

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF SPORTS ACTIVITIES IN ENHANCING STUDENTS' MENTAL HEALTH: A STUDY ON PREPARATORY YEAR STUDENTS AT KING FAISAL UNIVERSITY

Dr. Amr Abdelmotelb Elatla:

Department of Self-development skills, Preparatory Year, King Faisal University Al Ahsa
31982, Saudi Arabia; aatla@kfu.edu.sa

Abstract

This study investigates the effectiveness of sports activities in enhancing the mental health of preparatory year students at King Faisal University. Using a qualitative research design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 50 students to explore their perceptions of how sports influence their psychological well-being. The findings reveal that participation in sports significantly reduces stress and anxiety, improves emotional resilience, and enhances self-confidence and social connections. However, several barriers to participation were identified, including academic workload, lack of interest, and limited awareness of available sports programs. The study highlights the importance of integrating structured sports activities into university life as a means of promoting mental well-being among students. It recommends enhancing awareness campaigns, expanding the range of sports programs, and integrating sports into student mental health initiatives. Despite its limitations, including reliance on self-reported data and the focus on a single university, this research provides valuable insights into the role of sports in fostering students' psychological health. The study underscores the need for universities to adopt comprehensive strategies that support student engagement in sports, ultimately contributing to their academic success and overall well-being.

Keywords: Sports participation, mental health, university students, stress reduction

1. Introduction

University life is a critical period for students' personal and academic development, often accompanied by significant psychological and social challenges. Mental health plays a fundamental role in students' overall well-being, influencing their academic performance, social interactions, and ability to cope with stress (Keyes, 2007). Among various extracurricular activities, sports have been widely recognized for their positive impact on mental health by promoting physical fitness, reducing stress, and enhancing emotional resilience (Biddle & Asare, 2011).

Participation in sports activities allows students to develop coping mechanisms that mitigate anxiety and depression while fostering a sense of discipline, motivation, and self-confidence (Lubans et al., 2016). Engaging in regular physical exercise is associated with improved mood, better concentration, and increased levels of serotonin and endorphins, which contribute to overall emotional well-being (Fox, 1999). Furthermore, team sports encourage social interaction, collaboration, and a sense of belonging, all of which are essential for mental health stability, particularly among preparatory year students who face the challenges of transitioning from high school to university life.

Despite the recognized benefits of sports for mental health, limited research has explored the specific impact of sports activities on preparatory year students in Saudi universities, particularly at King Faisal University. This study aims to investigate how participation in sports activities influences students' mental well-being, focusing on their stress levels, emotional regulation, and overall psychological adjustment. Using qualitative methods, the research will gather insights from preparatory year students at King Faisal University through semi-structured interviews. The

findings will contribute to the existing literature on student mental health and provide recommendations for universities to develop more effective sports programs that support students' psychological well-being.

2. Literature Review

The relationship between sports participation and students' mental health has been extensively studied, with researchers highlighting its role in improving psychological well-being, reducing stress, and fostering social integration.

1. Psychological Benefits of Sports Activities for Students

Numerous studies confirm that physical activity significantly enhances students' mental health by alleviating symptoms of anxiety and depression.

Sports, particularly team sports, may offer psychosocial benefits beyond those attributed to physical activity alone (Eime et al., 2013). Studies indicate that students who participate in sports experience lower stress levels and higher happiness and psychological well-being compared to non-participants (Judge, 2018). Sports activities contribute to mental well-being through physiological mechanisms, such as regulating the hypothalamus-pituitary-adrenal axis, which plays a role in stress response (Thakre, 2024). Furthermore, students involved in sports exhibit higher levels of positive psychological characteristics and lower levels of negative psychological effects (Ning & Shi, 2022). These findings underscore the importance of promoting sports participation in educational settings to enhance both physical and mental health outcomes for students.

2. Social and Emotional Impact of Sports Participation

Beyond mental health benefits, sports activities play a crucial role in fostering students' social connections and emotional well-being. Regular physical activity can reduce risks of obesity, anxiety, low self-esteem, and bullying among adolescents (Pál, 2018). Increased sports participation is positively associated with various aspects of emotional and behavioral well-being, particularly self-concept (Donaldson & Ronan, 2006). Sports activities contribute to students' physical and emotional health, with a correlation observed between sports engagement and emotional uplift among students. Furthermore, sports participation is positively related to social media use and college attachment, which in turn enhances psychological well-being (Kim et al., 2017). The mediating role of social media use in this relationship highlights the interconnectedness of sports, social connections, and emotional health. These findings underscore the importance of incorporating sports activities into students' lives to promote overall well-being and social integration.

