

## Original Paper

# The Perceived Impact of University Sport Engagement on Staff and First-year Undergraduate Students: An Exploratory Study

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### **Abstract**

*This research investigated the perceived impacts of university sports engagement on first-year undergraduate students from both student and staff perspectives, employing a mixed-methods approach of qualitative interviews and quantitative surveys. It examined how sports participation affects academic performance, time management, social interactions, and emotional development. Findings revealed conflicting views on time management; students in general saw sports as motivational, while staff identified potential distractions for scholarship athletes. Staff expressed concerns about recreational athletes, but students reported increased confidence and academic engagement from sports. Notably, sports positively influenced social interactions and emotional well-being, fostering a sense of belonging. The study underscores the need for enhanced support systems, including tailored advising and flexible scheduling, to help students balance commitments. It highlights the importance of community in first-year adjustments and calls for ongoing improvements in support structures and academic policies. A recommendation made was that future research should focus on the long-term impacts of sports on academic and career outcomes to inform higher education policy development.*

### **Keywords**

*Academic motivation and engagement, time management, flexible scheduling*

### **1. Introduction**

The research reported in this paper relates to a small scale exploratory study that was intended to investigate how participation in sports influenced the educational journeys of both students and staff. The research adopted a mixed methods approach that incorporated perspectives from education, psychology,

and sports science. The aim of the study was to provide a nuanced understanding of the interplay between sports and education, from both the point of view of students and staff.

### *1.1 Aim and Objectives*

The primary aim of this research is to examine the impact of sports participation on educational outcomes among higher education, from the viewpoint of staff and students. This overarching aim is broken down into the following specific objectives:

- To assess the effect of sports participation on academic attendance.
- To explore how engagement in sports influences student motivation and engagement in lectures and seminars.
- To evaluate the role of sports in the social and emotional development of students.
- To explore the impact sports has on staff members lectures and seminars.

These objectives were addressed in a small-scale study through a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods, namely surveys and interview. The findings were intended to point the way to the development of evidence-based strategies to support the role of sports in education.

### *1.2 Research Questions*

In line with the research objectives, the following questions guide this study:

- How does participation in sports affect academic attendance among higher education students?
- What is the relationship between sports engagement and student motivation and engagement in lectures and seminars?
- In what ways does involvement in sports contribute to the social and emotional development of students?
- In what way do higher education staff members become impacted by sports?

These research questions were designed to capture the comprehensive impact of sports on various educational outcomes. They were addressed through a mixed-methods approach, combining both statistical data and in-depth qualitative insights.

## **2. Supporting Literature**

In recent decades, the role of sport in the educational sector has attracted significant attention from educators, policymakers, and researchers (Bailey et al., 2009; Houlihan & Green, 2006). The joining of sport and education is not merely a matter of physical health and fitness; it impacts on mental health too, resulting in cognitive, social, and emotional benefits (Bailey et al., 2013; Malm et al., 2019; Siedentop & Van der Mars, 2022) historically, physical education and sports were seen as extra to the primary academic curriculum, often valued for their role in promoting physical well-being and teamwork. However, present research suggests that participation in sports can also have profound impacts on educational outcomes, including academic performance, student engagement, and overall educational experience (Buckley & Lee, 2021; Finn & Zimmer, 2012; Willms et al., 2009).

According to (Trudeau & Shephard, 2008) the educational system developed students, preparing them for academic success and life beyond school. In this regard, sports can play a crucial role; engaging in sports activities has been linked to improved concentration, enhanced memory, and better classroom behaviour, which collectively contribute to a more conducive learning environment. Moreover, sports develops important life skills such as discipline, leadership, and resilience, which are valuable both within and outside academic contexts (Holt & Bailey, 2008; Newman, 2020).

Despite these potential benefits, the integration of sports within educational frameworks varies widely across different regions and institutions (Schulenkorf et al., 2016). Houlihan (2000) suggested that some educational systems prioritise athletic programs and invest heavily in sports facilities and coaching, while others struggle with limited resources and competing academic demands.

