority (76%) of students surveyed were playing with both their county and their college. It appears evident that the modification of the higher education competition structure must be considered. When asked if they would be in favour of having the higher education competitions moved to before Christmas, over half of the student inter-county players (53%) said yes, they would be in favour of this; however, interestingly 47% stated they would not be in favour of this change, representing an almost equally balanced and divided view. Further investigation is warranted in order to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the reasons for players' preference for the competition being held prior to or post-Christmas (December) and to establish any other alternatives that might be available as it is clear that the current structure is unsustainable for student inter-county players if they are to be given the best chance to fulfil their potential both as an athlete and academically.

Throughout the focus group discussions, the structure and timing of

the college competitions was something that students felt added to the pressures they experienced; however, all students highlighted the merits and benefits of the competitions and considered them to be enjoyable. All students suggested they would prefer to be involved in them than not involved in them.

Some of the benefits included:

“ For a lot of players it gives people game time like say the younger lads, 18 or 19 breaking into a county team, like they are probably not going to get a game for a whole year like or maybe two years before they break into the team so that gives them the chance to play at a high level, at probably the highest level bar inter-county. ”

**Masters, hurler**

“ Like even if you talk to some of the older lads on your team like 25 or 26 years olds that have hurled in Fitz, they'll just say that it will only make or break you, they'll talk so highly of it because you are hurling against lads, it's actually probably harder, because you are hurling against lads your own age from different counties so they are tearing lumps and stuff out of each other but the craic afterwards is just something you don't get to do when you're playing the league, like the league is just the next match after the next match. ”

**Final year undergrad, hurler**

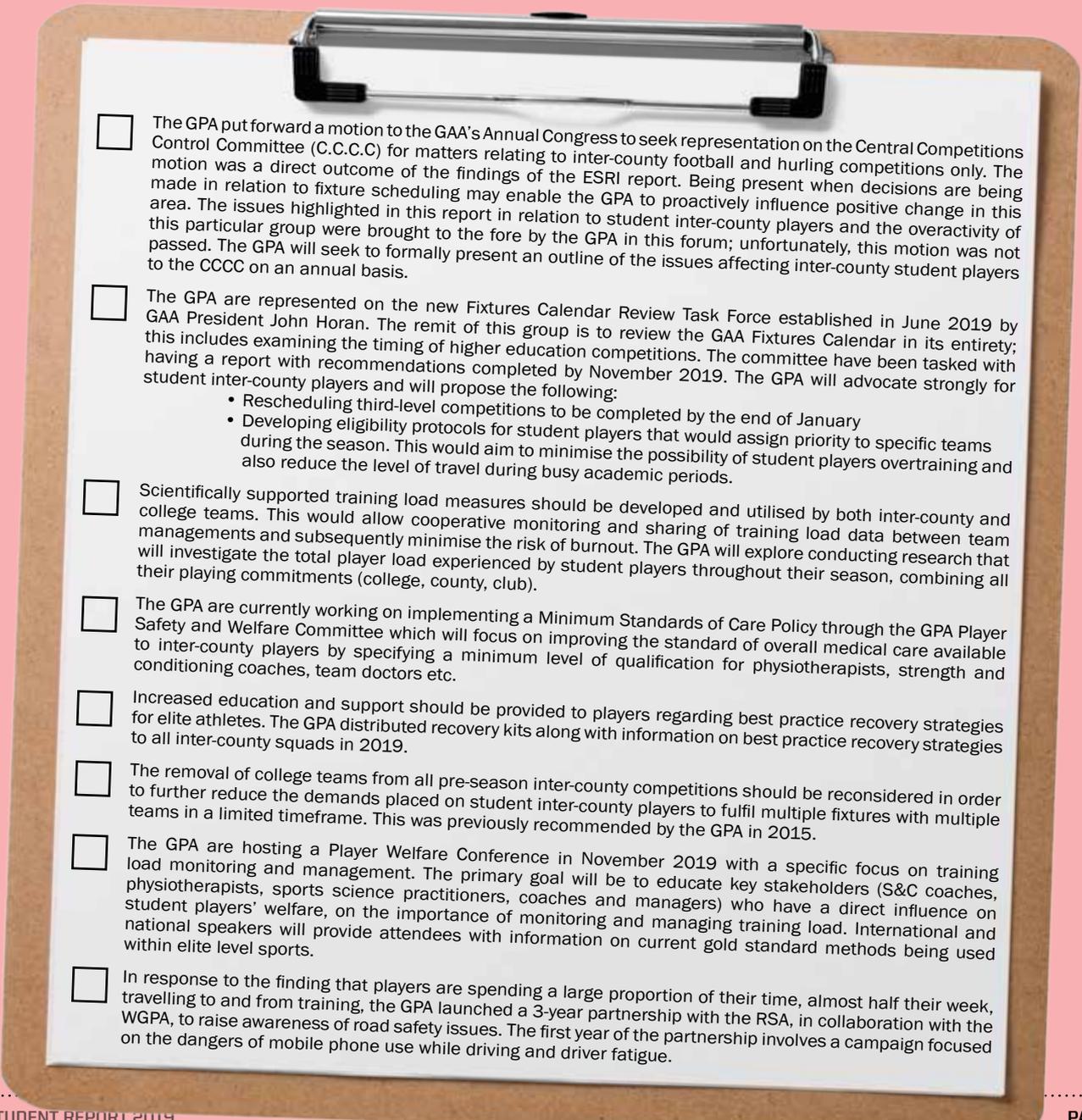
There was a general agreement across all of the focus groups that the college competitions were not valued by inter-county managers or the GAA and that the current structures were forcing them to play and train multiple times each week without adequate rest and recovery and to make difficult choices between college and county commitments. As one third year student footballer stated, *“it's only a burden from the managers point of view, it's just like oh they're gone, they're playing Sigerson or Fitzgibbon this weekend they're no good to me now”*. This was elaborated on by another student who suggested:

“ I think it goes a bit bigger than just the college competition, I think the whole structure, the whole calendar probably needs some tweaking at this stage. I think they are not giving the college competitions the respect that they deserve. ”

**Masters, footballer**

If changes to the higher education competition fixtures are not feasible then it is essential that protocols and supports are put in place to safeguard these young players' welfare. Collaborative thinking and genuine commitment are required from county, college, and where needed, club management, to monitor and manage physical and psychological load appropriately.

## RECOMMENDATIONS:

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- The GPA put forward a motion to the GAA's Annual Congress to seek representation on the Central Competitions Control Committee (C.C.C.C) for matters relating to inter-county football and hurling competitions only. The motion was a direct outcome of the findings of the ESRI report. Being present when decisions are being made in relation to fixture scheduling may enable the GPA to proactively influence positive change in this area. The issues highlighted in this report in relation to student inter-county players and the overactivity of this particular group were brought to the fore by the GPA in this forum; unfortunately, this motion was not passed. The GPA will seek to formally present an outline of the issues affecting inter-county student players to the CCCC on an annual basis.
  - The GPA are represented on the new Fixtures Calendar Review Task Force established in June 2019 by GAA President John Horan. The remit of this group is to review the GAA Fixtures Calendar in its entirety; this includes examining the timing of higher education competitions. The committee have been tasked with having a report with recommendations completed by November 2019. The GPA will advocate strongly for student inter-county players and will propose the following:
    - Rescheduling third-level competitions to be completed by the end of January
    - Developing eligibility protocols for student players that would assign priority to specific teams during the season. This would aim to minimise the possibility of student players overtraining and also reduce the level of travel during busy academic periods.
  - Scientifically supported training load measures should be developed and utilised by both inter-county and college teams. This would allow cooperative monitoring and sharing of training load data between team managements and subsequently minimise the risk of burnout. The GPA will explore conducting research that will investigate the total player load experienced by student players throughout their season, combining all their playing commitments (college, county, club).
  - The GPA are currently working on implementing a Minimum Standards of Care Policy through the GPA Player Safety and Welfare Committee which will focus on improving the standard of overall medical care available to inter-county players by specifying a minimum level of qualification for physiotherapists, strength and conditioning coaches, team doctors etc.
  - Increased education and support should be provided to players regarding best practice recovery strategies for elite athletes. The GPA distributed recovery kits along with information on best practice recovery strategies to all inter-county squads in 2019.
  - The removal of college teams from all pre-season inter-county competitions should be reconsidered in order to further reduce the demands placed on student inter-county players to fulfil multiple fixtures with multiple teams in a limited timeframe. This was previously recommended by the GPA in 2015.
  - The GPA are hosting a Player Welfare Conference in November 2019 with a specific focus on training load monitoring and management. The primary goal will be to educate key stakeholders (S&C coaches, physiotherapists, sports science practitioners, coaches and managers) who have a direct influence on student players' welfare, on the importance of monitoring and managing training load. International and national speakers will provide attendees with information on current gold standard methods being used within elite level sports.
  - In response to the finding that players are spending a large proportion of their time, almost half their week, travelling to and from training, the GPA launched a 3-year partnership with the RSA, in collaboration with the WGPA, to raise awareness of road safety issues. The first year of the partnership involves a campaign focused on the dangers of mobile phone use while driving and driver fatigue.