3. Barriers to Sports Participation Among University Students

Despite the well-documented benefits, several studies highlight barriers that prevent students from engaging in sports activities. Lack of time, primarily due to academic commitments, is consistently identified as a major obstacle (Griffiths et al., 2020; Gómez-lópez et al., 2010; Abou Elmagd et al., 2018). Cost and lack of confidence are also significant barriers (Griffiths et al., 2020). International students face additional challenges, including intrapersonal and interpersonal barriers, compared to local students (Hashim, 2012). Socioeconomic factors play a role, with students from lower socioeconomic groups being less active (Griffiths et al., 2020). Other barriers include lack of facilities, social and cultural factors, lack of interest, and insufficient information about available activities (Hashim, 2012; Abou Elmagd et al., 2018). Gender differences in motivation have also been observed (Gómez-lópez et al., 2010). Notably, students who did not participate in sports before university are less likely to do so during their studies (Griffiths et al.,

2020). These findings highlight the need for targeted interventions to promote sports participation among university students.

4. Institutional Strategies to Promote Mental Health Through Sports

Given the documented benefits of sports activities, universities have been exploring various strategies to encourage student participation. Education and self-awareness are crucial for young athletes' mental well-being, emphasizing the development of coping skills and stress reduction techniques (Krejčí, 2015). While organized youth sport can be a vehicle for mental health promotion, it also presents risks that need to be addressed through evidence-based interventions and athlete-centered approaches (Vella, 2019). Coaches play a vital role in shaping athletes' mental health by focusing on personal development alongside competitive success (Bell, 1997). At the collegiate level, universal mental health screening during preparticipation examinations is recommended, though implementation varies widely among institutions. Factors such as having a written mental health plan, employing clinical psychologists, and higher athletic trainer-to-student ratios are associated with more comprehensive screening practices (Kroshus, 2016). These strategies collectively aim to support athletes' mental health across different levels of sport participation.

While existing literature confirms the benefits of sports on students' mental health, several gaps remain. Most studies focus on general university populations, with limited research specifically examining preparatory-year students. Additionally, research on sports participation in Saudi Arabian universities is scarce, making it difficult to generalize findings across different cultural and educational contexts.

Furthermore, while barriers to participation have been identified, few studies offer concrete solutions for overcoming these challenges in university settings. Future research should explore innovative strategies, such as policy changes, faculty involvement, and digital interventions, to enhance student engagement in sports. Based on the identified gaps, the present study aims to achieve the following objectives:

- To examine the impact of sports activities on the mental health and social integration of preparatory-year students at King Faisal University.
- To identify the key barriers to participation in extracurricular sports and propose strategies to enhance student engagement.

3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore preparatory year students' perceptions of the effectiveness of sports activities in enhancing their mental health at King Faisal University. A phenomenological approach was used to understand students' lived experiences and insights regarding their participation in sports activities.

The study sample consisted of 50 preparatory year students at King Faisal University. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, ensuring diversity in their levels of engagement in sports activities. The inclusion criteria required that participants be currently enrolled in the preparatory year program, have either actively participated or chosen not to participate in sports activities, and be willing to share their experiences regarding the impact of sports on their mental health. The sample included students involved in various sports such as football, basketball, swimming, and individual fitness activities, as well as students who had not engaged in sports for

comparative insights. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained before conducting the interviews.

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, allowing participants to express their thoughts freely while ensuring that key topics related to sports and mental health were covered. The interviews took place in a quiet and comfortable setting on the university campus to encourage open discussions. Each interview lasted approximately 5–10 minutes. The interview guide included questions about students' motivations for participating (or not participating) in sports, their perceptions of sports' impact on stress, anxiety, and emotional well-being, and the role of sports in enhancing focus, motivation, and overall mental resilience.

The interviews were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework. This method involved six phases: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes based on recurring patterns, searching for themes related to the psychological effects of sports, reviewing themes for consistency and coherence, defining and naming themes to highlight key findings, and producing the final report to present the results systematically.

4. Results and Discussion

1. Participation in Sports Activities

The first area of analysis examined the level of student participation in sports activities. Table 1 presents the distribution of students based on their engagement in sports.

