

UNIVERSITY PHYSICAL EDUCATION AND UNIVERSITY SPORT: EUROPEAN COMPARATIVE MODELS

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This article analyses how university physical education and university sport are organized in different European contexts and how these forms may support students' physical activity during university studies. The study is based on a comparative documentary analysis of curricular documents, institutional regulations and public information provided by universities and university sport structures from four European areas: the Nordic countries, the Balkans, Central Europe and Western Europe. The analysed data show that European universities do not follow a single organizational model. Three main directions can be distinguished: physical education included in the curriculum, sport organized as a university service, and sport developed through clubs or competitive structures. For the Republic of Moldova, the analysis points to the need to strengthen the service-based component of university sport, as a complement to the existing curricular framework.

Keywords: *university physical education, university sport, physical activity, comparative analysis, institutional models.*

EDUCAȚIA FIZICĂ ȘI SPORTUL UNIVERSITAR: MODELE COMPARATIVE EUROPENE

Articolul analizează modul în care educația fizică și sportul universitar sunt organizate în diferite contexte europene și felul în care aceste forme pot susține activitatea fizică a studenților pe durata studiilor universitare. Studiul are la bază o analiză documentară comparativă a documentelor curriculare, regulamentelor instituționale și informațiilor publice oferite de universități și structuri ale sportului universitar din patru zone europene: țările nordice, Balcanii, Europa Centrală și Europa de Vest. Datele analizate arată că universitățile europene nu urmează un model unic de organizare. Se disting trei direcții principale: educația fizică inclusă în curriculum, sportul organizat ca serviciu universitar și sportul dezvoltat prin cluburi sau structuri competiționale. Pentru Republica Moldova, analiza indică necesitatea consolidării componentei de servicii a sportului universitar, în completarea cadrului curricular existent.

Cuvinte-cheie: *educație fizică universitară, sport universitar, activitate fizică, analiză comparativă, modele instituționale.*

Introduction

Motor activity is treated in the literature as one of the factors that supports health and helps individuals integrate into community life, including through adaptation to social dynamics [4, p. 242]. This understanding is close to the idea that health cannot be reduced to the biological state of the body, since it also includes social well-being [12, p. 61]. For this reason, motor activity should not be understood only as the movement required by everyday life: walking to classes, household tasks, commuting or professional routines. It also includes physical exercise chosen and practised deliberately, with a certain plan and regularity. This distinction is important. Daily movement may occur by necessity, while planned exercise requires personal decision, time organization and, in many cases, access to suitable conditions. Seen in this way, movement becomes part of self-care and self-regulation, helping to maintain physical fitness, prevent functional decline and support general health [4, 8, 9, 10].

The habit of practising physical exercise independently does not begin only at university. It is prepared earlier, through family routines, school experiences and the physical education lessons included in the national education system, from early education to higher education [11, 16]. Still, the university years are a sensitive stage. Students arrive with different motor experiences: some have practised sport for years, while others have only participated in compulsory school lessons. For many of them, the main challenge is no longer learning a movement task, but keeping physical activity in their weekly routine. In this sense,

university physical education and university sport should help students pass from guided participation to forms of practice that they can choose, organize and continue on their own.

Digitalization has changed the ordinary rhythm of daily life. For many students, study, communication and even part-time work now involve long periods spent in front of a screen. Movement does not disappear completely, but it is often reduced to short and irregular moments. In universities, this situation is easy to observe. Classes, individual study, assignments and assessments occupy a large part of the week, while the time available within the higher education framework plan is often limited [19]. As a result, physical activity is frequently moved to the end of the list. It is practised when there is free time, when facilities are accessible or when motivation is strong enough, not always as part of a stable academic routine.

Independent exercise also depends on how students organize their time. Many students may want to be more active, but intention alone rarely becomes routine. If physical activity is not planned, it is postponed. This happens during busy academic periods, but also when sport facilities are far away, schedules are unclear, places are limited or students do not have a group with whom to practise. Over time, prolonged sedentary behaviour may affect functional capacity and reduce tolerance to physical effort, with consequences for health and quality of life [18, 22]. Therefore, the university should not be viewed only as a place for professional training. It is also a space where students can be guided to protect their well-being and reduce the risks associated with a sedentary lifestyle.

The need to rethink university physical education is also supported by studies focused on students' actual participation in physical activity. Bragarenco N. et al. show that participation cannot be increased only by keeping the discipline in the timetable; universities also need to know what students prefer, what types of movement they need and what motivates them to attend or continue practising [7]. Leuciuc F. et al., using the IPAQ, draw attention to the need for concrete measures inside the university environment to reduce sedentary behaviour [17]. Pop C. et al. bring the discussion closer to students' own perceptions, showing that sedentary lifestyle is also linked to awareness and attitudes toward its consequences [20]. These studies point in the same direction: the problem is not only whether physical education exists in the curriculum, but whether the way it is organized can really keep students involved.