### *2.1 Academic Performance*

Research indicates a positive correlation between sports engagement and academic performance. Fox et al. (2010) found that regular sports participation is associated with higher academic achievement due to developed time management skills, discipline, and improved cognitive function (Shephard, 1997). Enhanced concentration and memory, vital for academic success, have also been reported (Trudeau & Shephard, 2008). However, much of the literature centres on American college sports, with limited UK-focused studies.

Kuh (2003) suggests students engaged in extracurricular activities, including sports, demonstrate greater academic persistence relating to (Umbach et al., 2006) who found that student-athletes show higher levels of academic engagement and integration.

In the research of Fox et al. (2010) positive associations were demonstrated by correlation though causality could not be implied. Trudeau and Shephard (2008) used a longitudinal design, offering stronger evidence for causality, yet their reliance on self-reported data may have introduced bias. Umbach et al. (2006) combined quantitative and qualitative methods, enriching understanding but limiting generalisability due to sample size and context.

### *2.2 Cognitive Benefits of Sport Engagement*

Bailey, et al. (2013) adjacent with Siedentop and Van der Mars (2022) assert that physical activity enhances cognitive functions crucial for academic success. This supports the findings of (Trudeau & Shephard, 2008) that suggest participation promotes better classroom behaviour. Finn & Zimmer (2012) also noted fewer disruptive behaviours and higher attendance among sports participants.

### *2.3 Social and Emotional Benefits of Sport Engagement*

Sports provide essential social interaction for first-year students, enhancing integration and alleviating isolation (Drolet & Arcand, 2013; Humphrey & Lowe, 2017). Tinto (2012) emphasises the role of social integration in academic success, while Stuart, et al. (2011) reports a sense of belonging among participants.

## *2.4 Psychological Impacts*

Biddle and Asare (2011) along with Malm, et al. (2019) link physical activity to improved mental health, suggesting it alleviates stress and anxiety. Bailey, et al. (2013) found sports participation enhances mood, contributing to overall well-being. Delving deeper, Malm et al.'s longitudinal study allows for observing changes over time but may suffer from participant drop-out. The meta-analysis of Biddle and Asare provides overarching conclusions but may be limited by the quality of included studies.

## *2.5 Perspectives of Staff and Students*

Students view sports as beneficial for their academic and personal lives, developing transferable skills like teamwork. Staff recognise the role of sport in creating positive learning environments, observing that participating students tend to be more engaged. Concerns exist regarding potential distractions from academic responsibilities (Levermore, 2010).

## *2.6 Institutional Support and Resources*

Comprehensive institutional support is crucial for balancing sports and academics. Effective collaboration between athletic departments and academic staff enhances student experiences and promotes academic success (Etzel et al., 1991; Howard-Hamilton & Sina, 2001).

## *2.7 Challenges and Barriers*

Students often struggle to manage balance academic and athletic commitments (Willms et al., 2009), although sports can teach valuable time management skills (Trudeau & Shephard, 2008). Competitive sports can overshadow academic priorities, particularly where winning is emphasised, leading to increase self and second-hand pressure (Eitzen, 2016). Female and minority student-athletes face unique challenges and experiences, including gender stereotypes and cultural barriers (Adler & Adler, 1991). Female athletes may benefit from higher levels of academic motivation and performance, but they also encounter unique challenges such as gender stereotypes and limited access to resources. Minority student-athletes may experience additional barriers, including racial discrimination and cultural alienation, which can affect their academic and athletic experiences (Singer, 2005).

## *2.8 Impacts on Educational Outcomes*

The literature presents mixed findings regarding the academic benefits of sports participation. While some studies, such as those by Lambert et al. (2024) and Muñoz-Bullón, et al. (2017), report significant academic benefits, others, like Fisher et al. (1996), suggest minimal or no impact. These discrepancies may be due to differences in study design, population, and measurement of outcomes. Beyond academic performance, sports participation can enhance the overall educational experience. Barton (2011), Koh and Camiré (2015) and Newman (2020) all argue that sports provide opportunities for personal development, including the acquisition of life skills such as leadership, teamwork, and resilience. These skills are valuable both within and outside academic contexts.