# STUDENT INTER-COUNTY PLAYERS & TIME DEMANDS

## Never enough time

The previous GPA Student Report published by Lane in 2015 was entitled *'Never Enough Time: The experience of third-level student county GAA players.'* As highlighted throughout the current report this previous title is still very relevant to student inter-county players in 2018 with much of the same issues reported by students in 2015 again reiterated by students in 2018. A significant lack of time is a theme that pervades throughout the survey responses, focus group discussions and interviews. The challenges that student inter-county players face as they attempt to squeeze their numerous commitments into their limited time are clearly impacting on their experiences both as a student and as an inter-county player. In the interest of avoiding repetition, some of the main points related to time demands will be highlighted here; however, this issue is inextricably linked to the experiences of student inter-county players in all aspects of their lives; wellbeing, academic experience, finance and welfare as documented in the earlier sections above.

## Inter-county players' time allocation

The vast majority of students surveyed were full-time students and over 40% of students reported that they have between 20 and 30 hours of college per week; this is excluding additional time associated with study, assignments, projects and exams. One of the main findings emerging from the ESRI report was the finding that time is one of the main commitments required to play senior inter-county (Kelly et al., 2018). The report highlights that per week, the average time-commitment required from players varied from 14.5 hours during a match week to 30.8 hours during a non-match week. The study highlighted that players tend to ring-fence their time allocation to senior inter-county activities by compromising on other aspects of their lives. The findings of the Student Scholarship Survey corroborate this finding as it is clear that students are sacrificing time that would ordinarily be spent on social activities, study, sleep or employment to devote this time to their inter-county commitments.

This was highlighted throughout the focus group discussions, as illustrated by one student who stated:

“The fact that when you're so committed to the county set up its very hard to be 100% committed to more than one thing at one time, I don't think I could really say if I was 100% committed to my studies at one time I probably wasn't being 100% committed to my training or whatever or you know if I was 100% flat out at training like I'm not giving 100% to my studies either so it can be very difficult to give time or even relationships and stuff outside of that you know you're very rarely giving everything you have to all of those like and all of them are very important so it can be very difficult to balance those.”

**Final year undergrad, hurler**

This report highlights that a high proportion of student inter-county players report feeling overwhelmed by all of their commitments, getting less sleep than recommended for athletes, spending less time on social activities than their non-athlete peers, and a lack of time to work part-time to fund their education. The ESRI report found that inter-county players aged between 18 – 21 years had particularly high levels of overall Gaelic game time commitment (Kelly et al., 2018). The average age of the respondents to the 2018 Student Scholarship survey was 22 years of age, and the findings provide further support for the findings of the ESRI report with over 83% of players reporting that they were playing with 3 or more teams and over one third of students reporting that they were spending almost half of their nights throughout the week traveling home for training.

As highlighted in earlier sections of this report high proportions of student inter-county players stated that they would like to devote more time to their studies and more time to their family and friends, while they also indicated that they would like to devote more time to their sport. Interestingly, less than half of students reported that they felt confident to speak to their county manager to request a reduced training load to allow them to spend more time on other aspects of their lives. In the earlier section above on the academic experiences of student inter-county players the issue of time demands is outlined along with the fact

**40%**

have between 20 and 30 hours of college per week

**10%**

said more support in managing time commitments was a priority

**51%**

say inter-county commitments have prevented them exploring other interests

that when asked how the GPA could better support students 10% of students suggested that more support in the area of managing their time commitments was a priority for them.