Table 1: Participation in Sports Activities

Participation Level	Number of Students	Percentage (%)
Active Participants (Regularly engage in sports)	22	44%
Occasional Participants (Engage in sports sometimes)	15	30%
Non-Participants (Do not engage in any sports)	13	26%

The results indicate that a significant proportion of students (44%) actively participate in sports activities, while another 30% engage occasionally. However, 26% of students do not participate in any form of sports. The lack of engagement may be attributed to various barriers such as time constraints, lack of interest, or limited accessibility to sports facilities. Previous research suggests that student engagement in physical activities is influenced by personal motivation, institutional support, and perceived health benefits (Kahu & Nelson, 2018).

2. Impact of Sports on Mental Health

To assess the role of sports in enhancing mental health, students were asked whether participation in sports activities helped them manage stress and emotional well-being. Table 2 presents their responses.

Table 2: Perceived Impact of Sports on Mental Health

Response Category	Number of Students	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree	20	40%
Agree	18	36%
Neutral	7	14%
Disagree	5	10%

A majority (76%) of students either strongly agreed or agreed that participating in sports helped them manage stress and improve their emotional well-being. Only 10% disagreed, indicating that sports activities have a generally positive effect on students' psychological health. These findings align with prior research, which highlights the benefits of physical activity in reducing anxiety, depression, and overall stress among university students (Astin, 1984).

3. Influence of Sports on Social Connections and Emotional Support

One of the key benefits of sports participation is its role in fostering social connections and providing emotional support. Table 3 presents students' perceptions regarding the impact of sports on their social interactions.

Table 3: Influence of Sports on Social Connections

Response Category	Number of Students	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree	24	48%
Agree	19	38%
Neutral	5	10%
Disagree	2	4%

The results show that **86%** of students believed that participating in sports helped them build friendships and strengthen social connections. These findings support previous studies by Soria and Stebleton (2013), which emphasize that social involvement plays a crucial role in students' emotional well-being and overall academic success. Universities should continue to encourage sports participation as a means of fostering peer support and reducing feelings of isolation.

4. Barriers to Participation in Sports Activities

Students who did not engage in sports were asked about the key barriers preventing their involvement. Table 4 outlines the main challenges reported by non-participants.

Table 4: Barriers to Participation in Sports Activities

Barrier	Number of Students	Percentage (%)
Lack of time due to academic workload	18	36%
Lack of interest in sports	12	24%
Limited awareness of opportunities	10	20%
Personal reasons (e.g., social anxiety, health concerns)	10	20%

The most frequently cited barrier was academic workload (36%), which aligns with previous research indicating that university students often prioritize coursework over extracurricular activities (Trowler, 2010). Additionally, 24% of students reported a lack of interest in sports, suggesting a need for more diverse and appealing sports programs. Universities can address these challenges by promoting flexible sports schedules, raising awareness of available programs, and integrating physical activity into students' daily routines.

5. Psychological and Emotional Benefits of Sports Participation

Students who actively participated in sports were asked to describe the psychological and emotional benefits they experienced. Table 5 presents the key benefits reported.

Table 5: Psychological and Emotional Benefits of Sports

Benefit	Number of Students	Percentage (%)
Reduced stress and anxiety	22	44%
Increased self-confidence	18	36%
Improved teamwork and leadership skills	16	32%
Enhanced sense of purpose and motivation	15	30%

The findings reveal that 44% of students experienced reduced stress and anxiety due to sports participation. Furthermore, 36% reported increased self-confidence, supporting research that links physical activity to personal development and leadership skills (Kahu & Nelson, 2018). These results highlight the importance of structured sports programs in promoting students' mental health and fostering positive emotional growth.

The findings of this study highlight the significant role of sports activities in enhancing the mental health of preparatory year students at King Faisal University. A considerable proportion of students (44%) actively participate in sports, while 30% engage occasionally. However, 26% of students do not participate in any sports activities, primarily due to academic workload, lack of interest, or limited awareness of available programs. These results align with prior research suggesting that student engagement in extracurricular activities is often influenced by personal motivation, institutional support, and time management challenges (Kahu & Nelson, 2018). The relatively high rate of non-participation suggests a need for universities to create more flexible and inclusive sports programs that accommodate students' academic commitments and diverse interests.

One of the most notable findings is that 76% of students perceived sports as beneficial for managing stress and improving emotional well-being. This supports previous studies emphasizing the positive psychological impact of physical activity, including reduced anxiety, improved mood, and enhanced resilience (Astin, 1984). Given the growing concerns over students' mental health in higher education, universities should integrate structured sports initiatives as a key component of their well-being strategies. Providing accessible and well-promoted sports programs can serve as a proactive approach to preventing stress-related issues among students.