## *2.9 Research Design*

A mixed-methods design, specifically a sequential explanatory strategy, was used. This design involved collecting and analysing quantitative data first, followed by qualitative data to explain and build upon

the quantitative results (Ivankova et al., 2006). This approach allowed for a detailed exploration of the statistical relationships identified in the initial phase and provided rich, contextual insights into the perspectives of students and staff.

### 2.10 Research Methods

The study employed semi-structured interviews and survey, to collect data. This approach facilitated the collection of rich, detailed insights from participants with varying points of view (Blandford, 2013; Creswell & Poth, 2016) The combination of interviews and survey was intended to ensure a robust data collection strategy that supported triangulation, enhancing the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings (Denzin, 2012; Patton, 2014). University ethics approval was granted for this research.

### 3. Quantitative Phase: Surveys

Surveys were used to collect quantitative data from 14 first-year undergraduate students and staff. The survey included questions on academic performance, social integration, and psychological well-being, drawing from validated instruments such as the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) (Kuh, 2003). The survey was intended to allow for the efficient collection of data from a small yet diverse population, *facilitating statistical analysis of trends and relationships*. The survey included both closed and open questions, providing both quantitative data and qualitative insights. Table 1 below describes the participants involved in the study and their responses.

**Table 1. Summary of Survey Responses on the Impact of University Sports**

<i>Question</i>	<i>Percentage Answer or outcome of the answers N=14</i>
<i>Q1: Role at University:</i>	43% Staff (6) 57% Student (8)
<i>Q2: If student, year of study:</i>	First Year
<i>Q3: If staff, department:</i>	Academic
<i>Q4: How frequently do <b>you</b> participate in or engage with university sports activities?</i>	14% Never 7% Rarely 21% Occasionally 29% Frequently 29% Very Frequently

<b>Q5:</b> How important do you think university sports are for students' overall university experience?	0% Not Important 0% Slightly Important 21% Moderately Important 50% Very Important 29% Extremely Important
<b>Q6:</b> To what extent do you believe participation in university sports affects academic performance?	0% Very Negatively 0% Negatively 14% No Impact 71% Positively 14% Very Positively
<b>Q7:</b> Do you think that participating in university sports helps students develop time-management skills?	7% Strongly Disagree 7% Disagree 21% Neutral 50% Agree 14% Strongly Agree
<b>Q8:</b> In your opinion, do university sports contribute to increased motivation and discipline in academic settings?	0% Strongly Disagree 7% Disagree 21% Neutral 36% Agree 36% Strongly Agree
<b>Q9:</b> How do you perceive the impact of university sports on students' social integration and relationships?	0% Very Negatively 0% Negatively 14% No Impact 36% Positively 50% Very Positively
<b>Q10:</b> Do you believe that university sports help reduce stress and improve mental health among students?	0% Strongly Disagree 0% Disagree 7% Neutral 36% Agree 57% Strongly Agree

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<b>Q11:</b> In your opinion, does participation in university sports enhance students' leadership and teamwork skills?	0% Strongly Disagree 0% Disagree 7% Neutral 29% Agree 64% Strongly Agree
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**Open Questions****Summary of responses**


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<b>Q12:</b> How do you think the impacts of university sports differ between athletes and non-athletes?	Enhance social skills, build strong friendships, provide stress relief, and create networking opportunities. Non-athletes may miss out on these benefits and focus solely on academics. Athletes often find motivation in competition and enjoy a supportive, like-minded community.
<b>Q13:</b> Do you perceive any differences in the academic and social impacts of sports engagement between first-year students and upper-year students? If so, please explain.	Benefit socially from sports by quickly forming friendships and networks. Third year students may prioritise academics over sports. The academic impact can vary, with some students balancing sports and academics effectively, while others struggle.
<b>Q14:</b> What improvements, if any, do you think could be made to the university sports programs to better support educational outcomes?	Better timetabling to avoid clashes with academic commitments. Increased funding for non-performance sports. Welfare support for students. Guidance on balancing academics and sports. Raising awareness of available programs and offering more beginner-friendly options were also suggested.

