WHY COACHING CAREERS NEED SUPPORT?

URHEA | NATIONAL OLYMPIC TRAINING CENTER Helsinki | UMEÅ UNIVERSITY | VARALA

Summary of results and recommendations of the CARE project



Tuomas Rouvali, Tuuli Merikoski, Apostolos Theos, Taru Tervo & Juha Antikainen

PUBLISHER

National Olympic Training Center Helsinki / Urhea Foundation

Mäkelänkatu 47
00550 Helsinki

www.urhea.fi

PUBLISHED

November 2026

Co-funded by the European Union

Table of contents

Introduction 3
The CARE Project 4
Key Messages 5
Why Coaches' Careers Need Support? 6
What Existing Frameworks Say? 7
Coaches' Insights and Experiences 8
The Gap: Where Current Systems Fall Short 11
Recommendations 13
How Can Career Support Be Put into Practice? 15
Publications 16
References 17

INTRODUCTION

The CARE (Career Advancement, Resilience & Employability of Sport Coaches) project aim has been **to develop career guidance for sports coaches** so that they can develop their professional skills, deliver better coaching and create better careers for themselves.

Global megatrends and changing working life increase demands for coaches to maintain their employability and continuously develop their skills. In the field of sport coaching, sector-specific factors like **diverse educational backgrounds, varied working arrangements, and the risks of redundancy and job termination** further highlight this necessity.

This final summary of the CARE project presents **the key findings and recommendations for future development**. It explains why coaching careers and their support are important, how they are reflected in European coaching development models and frameworks, and includes coaches' own perspectives. Based on all of the above, **the document provides recommendations for coaches, employers, educators, and the system level.**

CARE combined **a literature review, a benchmark of selected European frameworks and qualitative workshop material from Finland, Sweden and Slovenia.** The findings identify recurring themes across these materials. They are **not intended as a comprehensive assessment** of every European coaching system, sport or organisation.

The project is funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the authors only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

THE CARE PROJECT

The CARE project was inspired by earlier development work carried out by Urhea to support coaches' continuous learning and professional development.

During the ESF+ funded JOUVA project, coaches expressed a need for stronger support not only for learning and education, but also for managing their careers. Questions related to career planning, recognising learning gained through work, and navigating career transitions emerged repeatedly.

To explore these issues further, **Urhea** launched the CARE project together with partners from Finland, Sweden and Slovenia. The partnership combined expertise from different parts of the coaching ecosystem. **Umeå University** contributed academic expertise in sport sciences and coach development. **Varala Sports Institute** brought experience from coach education and direct work with coaches. **Labod Bled Skating Club** and **Tampereen Pyrintö** provided an important club-level perspective and enabled practical engagement with coaches throughout the project.

The project was carried out in three phases.

First, **a literature review and benchmark analysis** were conducted to examine career guidance, lifelong learning and existing approaches to supporting coaches' careers.

Second, **workshops were organised in Finland, Sweden and Slovenia** to explore coaches' experiences, challenges and perspectives.

Third, **the findings from these phases were brought together in this publication**, which presents the project's key findings and recommendations.

Although CARE started with a focus on career guidance, the project gradually revealed a broader challenge. The findings suggest that **the key issue is not only career guidance itself, but the wider support structures surrounding coaching careers**.

As a result, the project moved from a focus on career guidance towards a broader understanding of career support. In CARE, career support means the combined support provided through guidance, leadership, education, mentoring, networks, visible career pathways and fair working conditions. Career guidance is one part of this broader support.

The CARE project therefore argues that supporting coaching careers should be viewed as a shared responsibility involving coaches, employers, education providers and sport organisations.

KEY MESSAGES



1. Coaching careers are becoming more complex

Coaching careers are rarely linear. Many coaches work in multiple roles, combine coaching with other work, and move between organisations throughout their careers. Success increasingly requires not only coaching expertise but also the ability to manage a career in a changing working life.

2. Coaching competence is well supported

European coaching frameworks provide strong support for learning, competence development and professional standards. They help coaches develop the knowledge and skills needed for modern coaching.

3. Career support is less structured

While coaching competence is widely supported, coaching careers receive much less attention. Career planning, transitions, career management skills and organisational responsibility are often unclear or missing.

4. Career support is a shared responsibility

Supporting coaching careers should not rely on individual coaches alone. Employers, education providers, federations and other sport organisations all have a role in helping coaches build sustainable and attractive careers.

WHY COACHES' CAREERS NEED SUPPORT?

