

BOOSTING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN UNIVERSITY PHYSICAL ACTIVITIES: SECOND STUDY

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Abstract. *Background.* Physical activity is a critical component of a healthy lifestyle, contributing to the prevention of chronic diseases, supporting mental health, and promoting overall well-being (Neumark-Sztainer, 2010; Iconaru, 2023; Burciu & Stoica, 2025). Despite these benefits, lifestyle changes in post-communist Romania have led to rising overweight and obesity rates, particularly among urban youth (Roman, 2019; Lăzărescu & Popa, 2015; Geantă, 2021). This study focuses on the University of Bucharest (UniBuc) to explore reasons behind students' participation in university-organized physical activities (Puiu, 2020). The lack of participation in sports and physical activities exhibited by young people is addressed in the academic environment, specifically in the University of Bucharest, which makes the subject of the present study.

Objectives. This research focuses on the University of Bucharest to explore the reasons behind students' low participation in university-organized physical activities. This research effort aims to lay the groundwork of an extended research effort centered on identifying the main reasons why young students (roughly aged 18-35) don't participate – or only participate sporadically, or only because of the mandatory component – in physical activities organized by the university they are enrolled in, and, in subsidiary, in physical activities overall.

Methods. By employing a structured questionnaire distributed electronically, this study aims to collect comprehensive data on student demographics, participation levels, motivations, barriers, and suggestions for improvement. The quantitative analysis component of the study aims to identify participation trends and barriers, while qualitative insights will provide nuanced perspectives on students' experiences. The findings will inform targeted strategies to promote physical activity among students, contributing to their immediate and long-term health.

Results. Data collected from the survey will be analyzed using various statistical methods to identify prevalent trends and correlations, while thematic analysis will be applied to the qualitative responses of the UniBuc students in order to extract common themes and insights.

Conclusion. Overall, this exploratory study seeks to lay the groundwork for future research on enhancing physical activity participation in academic settings, ultimately supporting the holistic development of young adults. Understanding the factors that influence students' engagement in physical activity will contribute significantly to the process of building the necessary conditions for their future participation, which represents the main point of this exploratory study, and, in line with its results, other potential research efforts focused on this pressing issue.

Key words: Sports, physical activity, exercise, health, mental health, depression, anxiety, youth, academia, overweight, obesity.



Introduction

Physical activity is widely recognized as a key component of a healthy lifestyle, contributing significantly to physical and mental health (Neumark-Sztainer, 2010; Caciula, 2020; Iconaru, 2023). Post-communist lifestyle changes, including sedentary behaviors and shifts in nutrition, have contributed to an excess weight epidemic in Romania, beginning in childhood and continuing into young adulthood (Roman, 2019; Geantă, 2021; Lăzărescu & Popa, 2015). Establishing healthy habits in young adulthood is essential for lifelong wellness (Neumark-Sztainer, 2010; Burciu & Stoica, 2025).

Despite these benefits, university students often face barriers to participation, including academic pressure, lack of time, and limited access to facilities (Silva, 2022; Sapsani & Karampelas, 2017).

Understanding these barriers within a university context is critical for promoting sustainable physical activity habits (Neumark-Sztainer, 2010; Cunningham, 2015). Regular exercise positively affects mental health by reducing stress, anxiety, and depression, and stimulates neuroplasticity and hippocampal neurogenesis (Caciula, 2020; Gao & Zhao, 2020; Iconaru, 2023).

This study explores students' engagement in university-organized physical activities, aiming to identify patterns, motivations, barriers, and opportunities for improvement, ultimately guiding interventions to enhance participation.

Methodology

A structured questionnaire was distributed electronically to 92 UniBuc students, from freshmen to seniors, to ensure wide coverage and representativeness (Burciu & Stoica, 2025). The survey combined quantitative questions measuring participation levels, motivations, and barriers, and qualitative questions capturing personal experiences, suggestions, and nuanced insights (Burciu & Stoica, 2025; Puiu, 2020).