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<p><b>Q15:</b> Any additional comments or observations regarding the impact of university sports on students' education?</p>	<p>University sports generally have a positive impact, aiding in time management, stress relief, socialisation, and broader friend networks. However, effective academic support needed to ensure students can balance their commitments successfully.</p>
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This table presents an analysis of responses regarding the role of university sports in students' academic performance, social integration, and overall university experience. The data highlights the perceived benefits of sports in fostering time management, motivation, and social connectivity, while also suggesting areas for improvement, such as better scheduling and increased support for non-performance sports.

#### 4. Qualitative Phase: Interviews

Six semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of students and staff. The interview protocol included open-ended questions designed to explore the nuanced impacts of sports engagement on education, such as firsthand experiences, perceived benefits, and challenges. This method was chosen for its flexibility and ability to capture in-depth, context-rich information (Kvale, 2009). By adopting a semi-structured format for the six interviews, flexibility was ensured in probing deeper into respondents' perceptions while covering key topics (Kvale, 2007). Ethical approval for the study was obtained from University of Hertfordshire Ethics Committee, and informed consent was secured from all participants prior to the interviews.

The questions were designed to explore how participation in sports affected academic attendance among higher education students, the relationship between sports engagement and student motivation and engagement in lectures and seminars, the contributions of sports involvement to the social and emotional development of students, and the impact on higher education staff members. The interview guide was developed to explore nuanced impacts of sports engagement, aligning with findings from (Drolet & Arcand, 2013) and Tinto (2012) regarding social integration and emotional well-being.

##### 4.1 Participant Selection

Participants for this study were selected using a combination of stratified random sampling for the survey and purposive sampling for the interviews. Stratified random sampling was employed as suggested by Acharya et al. (2013), while purposive sampling was informed by guidelines from (Campbell et al., 2020; Tongco, 2007). The survey targeted first-year undergraduate students and staff members across various subjects and faculties, ensuring a representative sample. Interview participants were selected based on their direct involvement and experience with university sports and academic engagement.

The purposive sampling for interviews allowed for the selection of participants based on specific criteria relevant to the study's objectives. This approach ensured that insights were gathered from individuals



with substantial involvement in university sports and academic engagement. As advocated by Patton (2014), purposive sampling is essential for achieving depth and richness in qualitative data. The criteria for selecting interview participants included being a first-year student, providing in-depth insights into their experiences and perceptions related to academic engagement and the impact of sports (Campbell et al., 2020; Tongco, 2007). Staff members were chosen based on their roles in delivering lectures and seminars, ensuring their expertise enriched the study's findings.

Diversity in gender, ethnicity, sports participation, and academic discipline was prioritised to capture a comprehensive range of experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2016). This methodological approach enriched the qualitative data and provided a thorough understanding of the research questions.

#### *4.2 Data Collection Procedures*

##### *4.2.1 Interview Process*

Interviews were conducted in a quiet, private setting via video conferencing to ensure confidentiality and comfort for the participants. Each interview lasted approximately 45-60 minutes and was recorded with the participant's consent, allowing for a transcript to be made and developed. All transcripts were sent to the interviewees for Interviewee Transcript Review (ITR) to allow for respondent validation. Participants were informed about the study's purpose, their right to withdraw, and measures taken to protect their privacy.

An interview guide was developed, including open-ended questions that explored participants' views on the impact of sport engagement on educational outcomes. Questions might be adapted, left out, or new questions might arise from the semi-structured interview.

##### *4.3 Survey Administration*

Surveys were distributed electronically, on an online survey tool, to first-year students and staff through email. To encourage participation, the survey was concise, taking no more than 30 minutes to complete. Respondents were assured of confidentiality and anonymity to encourage honest and accurate responses. The survey had different categories such as demographic Information, general perceptions, academic impacts, social and emotional impacts, comparative perceptions, and suggestions and improvements.

## **5. Data Analysis**

### *5.1 Qualitative Data Analysis*

The data analysis protocol involved a structured approach to ensure rigor and consistency. Interview data were transcribed verbatim from the recordings and analysed using thematic analysis, following (Braun & Clarke, 2012) six-phase framework. NVivo (Version 14; QSR International) was employed to facilitate the systematic coding and organization of themes. This protocol ensured that themes were identified and developed through a consistent and transparent process.