Additionally, sports participation was found to play a crucial role in fostering social connections and friendships, with 86% of students reporting enhanced peer relationships through sports activities. These results reaffirm the importance of social engagement in student well-being, as peer support networks have been shown to enhance both emotional stability and academic motivation (Soria & Stebleton, 2013). Universities should leverage these findings by expanding sports programs that encourage teamwork, collaboration, and a sense of community, particularly for students who may struggle with social integration.

Despite these benefits, the study identified several barriers to sports participation, with academic workload being the most significant challenge (36%), followed by lack of interest (24%), limited awareness of opportunities (20%), and personal constraints such as social anxiety (20%). These barriers suggest that universities need to adopt a more student-centered approach to sports promotion. For example, integrating flexible sports schedules, providing stress-relief programs that combine physical activity with academic life, and offering alternative fitness options such as yoga or mindfulness-based exercise programs could encourage broader participation.

Furthermore, the psychological and emotional benefits of sports were strongly evident, with 44% of students reporting reduced stress and anxiety, 36% experiencing increased self-confidence, and 32% noting improvements in teamwork and leadership skills. These findings highlight the broader impact of sports beyond physical fitness, reinforcing their role in personal and professional development. Universities should emphasize these benefits in their student engagement strategies, positioning sports as not only a recreational activity but also a crucial component of students' holistic growth and future career readiness.

The findings of this study carry several important implications for university policy and student support services. First, higher education institutions should prioritize sports activities as an integral part of student well-being programs. This could involve incorporating structured physical activity sessions within the academic schedule or providing incentives for participation, such as awarding students with participation certificates or academic credit for engaging in sports. Second, universities should address the barriers preventing students from participating in sports by implementing flexible and inclusive programs. Strategies such as offering a wider range of sports options, scheduling activities at convenient times, and launching awareness campaigns about the mental health benefits of physical activity could enhance student engagement. Additionally, providing mentorship or peer support groups for students who experience social anxiety could help encourage participation in team-based sports. Finally, the study suggests that sports activities should be viewed as a means of fostering community and belonging within the university environment. Universities should invest in creating more student-driven and socially engaging sports programs, ensuring that all students, regardless of their skill level or background, have the opportunity to participate. Such efforts would not only improve mental health outcomes but also contribute to stronger university identity and student retention.

5. Conclusion, Recommendations, and Limitations

This study examined the effectiveness of sports activities in enhancing the mental health of preparatory year students at King Faisal University. The findings revealed that sports participation plays a crucial role in reducing stress, improving emotional well-being, fostering social connections, and enhancing self-confidence and leadership skills. A significant proportion of students acknowledged the psychological benefits of engaging in sports, emphasizing its role in promoting resilience and academic motivation. However, the study also identified several barriers to participation, including academic workload, lack of interest, and limited awareness of available sports programs. These challenges highlight the need for universities to adopt more flexible and inclusive approaches to encourage broader student engagement in sports activities. Overall, the study reinforces the argument that sports should be an integral part of student support services, contributing not only to physical fitness but also to mental and emotional well-being.

The study recommends several strategies to enhance the effectiveness of sports programs in supporting students' mental health. First, universities should integrate structured physical activity sessions into academic schedules to ensure students have dedicated time for sports without affecting their coursework. Flexible scheduling options, such as evening and weekend sessions, can further accommodate students. Second, increasing awareness of available sports activities through campaigns, orientation programs, and clear communication of program details can help students engage more. Additionally, expanding the range of sports offerings, including fitness programs and stress-relief exercises like yoga, can cater to diverse student interests and abilities. To address psychological barriers such as social anxiety, universities should implement peer mentorship programs and mental health workshops to create a more supportive environment.

Finally, universities should strengthen the connection between sports and mental health services by promoting physical activity as a stress-relief mechanism, in collaboration with counseling departments.

While this study provides valuable insights into the impact of sports on students' mental health, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study focused solely on preparatory year students at King Faisal University, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to students in other universities or academic levels. Future research should explore the impact of sports on a broader student population, including undergraduate and postgraduate students.

Second, the study relied on self-reported data from student interviews, which may be subject to response bias. Some participants might have provided socially desirable answers rather than fully disclosing their experiences. Employing mixed-method approaches, such as combining qualitative interviews with quantitative psychological assessments, could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the effects of sports on mental health.

Author's Contributions

The author was solely responsible for the conception, design, data collection, analysis, and interpretation of the study. Additionally, the author drafted and revised the manuscript, approved the final version, and is accountable for all aspects of the work.

Ethical Approval

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of King Faisal University, Saudi Arabia. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their involvement in the study. All procedures involving human participants adhered to the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki.