## Student-athletes as 'well-rounded' individuals

Historically, it has been suggested that participation in sport contributes to a 'well-rounded' college experience for student-athletes; however, some researchers have suggested that the amount of time spent by student-athletes in their sport may actually deprive them of a well-rounded experience (Potuto & O'Hanlon, 2007). Notably, one of the predominant positives associated with being a student inter-county player highlighted during the focus group discussions was the opportunity to meet new people and develop friendships that they otherwise would not have had the opportunity to develop, as illustrated by one player who stated:

“You meet lads from different counties who you never would have got the chance to play with before and I think that's deadly like you just end up meeting friends from all over the place and then you have contacts you end up keeping in touch with different lads and you see them down the line during match day, it's nice to know that you played together – I think that's the nice part of being a student player.”

**Final year undergrad, footballer**

The positive aspects of being a student inter-county player were also highlighted in the interviews with key stakeholders with one inter-county manager suggesting:

“I think if inter-county is done right it is a great education for people that are motivated, they learn a lot about the nutritional aspects, high performance, you know there's a lot of self-assessment and self-reflection that I think it is good for young people to do. I suppose at inter-county level you need a focus and a determination that transfers directly into normal life as well there's huge life lessons in being an inter-county player that people will use in all aspects of their life.”

**Inter-county manager, football**

The importance of having the opportunity to develop other aspects of your life outside of your sporting career was also highlighted as a positive by a number of students:

“Yeah, obviously meeting new friends and you know you have a good range of friends there as well but I think it opens up a lot of opportunities for you like outside of football there's a lot of supports there if you're a student like I know it might be more difficult but with us they've added some new coaches to the background team that you can go to if you've an issue or a problem outside of football that you can just go to someone and talk to them and they'll find a way like even with the work with the GPA they'll find a way like they'll support you in trying to develop other aspects of your life so I think it opens up a lot of opportunities in other aspects of your life too.”

**Third year undergrad, footballer**

While all those involved in the focus groups and interviews agreed that there are a number of benefits and positives, the issue of time demands and the impact on student inter-county players' opportunities to engage in other hobbies or passions was highlighted in the Student Scholarship Survey with over half (51%) of respondents agreeing that their inter-county commitments have prohibited them from exploring other interests. While the social aspect of sport is something that is hugely positive, it may also be the case that student inter-county players are missing out on the opportunity to develop a more diverse social network due to a lack of time for engaging in social activities in college outside of their inter-county commitments. Indeed, over half of survey respondents reported that most of their friends are athletes.

The importance of having a life outside of inter-county hurling and football and the significance of your college years in developing other interests was highlighted in the focus group discussions with one player stating:

“ You're only going to be in college once like you're only going to be 18, 19, 20 once in your life, this is the time when you develop and find yourself and meet new people and make friends for life, like you can play inter-county football for 10 or 12 years but after that you're back to living your normal life I suppose you know so you kind of need to have a full circle of life outside of football once you finish it. ”

**Third year undergrad, footballer**

This view was reiterated by a member of academic staff who stated:

“ They do lose out socially and in developing friendships at college - you probably end up that the majority of your friends are your peers in football and hurling and you don't expand your circle of friends outside of your football and hurling and you may find that quite often your circle of friends are those people so you may lose out on other classmates and other people you could interact with in college and the time to develop friendships with others so that socially you lose out. ”

**Academic staff member**

It is important to acknowledge, however, that despite all of the competing demands that inter-county players encounter, the overwhelming majority of inter-county players agree that they are glad they made the choice to play at an inter-county level (Kelly et al., 2018).



## RECOMMENDATIONS:

A number of the recommendations mentioned throughout the previous sections of the report will have a related impact on the issue of time demands.

- Increased opportunities for players to upskill on communications and negotiations so that they have confidence and are more comfortable in speaking with management about their training load and commitment may be beneficial. An element of this will be incorporated into the GPA Rookie Camp schedule.
- Further research into the potential solutions to the competing time demands that student inter-county players have is warranted. It would be useful to explore this in more details from the perspectives of all stakeholders, students, managers, universities etc.