Quantitative data were analyzed using statistical methods to identify trends, correlations, and demographic differences, while thematic analysis was applied to qualitative responses to extract common themes (Burciu & Stoica, 2025; Silva, 2022). This mixed-methods approach provides a holistic understanding of student engagement and informs strategies to improve participation (Alhassan, 2018; Shameli & Kim, 2017).

Results and Discussion

Table 1 summarizes students' participation in university-organized physical activities, motivations, barriers, and suggestions for improvement.

Table 1. Student Participation, Motivations, Barriers, and Suggestions for University Physical Activities (n = 92 total respondents)

Category	Details	Percentage (%)
Participation in at least one sport	Aerobics	64.1
	Other sports	35.9
Attendance in sports classes	Regularly	45.0
	Occasionally	25.6
	Rarely/Never	29.4

Motivations for attending sports classes	Academic grades	65.2
	Health improvement	51.1
	Stress reduction	31.5
Barriers to participation	Packed schedule	32.6
	Work or other commitments	20.7
	Class overlaps	19.6
Personal exercise habits	Daily	5.4
	Weekly	23.9
	Occasionally	32.6
	Rarely/Never	23.9
Student suggestions for boosting participation	Improved scheduling	59.8
	More diverse sports options	30.4
	Better promotion and facilities	25–27

Note: Percentages reflect survey responses; multiple selections were allowed for motivations, barriers, and suggestions (Burciu & Stoica, 2025).

Below we will analyze the most relevant answers to several questions from the questionnaire.

A. Demographics

1. What is your age range?

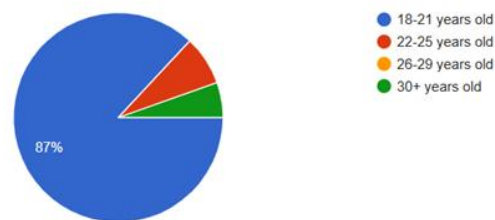


Figure 1. The answers to the question "What is your age range?"

2. Where do you live?

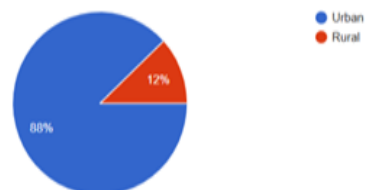


Figure 2. The answers to the question "Where do you live?"

B. Participation in sports activities

6. The sport you are/were enrolled in at the University (if applicable)

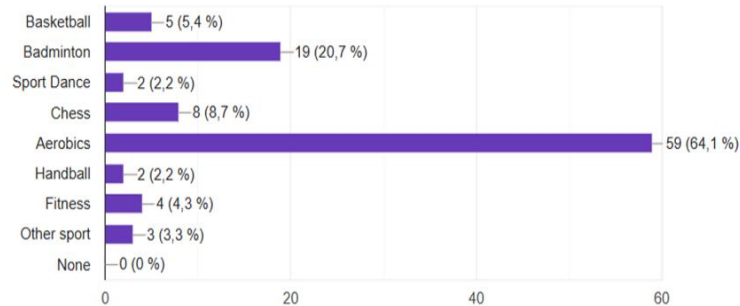


Figure 3. The answers to the question "The sport you are/were enrolled in at the University?"

- Aerobics dominates as the most chosen sport, suggesting it may be the most accessible, popular, or well-promoted.
- Badminton and Chess also show notable engagement.
- No one reported not participating, which could reflect a strong culture of sports involvement or a sample bias toward active students.

7. How often do you attend Sports class at the University?

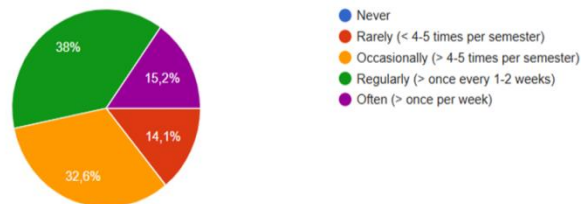


Figure 4. The answers to the question "How often do you attend Sports class at the University?"