### *5.2 Quantitative Data Analysis*

The data analysis protocol for survey responses included both descriptive and inferential statistical methods. Descriptive statistics summarized the frequency and distribution of responses (as seen in Table

1). Inferential analyses, including correlation and regression, were conducted to explore relationships between sports engagement and academic performance, social integration, and psychological well-being. This protocol ensured the reliability and validity of the quantitative findings.

## 6. Discussion of Findings

### 6.1 Data Collection

The data collection phase involved transcribing audio-recorded interviews into written text. Interviewees reviewed their transcripts to clarify or adapt responses (Hagens et al., 2009).

### 6.2 Participant Demographics

Participants included eight students and six staff members. Of the students, three participated in in-depth interviews, while all eight engaged in broader discussions. Staff members, ranging from academic tutors to lecturers, provided insights into the balance between sports and academics, along with social and psychological impacts.

**Table 2. Demographics of Interview Participants**

Participant	Role	Involvement in Sports	Area of Study/Role
Staff 1	Staff	Previously personal tutor to scholars	Professor of Judo Education
Staff 2	Staff	Gym user, lectures scholars	Sports Studies Program Leader
Staff 3	Staff	Limited engagement	Leader of Sports Business Management
Student 1	Student	Plays rugby, uses campus gym	Optometry
Student 2	Student	Plays rugby, uses campus gym	Music
Student 3	Student	Plays rugby	Sports Coaching

## 7. Findings (Themes identified)

### 7.1 Participation and Time Management

Students reported frequent participation in sports, with 50% selecting “Frequently” and 50% “Very Frequently”. Conversely, staff engagement was limited, with none reporting participation above

“Occasionally”. Both students and staff acknowledged challenges in balancing sports and academics. Student 2 noted: “I make time for my game, so I kind of plan around sport and then... around my academics.”

**Table 3. Time Management Ratings**

Question	Student Response (Agree/Strongly Agree)	Staff Response (Agree/Strongly Agree)
Sports improve time management	64%	Limited agreement noted

### *7.2 Academic Engagement and Motivation*

Survey results showed that 100% of staff agreed sports positively influence education. However, opinions differed on the extent of this impact. Staff 2 remarked: “Recreational athletes might engage better than scholarship students.” Students highlighted how sports build confidence. For instance, Student 3 stated: “It makes me think there’s nothing to really be scared of when talking in class.”

### *7.3 Social and Emotional Development*

Both staff and students emphasized the social benefits of sports, with 86% of students believing sports positively affect social interactions. Staff 3 reflected on personal experience, saying: “The day I was made captain of the team was one of my proudest achievements ever.” Students reinforced the importance of friendships formed through sports. Student 1 advised: “Just get involved, join a club, do something.” In terms of mental health, 75% of students acknowledged positive impacts, though 17% remained neutral, possibly indicating gaps in awareness. Staff 1 highlighted support systems, noting: “We’ve got a very good scholarship program.”

### *7.4 Future Goals*

Students and staff suggested improvements to timetabling and support for balancing sports with academics. Students advocated for initiatives like teaching time management skills, while staff pointed out the need to address scheduling conflicts.

**Table 4. Proposed Improvements**

<b>Improvement</b>	<b>Example Quote</b>
Improved timetabling	“Timetabling doesn’t always support sport participation.” – Staff 2
Time management education	“Teach how to balance to ensure positive outcomes in both sport and academics.”
Increased social opportunities	“Meeting people through sport builds confidence and friendships.” – Student 1

## 8. Conclusion

This research explored the perceived impacts of university sport engagement on first-year undergraduate students’ education from the perspectives of both students and staff. The study aimed to understand the influence of university sports participation on students’ academic performance, time management, social interactions, and emotional development. The key findings and reflections on the research process provide valuable insights for future practice and policy in higher education.