# HOW CAN THE GPA SUPPORT YOU BETTER AS A STUDENT?

The Student Scholarship Survey contained one open ended question where respondents were asked how the GPA could support them better as a student. As illustrated below in Figure 12, six main themes emerged when students' responses to this question were analysed. The predominant theme was the theme of Financial Support with over one third of students highlighting this as a priority and an area where they would benefit from additional support; *"more funding to students as the financial burden on students is huge"*. The next most prevalent theme was Academic Support and Careers with 15% of student inter-county players citing this as an area where they felt they required additional support; *"By providing grinds for inter-county players who are struggling at college work"*; *"Providing tutors to help with study plans or to get help with different subjects"*. Welfare, and Engagement and Communication, were the next most common themes representing 11% and 10% of all responses respectively; *"Ensuring the commitments of inter-county playing students doesn't affect us academically, financially or emotionally"*; *"Making me aware on the importance of mental health and balancing my sport and education"*. Fixtures and Time Demands emerged as another theme with almost 10% stating that they would benefit from additional support in these areas:

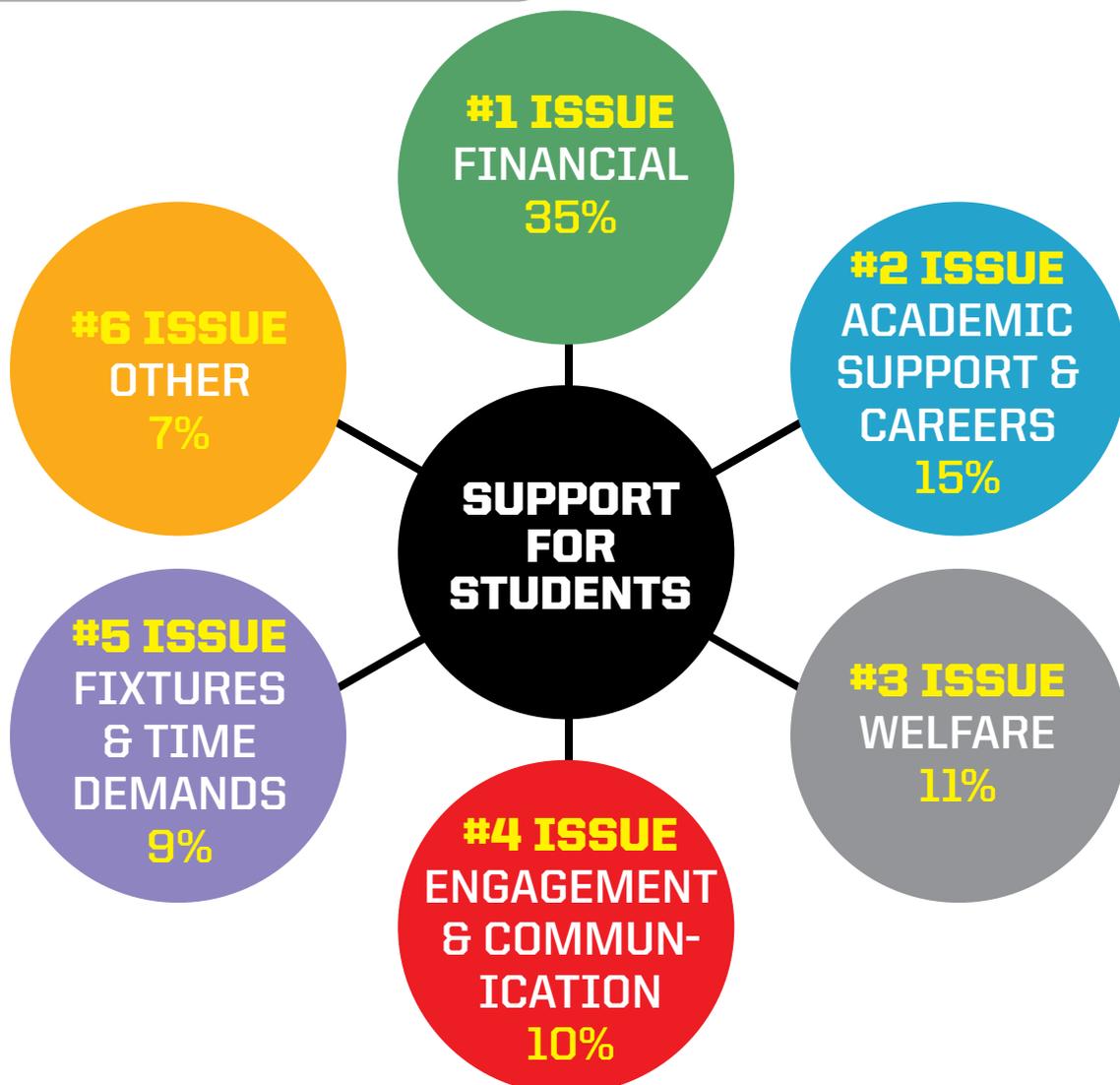
*"I spend 2 hours traveling to training, which means I sometimes have to miss lectures and this is twice a week during the spring. I am training for county twice a week and then twice a week with my college and then when I go home, I'll be training with my club team. My college work is disadvantaged as I am traveling to training which will cause me to miss 3 lectures that evening. If I do not go to the training and stay for my lectures it will give the negative impression that I am not dedicated to the team, which is not the case. I hope that the GPA could help me with this situation so I'm not disadvantaged on either side."*