Funding Statement

This work was supported by the Deanship of Scientific Research, Vice Presidency for Graduate Studies and Scientific Research, King Faisal University, Saudi Arabia. GRANT **KFU251250**.

References

- Astin, A. W. (1984). Student involvement: A developmental theory for higher education. *Journal of College Student Personnel*, 25(4), 297-308.
- Bell, C. C. (1997). Promotion of mental health through coaching competitive sports. *Journal of the National Medical Association*, 89(8), 517-520.
- Biddle, S. J. H., & Asare, M. (2011). Physical activity and mental health in children and adolescents: A review of reviews. *British Journal of Sports Medicine*, 45(11), 886-895. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bjsports-2011-090185>
- Donaldson, S. J., & Ronan, K. R. (2006). The effects of sports participation on young adolescents' emotional well-being. *Adolescence*, 41(162), 369-389.
- Eime, R. M., Young, J. A., Harvey, J. T., Charity, M. J., & Payne, W. R. (2013). A systematic review of the psychological and social benefits of participation in sport for children and adolescents: Informing development of a conceptual model of health through sport. *International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity*, 10, 98. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1479-5868-10-98>

- Elmagd, M. A., Tiwari, U., Mossa, A. H., & Tiwari, D. (2018). Barriers of sports participation in higher education in the UAE. *International Journal of Sport and Exercise Science*, 12(1), 15-24.
- Fox, K. R. (1999). The influence of physical activity on mental well-being. *Public Health Nutrition*, 2(3a), 411-418. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1368980099000567>
- Gómez-López, M., Gallegos, A. G., & Extremera, A. B. (2010). Perceived barriers by university students in the practice of physical activities. *Journal of Sports Science & Medicine*, 9(3), 374-381.
- Griffiths, K., Moore, R., & Brunton, J. (2020). Sport and physical activity habits, behaviours, and barriers to participation in university students: An exploration by socio-economic group. *Sport, Education and Society*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2020.1772389>
- Hashim, H. A. (2012). Perceived barriers to recreation sport participation in university students: A comparison between international and local students in the United States. *Pertanika Journal of Social Science and Humanities*, 20(2), 197-203.
- Judge, J. (2018). Stress, happiness and psychological well-being among college students: Role of sports in mental health. *International Journal of Physical Education, Sports and Health*, 5, 22-25.
- Kahu, E. R., & Nelson, K. (2018). Student engagement in the educational interface: Understanding the mechanisms of student success. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 37(1), 58-71. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2017.1344197>
- Keyes, C. L. M. (2007). Promoting and protecting mental health as flourishing: A complementary strategy for improving national mental health. *American Psychologist*, 62(2), 95-108. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.62.2.95>
- Kim, Y., Liu, Y., & Shan, Z. (2017). Beyond touchdown: College students' sports participation, social media use, college attachment, and psychological well-being. *Telematics and Informatics*, 34, 895-903. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tele.2017.04.007>
- Krejčí, M. (2015). Strategies of mental health promotion in young athletes – Education to wellness. *Journal of Sports Science and Medicine*, 14(1), 6-15.
- Kroshus, E. (2016). Variability in institutional screening practices related to collegiate student-athlete mental health. *Journal of Athletic Training*, 51(3), 202-208. <https://doi.org/10.4085/1062-6050-51.3.06>
- Lubans, D. R., Richards, J., Hillman, C. H., Faulkner, G., Beauchamp, M. R., Nilsson, M., Kelly, P., Smith, J. J., Raine, L. B., & Biddle, S. J. H. (2016). Physical activity for cognitive and mental health in youth: A systematic review of mechanisms. *Pediatrics*, 138(3), e20161642. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2016-1642>
- Ning, Q., & Shi, J. (2022). Psychological adaptation level optimization to attain the goal of sustainable education. *Journal of Community Psychology*.
- Pál, J. (2018). How is participation in sports related to students' performance and well-being? *PISA in Focus*.
- Soria, K. M., & Stebleton, M. J. (2013). Social capital, academic engagement, and sense of belonging among working-class college students. *College Student Affairs Journal*, 31(2), 139-153.
- Thakre, K. S. (n.d.). Importance of sports activity for the better mental health of the Indian student. *International Journal of Leading Research Publication*.
- Trowler, V. (2010). Student engagement literature review. *The Higher Education Academy*. <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/student-engagement-literature-review>
- Vella, S. A. (2019). Mental health and organized youth sport. *Kinesiology Review*, 8(2), 156-163. <https://doi.org/10.1123/kr.2018-0027>