- Over 85% of respondents attend at least occasionally, showing a generally high level of participation.
- The largest group attends regularly, suggesting that sports classes are a routine part of student life for many.
- Very few students attend rarely or not at all, reinforcing the idea of a strong sports culture.

8. How often do you exercise in your personal time?

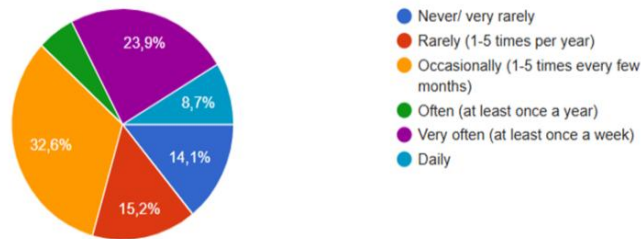


Figure 5. The answers to the question "How often do you exercise in your personal time?"

- The most common response is occasional exercise, suggesting that while many students are not inactive, they may not have a consistent routine.
- Only 5.4% exercise daily, and 23.9% do so weekly, indicating a smaller group of highly active individuals.
- A combined 23.9% (Never + Rarely) exercise very infrequently, which could be a concern for overall student wellness.

9. What motivates you to attend Sports class at the University (you can select multiple answers)?

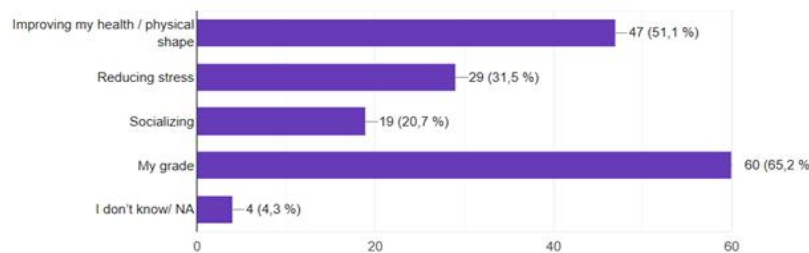


Figure 6. The answers to the question "What motivates you to attend Sports class at the University?"

- Grades and health are the primary motivators, indicating both extrinsic (academic) and intrinsic (well-being) reasons.
- Stress reduction and socializing are secondary but still relevant, highlighting the broader benefits of sports participation.
- Very few respondents are unsure of their motivation.

11. Would you attend Sports class at the University if they were not mandatory?

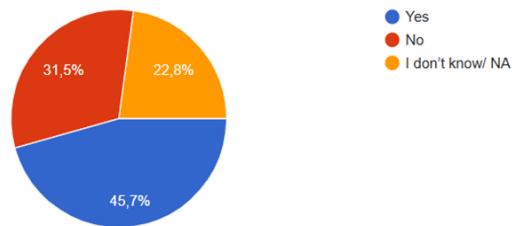


Figure 7. The answers to the question "Would you attend Sports class at the University if they were not mandatory?"

C. Your experience during Sports class

13. How would you describe your experience during Sports class (rate it from 0 to 5, 0 corresponding to a very unpleasant experience and 5 corresponding to a very pleasant experience)?

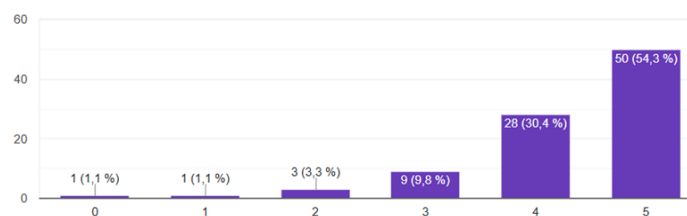


Figure 8. The answers to the question "How would you describe your experience during Sports class?"