For the Republic of Moldova, European integration also raises questions about the place of physical education and sport in universities. European practices may serve as useful points of reference, especially for institutional development, compatibility and the recognition of educational pathways within the European space [14]. However, they cannot be taken over automatically. Any adjustment has to consider national regulations, university resources, available facilities and the real conditions in which students can participate.

At European level, physical activity is promoted through recommendations and policy documents that encourage movement and aim to reduce sedentary behaviour, including among young people and students [1, 15]. In universities, however, these directions are applied differently. Some institutions rely mainly on curricular physical education. Others develop sport services, clubs, competitions or mixed solutions. The differences depend on educational traditions, governance, infrastructure and the way each university understands its responsibility for student well-being. For this reason, a comparative analysis of European practices is useful not only for identifying existing models, but also for seeing how they help students remain active after the period in which physical education is compulsory [1, 2, 13].

Materials and Methods

Research aim: The study aimed to clarify how university physical education and university sport are organized in different European university contexts. More specifically, the analysis followed the institutional forms through which students gain access to physical activity and the ways in which these forms may support regular practice during the university years.

The research was carried out as a qualitative comparative document analysis. The materials consulted were not limited to study plans. They also included university regulations, course descriptions, information published by sport centres or university sport services, and data concerning clubs, associations and competitions. These documents were useful because they show not only whether physical education or sport exists in a university, but also how students actually enter, attend, validate or continue these activities.

The analysis covered four European areas. The Nordic group included Finland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Iceland; the Balkan group included Croatia, Bulgaria, Greece, Slovenia, Serbia and Montenegro; Central Europe was represented by Poland, Czechia, Hungary and Romania; and Western Europe included Belgium, Italy, France, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Spain, Portugal and Germany. The countries and institutional cases were selected according to the availability of public information and the possibility of comparing similar aspects of university physical education and sport.

In reading the documents, attention was given to several practical indicators: the status of the activity, whether mandatory, elective or voluntary; the way students obtain access, through enrolment, membership, sport ticket or eligibility rules; the volume of participation, expressed in hours or ECTS credits where this information was available; the validation of participation, mainly through attendance, active involvement or make-up rules; the organizational form, such as courses, sport services, clubs or competitions; and references to inclusion, including adapted pathways, medical conditions or adaptive sport.

On this basis, each case was related to one or more organizational models: curricular, service-based or competitive. The information was then grouped by region, not to rank the systems, but to identify recurring patterns and differences in the way universities organize students' participation in physical activity. The synthesis is presented in Table 1, which brings together the dominant models, the usual status of activities, the main participation formats and the observations considered relevant for maintaining students' motor activity at university age.

European comparative models of university physical education and university sport

The documents analysed do not show a single European way of organizing university physical education and university sport. The picture is more varied. In some universities, physical education is still placed inside the study programme. In others, sport is found mainly outside the curriculum, through sport centres, clubs, associations or competitions. Therefore, the comparison cannot stop at the question of whether sport is present in a university. A more relevant question is how the student actually reaches these activities: through a compulsory class, through registration, through a sport ticket, through a club, or through selection for competitions.

From the analysed materials, three main forms of organization can be observed. The first is the curricular model, where physical education or sport is included in the academic programme. The second is the service-based model, in which the university offers sport activities through a sport centre or a similar structure. The third is the competitive model, organized mainly through clubs, associations and inter-university competitions [2]. These models are useful for analysis, but in practice they are not always found in a pure form. Many universities combine them, and the differences appear in the weight given to each component.

In the curricular model, students usually have scheduled physical education or sport classes and clear conditions for participation. This model has an advantage: it places movement in the student's weekly timetable, not only among optional activities. Still, its academic value is treated differently from one institution to another. In some universities, especially where participation is compulsory, the activity may be recorded without ECTS credits. In elective formats, credits can be awarded, most often in small values, such as 1–3 ECTS or other equivalent forms of recognition. The workload is also expressed differently. Some universities indicate one or two weekly sessions, while others use a total number of hours per semester. Thus, the curricular model does not function identically everywhere, but it usually ensures at least a minimum and regular contact with organized physical activity.

The service-based model has another logic. In this case, sport is offered as a university service, not necessarily as a curricular obligation. Students can choose activities according to their interests, level, timetable or available places. Access is often organized through enrolment, membership, a sport ticket or booking systems. This model may be attractive because it gives students more freedom. However, freedom of choice is useful only when the offer is real and accessible. If the schedule is inconvenient, if places are limited, if facilities are far from students or if costs are too high, participation remains difficult. For this reason, the service model depends strongly on management, communication and infrastructure.

The competitive model is built around clubs, associations and university competitions. It gives university sport visibility and creates opportunities for students who want a more structured or performance-

oriented form of participation. In some countries, this component is developed through national university championships and a wide range of sports. At the same time, this model addresses mainly students who are already prepared or motivated for competition. It cannot replace curricular or recreational forms of activity for the wider student population. Its value is greater when it completes the other models and offers an additional pathway for those who want to continue sport at a higher level.