It is hugely encouraging that when the students were asked how the GPA could support them better as a student, 13% of student-athletes responded by stating that they were satisfied with the support the GPA provides and that they had benefited from this support:

*"I am availing of a lot of the services available and I can't have any complaints about the support I've been given, I feel as though the GPA provides good support structures that can be availed of if needed."*

*"I feel that during my time here in college so far, the GPA have supported me and provided great assistance that I may have needed in order to balance my studies and football."*

While feedback such as this is extremely positive, it must be noted that there are an additional 87% of student inter-county players who responded to the survey who feel they require more support across a number of different aspects of their lives. It is worth noting that these themes, while not identical, closely align with the findings of the NCAA GOALS study (2016) which found that the three most common areas where student-athletes would appreciate more support were (a) academic success & preparing for a job after college; (b) information on proper nutrition and how to get better quality/more sleep; and (c) balancing academic commitments while keeping sports in perspective. This suggests that these issues are not unique to student inter-county players in Ireland but are issues that are common for student-athletes regardless of cultural contexts or specific sports.



# CONCLUSION

While it is acknowledged that there are a number of aspects of being a student inter-county player that are immensely positive and the majority of students attach significant importance to their identity as a student-athlete, it is evident from the findings of this report that some student inter-county players are struggling to cope with the demands associated with their dual careers. While the majority of student inter-county players' college experience is a positive one, a high percentage of student inter-county players feel regularly overwhelmed by their commitments, do not find their commitments easy to manage, have less time to socialise with their peers and are faced with financial pressures due to time constraints preventing them from obtaining part-time employment. Furthermore, a high proportion of student inter-county players are attempting to represent three or more teams and are spending large amounts of time each week travelling up and down the country to training. It must be noted that none of this is new information and the recent ESRI report (2018), the previous GPA Student Report (Lane, 2015) and this current report all support the anecdotal evidence that we have been hearing from students year upon year.

A number of recommendations were made by Lane (2015) on the basis of the findings of her report on the experiences of student inter-county players based on data from 2012 to 2015. We have found that the findings of that report are still very relevant a number of years on, with student inter-county players' 2018 experiences closely mirroring the experiences of their fellow student players in the past. The similarities between the findings of this report and the previous student report completed by Lane (2015) are stark and highlight that more needs to be done to support student inter-county players so that when future reports are compiled, they are not mirroring the same findings again and again with no evidence of any alleviation of the pressures and demands that student inter-county players encounter on an ongoing basis (see Appendix 1 for outline of similar key findings). As outlined throughout there are a number of recommendations in the areas of student wellbeing, academic experience, finance and welfare that may potentially go some way towards minimising the negative impact that managing a dual career as a student inter-county player can have on the lives of our student players. It is imperative that these recommendations are examined and given serious consideration by all stakeholders, namely the GPA, GAA, third-level institutions, managers and the students themselves and that action plans are agreed upon so that student inter-county players struggling to juggle the multiple competing demands of their dual careers does not continue to remain as the status quo.

