

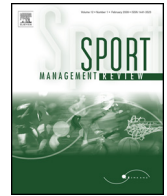


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The influence of sports participation on academic performance among students in higher education

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to analyse the effect that participating in extracurricular sporting activities has on academic performance among students in higher education. Prior research on this topic has yielded contradictory results: while some authors find a positive effect of sports participation on academic outcomes, others report a negative impact. Accordingly, the authors seek to provide a more rounded understanding of these mixed findings. The empirical evidence is provided by a panel dataset of undergraduate students who studied at a Spanish University over the period 2008–2014. The academic performance of sports participants are compared with those of non-participants in terms of their outcomes in the form of grades. Results reveal that participation in formal sporting activities is associated with higher grades among students at this university. The analysis reinforces the idea that apart from their health benefits for practitioners, sporting activities lead to the attainment of the performance goals to which higher education institutions aspire.

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1. Introduction

Scholars have traditionally expressed substantial interest in understanding whether sports participation impacts on students' academic performance by addressing the topic from different perspectives, such as education, psychology, sociology, and sports (e.g., [Feldman & Matjasko, 2005](#); [Fredricks, 2012](#)). Despite the wealth of research on the correlation between sports participation and academic performance ([Chuan, Yusof, & Shah, 2013](#); [Gaston-Gayles & Hu, 2009](#)), there is currently no consensus regarding the effect the former has on the latter. Our aim is to provide a more rounded understanding of extracurricular participation and subsequent academic achievement among students in higher education. In particular, our objective is to determine whether student involvement in regular physical-sporting activity has a causal relationship with their academic outcomes (i.e., the direction of the effect is from sports participation to academic performance, and not the other way around).

From a theoretical point of view, we propose several key conditions related to sports participation (e.g., skills and goals, social relations, and mental health capital) that may increase or decrease students' academic performance. Empirically, we rely on a panel data of 3,671 students from a Spanish university (Universidad Carlos III de Madrid) who began to study an

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undergraduate degree in 2008, and had all completed it by 2014. Our main findings show that regular, organised physical-sporting activity leads to higher academic performance among students at this university.

Our analysis becomes relevant insofar as most previous research has focused on undergraduate students participating in sports at universities in the United States (i.e., Kiger & Lorentzen, 1986; McArdle, Paskus, & Boker, 2013), where sports programmes play a central role, covering a broad range of men's and women's elite activities (professional athletes), and generating considerable amounts of advertising revenue. As a result, sports participation is institutionally linked with schools, attendance patterns, formal team selection processes, grades, and social status among peers and teachers (Coakley, 2011, p. 311). Like the US, sports programmes at universities in Canada are also very important. They are financed via athletics departments integrated within Canadian Interuniversity Sport, the organisation in charge of national competitions (Canadian Interuniversity Sport, 2007). The majority of Canadian universities provide training facilities, computer facilities and team sports free of charge. Likewise, the Australian government heavily supports university sports programmes at regional, national and international level, which are administered by Australian University Sport, a not-for-profit organisation and university sport's supreme governing body in that country (Knapp, 2011).

Universities in Spain belong to the European University Sports Association, an umbrella organisation for all national university sports federations in Europe, which coordinates competitions, conferences, mass participation sports events, and other activities at both university and national level. Each university organises its own sports programmes together with the Spanish University Sports Committee (integrated in the Higher Sports Board), which oversees sporting activities at national and international level. Spanish universities receive financial support from the different authorities at national, regional and local levels. Unlike the US, Canada or Australia, however, Spanish universities mainly support sport as a way of complementing students' academic education. Moreover, sports programmes at Spanish universities depend both politically and financially on public resources. Although the current context of higher education in Spain allows students to validate up to six optional credits through extracurricular activities, sport has little or no transcendence beyond the universities themselves. Moreover, compared to the US context for instance, attendance of sports events is minimal among university students in Spain, and athletics programmes hold little interest for the media. This may explain why the relationship between sports participation and academic performance has been underexplored in Spain compared to other institutional settings. The fact that our results reveal that participation in formal sporting activities is associated with higher grades among students renders it essential to provide universities with more opportunities to further invest in extracurricular sporting programmes based on their positive association with the improvement of students' academic performance.

The rest of the paper is organised as follows. The next two sections develop the theoretical analysis (literature review and theoretical framework). Section 4 briefly describes the research context (a Spanish university), and Section 5 describes the data, variables and empirical methods applied. Section 6 presents the main findings, and Section 7 concludes (implications, limitations, and future research).

2. Literature review

Research on the relationship between extracurricular participation and subsequent academic achievement has focused on identifying various plausible explanations for this relationship in specific settings, such as the physically active student population (Busch et al., 2014; Kokolakis, Lera-López, & Panagouleas, 2015; Levine, Etchison, & Oppenheimer, 2014). In this regard, research has presented the theoretical backgrounds for different sides of the argument (Busch et al., 2014). Although our purpose in this section is not to develop a scoping review of the previous literature, Table 1 summarises some of the main empirical studies on the relationship between sports participation and academic performance among students in higher education.

In general, previous research has examined the characteristics of participants (e.g., gender, race, background and academic credentials for college entrance) that are relevant for understanding the relative academic performance of students involved in sporting activities (Cornelius, 1995), as well as external factors that may have some influence on the relationship between sports participation and academic performance—for instance, Chuan et al. (2013) have found a negative link between the support system and the academic performance of physically active students at university.

As Table 1 shows, research has focused on different types of universities—for instance, private versus public ones (Chuan et al., 2013)—as well as on a wide variety of sports: from basketball and volleyball (e.g., Meyer, 1990), to football, basketball, baseball, and hockey (Shapiro, 1984), and even track and field events, or swimming (Miller & Kerr, 2002). In this regard, some authors have also distinguished between revenue and non-revenue sports activities (e.g., Kiger & Lorentzen, 1986). In addition, most literature has focused on the US context (Gaston-Gayles & Hu, 2009; McArdle et al., 2013), although there are other contributions, for example, from Canada (Miller & Kerr, 2002) and Asia (Chuan et al., 2013; Jayanthi, Balakrishnan, Ching, Latiff, & Nasirudeen, 2014).

Despite this growing body of literature, the results obtained are mixed and largely inconclusive. While some researchers have found that student engagement in extracurricular activities (such as sport) improves their academic performance (e.g., Jayanthi et al., 2014; Levine et al., 2014), others contend that the impact of sports participation on students' academic performance is negative (e.g., Miller & Kerr, 2002), or even null (e.g., Hood, Craig, & Ferguson, 1992). The discrepancy in these research findings may be traced to differences in both data gathering methods and methodology. On the one hand, while some studies have been conducted using large samples of national data (e.g., McArdle et al., 2013) others have used smaller

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