Coaching is a demanding profession

Coaching is a demanding and evolving profession. Coaches are expected **to develop athletes, support wellbeing, and deliver results in increasingly complex environments.** At the same time, they must navigate their own careers in a working life that requires continuous learning, adaptability and resilience (Cedefop et al, 2025).

Unclear career paths

Unlike many other professions, **coaching careers are rarely linear or clearly structured**. Coaches often move between roles, organisations and levels, combining coaching with other work or studies. Employment conditions are frequently varied, including part-time work, short-term contracts and project-based roles (EOSE, 2025). This creates careers that are dynamic but also uncertain.

Diverse competence requirements

Demands placed on coaches continue to grow. **Modern coaching requires not only technical and sport-specific expertise, but also skills related to leadership, communication, wellbeing and long-term athlete development** (Lara-Bercial et al, 2017). Maintaining employability in this context means continuous development and the ability to navigate transitions throughout a career.

Need for career management skills

Coaches are increasingly expected to possess not only sport-specific competences, but also skills related to managing their own careers. These include the ability to plan and reflect on their development, identify opportunities, make career-related decisions, and navigate transitions between roles and environments. In practice, these **career management skills** (Sultana, 2012) are often essential for sustaining a professional career, yet they are rarely explicitly recognised or systematically supported.

WHAT EXISTING FRAMEWORKS SAY?

As part of the CARE project, we reviewed key European coaching frameworks and models. These included frameworks from sport coaching as well as from related fields. Together, they help explain what coaching is as a profession, what skills coaches need, and how coaches are expected to develop.

Across these frameworks, the message is clear: **there is a strong focus on developing coaching skills and competence.**

What do the frameworks highlight?

- the importance of sport-specific knowledge and technical skills
- the need for communication and other interpersonal skills
- the role of coaches in supporting athlete development and wellbeing
- the importance of continuous learning and professional development

Careers are not described as clearly as skills

Career development is often understood as:

- moving forward through education or certification levels
- gaining experience in different coaching roles
- continuing to learn throughout a career

However, less attention is given to:

- how coaches move between roles and organisations
- how career transitions are supported
- what role organisations should play in supporting careers
- how coaches develop skills to manage their own careers

Existing frameworks are strong in supporting learning, but less explicit in supporting careers.

COACHES' INSIGHTS AND EXPERIENCES

Workshops organized in Sweden, Slovenia and Finland brought coaches' own experiences into CARE and explored how the findings from the literature review and benchmark relate to everyday coaching. Across the workshop material, many similar themes emerged in different coaching environments.

No single coaching career path

Coaches entered the field through different routes and moved forward through changing roles, opportunities and personal choices. Careers were often difficult to predict. Transitions between roles, organisations and levels were a normal part of career stories, and opportunities often emerged through people, networks or changing circumstances.

Support exists, but is mainly informal

Coaches received important support from experienced coaches, colleagues, mentors, managers, clubs and personal networks. Trust, feedback, peer support and learning through practice were also important. Much of this support, however, depended on people and local working environments rather than formal career-support structures.

Networks and personal initiative matter

Coaches often build their careers by creating professional contacts, taking opportunities and actively seeking ways to develop. Career choices included new positions, changing roles, education, entrepreneurship and combining coaching with other work.

Working conditions shape careers

Career possibilities were strongly affected by everyday realities such as time, workload, income, available resources and organisational support. Combining coaching with other work, family life and personal commitments added further complexity.

Support is available in coaching, but it is rarely organised into a systematic process that helps coaches build sustainable long-term careers.

Continuous learning is a clear strength

Coaches described learning through education, everyday work, feedback, peer discussions and self-directed development. Continuous learning is already strongly embedded in coaching culture. However, learning and competence development alone do not answer important career questions about employment opportunities, financial sustainability, transitions or where to find support for career decisions.

Career transitions are key moments for support

Coaches may need additional support when their role, responsibilities or working environment changes. Moving into full-time coaching, becoming a head coach, taking leadership responsibility or reconsidering career direction are examples of transitions where onboarding, mentoring and career discussions can be particularly valuable.

Shared message from the workshops

- Coaching careers are diverse and rarely linear.
- Career development depends strongly on people, networks and personal initiative.
- Continuous learning is a clear strength of coaching culture.
- Working conditions and organisations strongly shape career opportunities.
- Career transitions are important moments when structured support can be particularly valuable.
- Clear career pathways and systematic career support remain limited.

Different contexts, similar experiences

The workshops took place in different national, organisational and sporting environments. The main findings were similar across the three countries, but each context highlighted somewhat different aspects of coaching careers.