While this report and the previous student report have provided an overview of the more challenging aspects of being a student inter-county player, it is widely acknowledged and accepted that through their involvement in sport at an elite level and their ability to combine excelling in their chosen sport with achieving academically, student-athletes develop a range of important skills and attributes that are associated with leading a fulfilled and successful life. With this in mind the GPA's focus is on maximising the positive aspects of being a student inter-county player while also minimising the negative impact of the challenging aspects of managing this dual career for our student members. The recommendations proposed throughout this report have largely focused on what can be done to alleviate the pressures and demands on student inter-county players; however, future explorations of the experiences of student inter-county players should also focus on what the positive aspects of managing a dual career are from the perspectives of student players. It is of paramount importance that we continue to examine the ways that the balance between achieving in sport and achieving academically can be attained and to avoid focusing solely on the challenges but also provide opportunities for the positive aspects of being a student inter-county player to be experienced and enhanced for our student members.

Throughout the focus group discussions there was a general sense of concern about what the experience will be like for future student inter-county players and an acknowledgement that any increase in the current demands on students will be unsustainable and unfeasible. One of the students articulated these concerns by stating:

“ I'm just wondering where is it going to come to, like as in it's an amateur game ... with amateur athletes, I just don't know. ”  
Masters, hurler

In examining the experiences of student inter-county players and in attempting to maximise the positives and reduce the impact of the challenges it is vital that all stakeholders bear in mind that:

“ Ultimately gaining a degree at the end of it is the most important thing - I think we all have to be cognisant of that within the college and outside as well. ”  
GDO

*\*Note: The sample size for the 2015 report was larger than the sample size for the current report as it was based on the compilation of data over a number of years (2012-2015).*

*\*Note: Additional supplementary data related to wellbeing was obtained from the Grant survey which was completed by the same students during a different time period (GPA Student Scholarship Survey was completed over a period of 3 weeks from October – November; GPA Grant Survey was completed over a period of 4 weeks from December – January). Not all students who completed the Student Scholarship Survey completed the grant survey, the total sample for the wellbeing data (obtained from the Grant Survey) utilised in this report was N = 436 in comparison to N = 488 for the remainder of the data collected as part of the Student Scholarship Survey.*



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# APPENDICES

## Appendix 1: Similarity between the findings of the 2015 Student Report and the current report.

A similar report to the current report was commissioned by the GPA in 2015 and authored by Dr Aoife Lane. Notably, one of the key findings of the current report is that many of the challenges highlighted by the 2015 report are still evident. A number of the findings of the current report closely mirror the findings from the 2015 report and in many cases, there has been an increase in the proportion of students who are experiencing specific challenges.

KEY FINDINGS FROM THE GPA STUDENT REPORT	2015	2019	CHANGE
% of student inter-county players who had to repeat an exam	40%	35%	↓-5%
% of student inter-county players who had to repeat an academic year	14%	11%	↓-3%
% of student inter-county players who reported that they find it difficult to manage all of their commitments	58%	62%	↑+4%
% of student inter-county players who reported that they feel overwhelmed by their commitments (college, sport, relationships, work etc.,)	50%	54%	↑+4%
% of student inter-county players who reported feeling stressed at least once per month	54%	78%	↑+24%
% of student inter-county players who would like to spend more time with family & friends	61%	73%	↑+12%
% of inter-county players who represented at least 3 teams in the previous year	69%	83%	↑+14%
% of inter-county players who trained at least 4 times per week	89%	81%	↓-8%
% of inter-county players who were travelling from college to training at least 3 times per week	52%	69%	↑+17%
% of inter-county players who would like more time to devote to their studies	56%	69%	↑+13%





Gaelic Players Association  
Unit 27 Northwood House  
Northwood Business Campus  
Santry, Dublin 9, Ireland

Tel: +353 1 857 5686  
[www.gaelicplayers.com](http://www.gaelicplayers.com)  
[www.wewearmore.ie](http://www.wewearmore.ie)