16. What are the main reasons for your rare/ lack of attendance of Sports class (if applicable)?

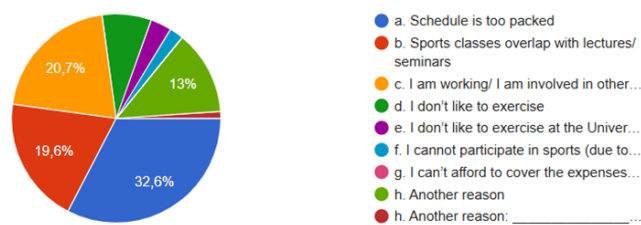


Figure 9. The answers to the question "What are the main reasons for your rare/lack of attendance in Sports class?"

- Time constraints (packed schedules, overlapping classes, and other commitments) are the dominant reasons for low attendance.
- Personal preferences and logistical/financial/medical barriers also play a role, though less frequently.

17. What could UniBuc do to encourage you to participate more frequently in sports classes (you can select multiple answers)

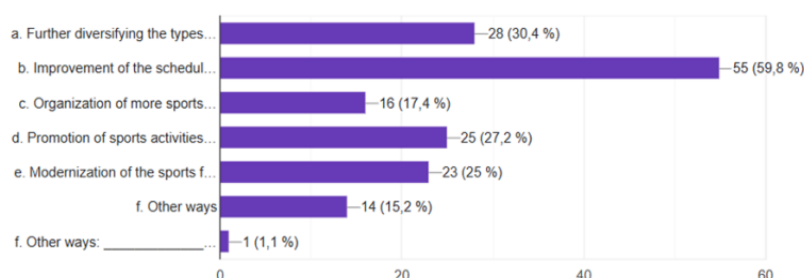


Figure 10. The answers to the question "What could UniBuc do to encourage you to participate more frequently in sports classes?"

- Scheduling improvements are the top priority for increasing participation.
- Students also value variety, promotion, and facility upgrades.
- A small number of respondents suggested other or personalized solutions.

Discussions

1. High Participation, But Room for Improvement

All respondents reported participating in at least one sport, with aerobics being the most popular (64.1%). Most students attend sports classes regularly or occasionally (70.6%), indicating generally positive engagement.

2. Motivation Is Both Academic and Personal

Grades were the top motivator for attending sports classes (65.2%), followed by health improvement (51.1%) and stress reduction (31.5%). This indicates a blend of extrinsic (academic) and intrinsic (well-being) motivations.

3. Time Constraints Are the Main Barrier

The most cited reasons for low attendance were packed schedules (32.6%), work or other activities (20.7%), and class overlaps (19.6%). These suggest that logistical conflicts are a major hurdle rather than a lack of interest in physical activity.

4. Personal Exercise Habits Vary Widely

While 23.9% of students exercise weekly and 5.4% daily, the largest group (32.6%) exercises only occasionally. A combined 23.9% rarely or never exercise, highlighting the need for more personal motivation or structural support.

5. Students Want Better Scheduling and Variety

To boost participation, students suggested improved scheduling (59.8%), more diverse sports options (30.4%), and better promotion and facilities (25–27%). These responses align with the barriers identified earlier and suggest that structural improvements can significantly enhance engagement.

Final Thoughts

There is a strong foundation of student engagement, but addressing logistical conflicts, emphasizing the personal benefits of sports beyond academic grades, and increasing variety in activities may help reach less active students.

Conclusion and Future Research Directions

The study highlights the importance of addressing both intrinsic and extrinsic factors influencing student engagement in university physical activities.

While overall participation is positive, logistical barriers and limited variety restrict engagement. Strategies such as flexible scheduling, diverse activity options, peer support, and digital tools can enhance participation and promote long-term health habits (Alhassan, 2018; Shameli & Kim, 2017; Gao & Zhao, 2020).

Universities play a critical role in shaping lifestyle behaviours and fostering well-being. Future research should evaluate interventions' effectiveness, explore socio-demographic influences and test innovative engagement strategies to strengthen the culture of physical activity.

Authors' contributions

All authors have an equal contribution to the publication.

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