Sweden

The Swedish discussions placed more emphasis on **visible career pathways and system-level responsibility**. Coaches highlighted the need for clearer information about career options and the possible role of federations, mentoring, internships and exchange opportunities. Career development was also strongly connected to networks, individual initiative and opportunities that emerged along the way.

Slovenia

The Slovenian discussions focused more on the **practical and financial sustainability of coaching work**. Time, workload, income and unclear prospects for professional coaching were important concerns. Support from clubs, coaching teams and experienced coaches was important, while international cooperation was seen as a source of learning, networks and new opportunities.

Finland

The Finnish material placed particular emphasis on **leadership, workplace support and career transitions**. Trust, feedback, mentoring and opportunities to gain experience were seen as important, while time, pay, resources and organisational support could also create barriers. The discussions also provided practical examples of more structured career support, such as onboarding, regular development discussions, mentoring during important transitions and peer networks across clubs and sports.

THE GAP: WHERE CURRENT SYSTEMS FALL SHORT

Strong emphasis on skills and competence

The CARE project highlights a clear gap in how coaching is supported. Existing frameworks place strong emphasis on developing coaching skills and competence. At the same time, much less attention is given to how coaching careers are built and supported over time. This creates a situation where coaching is well defined as a profession, but less clearly supported as a career.

Careers are treated as a result of competence

Career progression is often addressed mainly through competence development. This can create an implicit assumption that stronger competence will naturally lead to career opportunities. The CARE findings suggest that this is not always the case.

Coaching careers are diverse

Coaching careers are often complex and different from many other professions. Coaches work in a wide range of conditions: full-time professionals, part-time workers or volunteers, often combining multiple roles and income sources. Employment can be short-term, fragmented and dependent on local opportunities. This means that coaching does not follow a career path where education leads directly to stable employment. Instead, careers are built through a mix of roles, opportunities and personal choices.

Coaches don't always know what careers look like

The workshop findings suggest that this complexity is not always easy to understand or navigate. Some coaches find it difficult to describe what a coaching career looks like, or how it can develop over time. Career paths are often unclear, and there are few shared reference points. This does not necessarily mean that coaching careers lack structure entirely. Rather, the structures are often informal, local or hidden. Coaches rely on networks, experience and personal initiative to find opportunities and move forward.

Why does the gap between coaching competence and career support matter?

- **For coaches**, limited career support makes it harder to build stable and long-term careers, increasing uncertainty and the risk of leaving the profession.
- **For clubs and employers**, it can lead to weaker continuity, difficulties in retaining coaches and less effective use of existing competences.
- **For the sport system**, it may limit the availability of qualified coaches and slow down long-term development.

Developing coaching skills isn't enough

In many countries, there are clear ambitions to professionalise coaching and improve working conditions. However, the CARE findings suggest that these efforts often focus mainly on resources, education or competence. Less attention is given to the actual structure of careers and to how coaches experience and navigate them in practice. As a result, the system may support becoming a better coach but does not always support becoming a professional coach in a sustainable way.

Coaching careers are full of opportunities

The nature of coaching work also creates opportunities. Flexible working arrangements, diverse roles and multiple pathways can offer possibilities that do not exist in more traditional career structures. The challenge is therefore not only to fix a problem, but to better understand coaching as a unique type of career and to support it accordingly.

Competence development is just one part of career development for coaches.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COACHES AND EMPLOYERS

For coaches

- **Develop career management skills**: Actively reflect on your career direction, identify your strengths and plan your development over time.
- **Clarify what professional coaching means in your context**: Build a realistic understanding of work opportunities, possible roles and income sources in your sport or environment.
- **Make your competences visible**: Use tools such as portfolios or personal profiles to identify and communicate your skills and experience.
- **Invest in continuous learning**: Update your competences regularly and connect learning to your long-term career goals.
- **Be proactive in seeking opportunities and networks**: Build relationships, seek new roles and engage with peers and mentors.
- **Seek support at career transitions:** Use mentors, peers and career discussions especially when moving into a new role, taking more responsibility or reconsidering your career direction.

For employers

- **Define and communicate coaching roles and career pathways:** Make career options visible and understandable within your organisation.
- **Support career development, not only performance:** Make career conversations a regular practice. Discuss coaches' work, development goals and future direction regularly, not only when problems or transitions occur.
- **Recognise and develop competences systematically:** Monitor coaches' skills and create development plans that also include career management aspects.
- **Connect coaches beyond your own organisation:** Help coaches access peer networks and external expertise when the necessary support is not available internally.
- **Support flexible career solutions:** Help coaches combine roles across organisations when full-time positions are not available.
- **Support key transitions:** Provide structured onboarding and mentoring when coaches move into new roles or take on more responsibility.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EDUACTION PROVIDERS AND SYSTEM-LEVEL ACTORS

For coach education providers

- **Integrate career management skills into education:** Include topics such as career planning, decision-making and managing transitions in training programmes.
- **Use real-life career examples and pathways:** Help coaches understand how careers are built in practice, not only in theory.
- **Connect learning with career development:** Link education pathways to real work opportunities and roles in the field.
- **Support reflection and long-term planning:** Encourage coaches to think about their careers throughout their education, not only about skills.