### 8.1 Participation and Time Management

The research highlighted a clash in perceptions regarding time management. Students often used sports participation as a motivational tool to manage their time effectively, viewing it as a reward for completing academic tasks. However, staff noted that sports could detract from academic responsibilities, particularly for scholarship athletes frequently traveling for competitions. This contrast underscores the need for enhanced support systems to help student-athletes balance their dual roles effectively.

### 8.2 Academic Engagement and Motivation

The data revealed mixed perceptions about the impact of sports on academic engagement. Staff expressed concerns about recreational athletes’ engagement levels but also acknowledged the positive influence of sports on all athletes’ discipline and academic performance. Students reported that sports participation boosted their confidence and classroom engagement, although survey results showed some variance in this, as seen from Table 1 and 2. This suggests that while sports can enhance motivation and engagement for some, it may have varying effects on others.

### 8.3 Social and Emotional Development

Sports participation was recognised for its positive impact on social interactions and emotional well-being. Both students and staff emphasised the role of sports in fostering a sense of belonging and

community, crucial for first-year students adjusting to university life. Many survey respondents and interviewees supported the notion that sports positively affect mental health and social skills. This finding addresses the research question on how involvement in sports contributes to the social and emotional development of students, showing that sports play a significant role in enhancing these aspects.

#### *8.4 Future Goals*

The current researchers indicated that sports participation helps students develop valuable skills for their future careers, including networking, teamwork, and leadership. Students expressed a desire for better time management training and more support for balancing sports and academics. Both students and staff suggested institutional changes, such as adjusting timetables to accommodate sports schedules, to enhance the student-athlete experience.

#### *8.5 Implications for Policy and Practice*

##### *8.5.1 Timetable Adjustments*

As commented on previously, universities might consider how academic timetables might allow for major sporting events or training sessions to help student-athletes take part fully in both their academic and athletic pursuits.

##### *8.5.2 Skill Development Programs*

By offering workshops on time management, stress management, and other relevant skills, universities can better prepare student-athletes to handle the demands of their dual roles. More students may become interested in taking part in sports and academics as they will have a better grasp of the skills needed to balance sports and academics. In addition to student training, relevant training for academic staff on the unique challenges faced by student-athletes can foster a more supportive environment and encourage empathy and flexibility in managing academic requirements. This understanding can lead to better balance and support for student-athletes.

The findings of this research indicate a significant relationship between sports engagement and student motivation and engagement in lectures and seminars. Students who participated in sports frequently reported higher levels of motivation and engagement in their academic work. This is supported by both qualitative and quantitative data, with 75% of students surveyed believing that sports positively impact their academic engagement. Students used sports as a reward mechanism, incentivizing them to complete their academic tasks to participate in sports activities. This aligns with existing literature that suggests physical activity can enhance cognitive functions and academic performance (Bailey et al., 2013; Malm et al., 2019)

Involvement in sports significantly contributes to the social and emotional development of students. Both staff and students highlighted the positive impact of sports on social interactions, with 86% of survey respondents indicating that sports positively affect social interaction. The interviews revealed that sports foster a sense of community and belonging, which is crucial for the emotional well-being of first-year students. The staff members emphasized the role of sports in building confidence and social skills, with one staff member recounting their own positive experience as a student-athlete. This is consistent with

previous research that links sports participation to improved social and emotional outcomes (Malm et al., 2019).

The staff interviewed recognised the challenges student-athletes face in balancing academics and sports, particularly sports scholars who often travel for competitions. They noted that while scholar athletes generally manage their time well, recreational athletes sometimes struggle with time management. Staff also observed that sports engagement leads to better academic performance and higher levels of student interaction in lectures, although there were mixed opinions regarding the impact on time management skills. This highlights the need for universities to provide tailored support to student-athletes to help them balance their dual commitments effectively.

### 8.6 Conclusion

The study presented here offers an understanding of how sports influence the academic performances of students, time management, social interactions, and emotional well-being. The findings underscore the importance of supportive institutional policies and practices to enhance the overall experience and success of student-athletes. Future research could explore the long-term impacts of sports participation on academic and career outcomes, further informing policy development in higher education. The insights gained from this preliminary study have the potential to impact future research and practice, thus fostering a more inclusive and supportive university environment.

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