For sport federations and other system-level actors

- **Make coaching careers visible at system level:** Describe and communicate realistic career pathways, roles and opportunities in your sport or context.
- **Clarify responsibilities for career support:** Define who is responsible for supporting coaches' careers at different stages.
- **Support collaboration between organisations:** Enable cooperation between clubs and actors to improve career continuity and opportunities.
- **Promote networking and shared learning:** Create platforms and events where coaches can connect, share experiences and develop together.
- **Balance competence development with career support:** Ensure that career development is addressed alongside coaching skills.

Note: The recommendations can be adapted to the size and resources of the organisation. Even small actions, such as one annual career conversation or access to an external mentor, can make career support more systematic.

HOW CAN CAREER SUPPORT BE PUT INTO PRACTICE?

Regularly: Create space for career reflection. Discuss career direction together with competence development: What could be the next step? What skills and experience would it require? How could they be developed?

When a role changes: Support the transition. Clear expectations, onboarding, mentoring and regular check-ins can help when responsibilities, roles or working environments change.

During everyday work: Connect competence and career development. Consider not only what the coach needs to learn now, but how current work and learning can support future career opportunities.

When internal expertise is not enough: Look outside the organisation. External mentors, peer groups and cross-club or cross-sport networks can provide expertise and perspectives that are not available in one organisation.

When planning education: Link learning to career goals. Choose learning opportunities with both the current role and possible future roles in mind.

When full-time work isn't available: Build sustainable combinations of roles. Different coaching roles, employers, organisations or other work may be combined to create a realistic workload, sufficient income and a sustainable career.

Publications

Career Guidance for Sports Coaches: Literature Review for the CARE Project's Development Work

Supporting Coaches' Careers: A Benchmark of European Coaching Frameworks

References

Cedefop, European Commission, ETF, ILO, OECD, UNESCO, & World Bank. 2025. Investing in career guidance: Joint statement of the Interagency Working Group on Career Guidance.

European Commission: European Education and Culture Executive Agency, Birch, P., Balcon, M.-P., Bourgeois, A., Davydovskaia, O. et al. 2018. Teaching careers in Europe – Access, progression and support, Delhaxhe, A. (editor), Publications Office of the European Union.

European Observatoire of Sport and Employment. 2025. 2024 sport employment statistics in Europe: Research report. EOSE.

Bales, J. & Moustakas, L. 2022. European Sport Coaching Policy Framework. PEAK – Policy, Evidence and Knowledge in Coaching.

Cedefop. 2020. Inventory of lifelong guidance systems and practices - UK / England. CareersNet national records.

Cedefop. 2021. Inventory of lifelong guidance systems and practices - Finland. CareersNet national records.

Cedefop. 2023a. Inventory of lifelong guidance systems and practices - France. CareersNet national records.

Cedefop. 2023b. Inventory of lifelong guidance systems and practices - Netherlands. CareersNet national records.

Cedefop. 2025. Inventory of lifelong guidance systems and practices - Germany. CareersNet national records.

Lara-Bercial, S., North, J., Hämäläinen, K., Oltmanns, K., Minkhorst, J. & Petrovic, L. 2017. European Sport Coaching Framework. Champaign: Human Kinetics.

NOCNSF (Netherlands Olympic Committee & Sports Federation). n.d. Coach Development System / TeamNL Coach Development. NOC*NSF / TeamNL.

Sultana, R. G. 2012. Learning career management skills in Europe: a critical review. Journal of Education and Work, 25:2, 225-248

UK Coaching. n.d. Coach Learning Framework (CLF). UK Coaching.

WHO Regional Office for Europe. 2023. Framework for action on the health and care workforce in the WHO European Region 2023–2030. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe.



PUBLISHER

Urhea Foundation

Mäkelänkatu 47
00550 Helsinki

www.urhea.fi

PARTNERS OF THE CARE PROJECT

Urhea Foundation
Umeå University
Varala Sports Institute
Labod Bled Skating Club
Tampereen Pyrintö

URHEA

NATIONAL OLYMPIC TRAINING CENTER Helsinki