Seen together, the three models show that no single solution is sufficient for all students. A curricular component can provide regularity, but it may remain formal if students do not continue activity beyond the scheduled classes. A service-based offer can give choice, but only if access is simple and the activities are adapted to different levels. Competitions can strengthen motivation and belonging, but they involve a smaller category of students. For this reason, the most functional arrangements are mixed ones, where students can move between compulsory, recreational and competitive forms of participation.

Table 1 summarizes these differences by European areas. It presents the dominant models, the usual status of activities, the participation formats and the main observations related to the continuity of students' motor activity. The table should be read as a synthesis of tendencies, not as a strict classification of all universities from the analysed countries.

Table 1. Institutional models and participation formats of university physical education and university sport in Europe

Region (countries analysed)	Dominant model(s)	Typical status of university ph. education/ sport	Typical participation formats	Key observation
Nordic countries (Finland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Iceland)	Mainly service-based model, supported by student associations and, in some cases, competitive structures	Mostly voluntary and extracurricular; usually not expressed through a common number of hours or ECTS credits for all students	Access through sport centres, memberships, subscriptions, booking systems, recreational classes and activities organized on campus or through associations	Students usually participate by choice, not by curricular obligation. The offer can support regular practice when access is simple, schedules are flexible and activities respond to different interests.
Balkans (Croatia, Bulgaria, Greece, Slovenia, Serbia, Montenegro)	Curricular model combined with recreational and competitive forms	Often mandatory in the first years or semesters, later optional or extracurricular; validation is usually based on participation	Weekly classes or semester workloads, attendance requirements, make-up rules, medical exemptions, adapted conditions for athletes and participation in inter-university competitions	The compulsory component keeps students in contact with physical activity at the beginning of their studies. The difficult point is what happens later, when participation becomes optional.
Central Europe (Poland, Czechia, Hungary, Romania)	Mixed model: curricular component, sport services and competitive networks	Variable status: mandatory in some semesters or programmes, elective or voluntary in others; credits may be absent or limited, depending on the institution	University sport centres, digital registration, level-based courses, scheduled classes, voluntary activities and national university competitions	Students may reach sport through classes, services or competitions. This is useful when the routes are visible and connected, but less effective when each component works separately.

Western Europe (Belgium, Italy, France, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Spain, Portugal, Germany)	Mainly service-based and competitive models; in some cases, curricular or credit recognition components are also present	Generally voluntary and extracurricular; not mandatory at national level, although some institutions may offer recognition or integration in specific programmes	Sport centres, university clubs, recreational activities, leagues, championships, sport tickets, memberships and registration-based participation	The offer is usually broad, but the student must take the initiative. Cost, distance, timetable, available places and club culture can decide whether participation continues or stops.
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After the synthesis presented in Table 1, it becomes clear that European universities do not organize physical education and university sport according to one common formula. The differences are linked to educational traditions, available resources, infrastructure, student demand and the way each institution understands the place of movement in university life.

In the Nordic countries, sport is usually placed closer to the idea of a campus service than to a compulsory academic subject. Students choose activities according to their timetable, interests and available access conditions. This gives the model a flexible character. It can support regular practice, especially for students who already value physical activity and are ready to organize their own participation. At the same time, this model may leave aside less motivated students or those who need clearer guidance at the beginning. For them, flexibility alone is not always enough; beginner-friendly activities, visible information and simple access procedures become important.

The Balkan area shows a different situation. Here, the curricular component is more visible, especially in the first years or semesters of study. This has a practical advantage: students remain in contact with physical activity during a period when academic pressure increases and sedentary behaviour can become stronger. In many cases, validation is based mainly on attendance and active participation, which makes the system easier to apply. The limitation appears later, when the compulsory period ends. If students have not developed personal interest or if they do not find suitable voluntary options, participation may decrease. Therefore, the curricular model becomes more useful when it is connected with elective activities, recreational groups and opportunities that gradually transfer responsibility to the student.

Central Europe offers a more mixed picture. In some universities, physical education is still included in the academic programme; in others, sport services and competitive structures are more visible. This creates several possible routes for students: regular classes, voluntary activities, level-based courses, sport centres or competitions. Such diversity is useful, but only when the student understands how these routes are connected. If each component functions separately, participation may remain fragmented. A student may complete the compulsory part without knowing what options exist afterwards. For this reason, communication, guidance and progression by level are important, not only the existence of several sport opportunities.

In Western Europe, university sport is generally based on voluntary participation, supported by sport services, clubs, leagues and federations. The strength of this model is the variety of opportunities. Students can choose recreational activities, fitness programmes, club sport or competitive events, depending on their interests and level of preparation. However, voluntary participation also means that the student must take the initiative. During busy academic periods, or when activities involve costs, distance, limited places or inconvenient schedules, participation can easily become irregular. In this context, continuity depends less on obligation and more on how well the university designs access to sport: clear information, simple registration, suitable timetables and activities that can be integrated into the weekly routine.

Taken together, these regional tendencies show that no model solves the problem of student participation by itself. The curricular component can provide regularity, but it does not automatically create independent practice. Sport services offer choice, but they work only when access is real and visible. Clubs and competitions can strengthen motivation and belonging, but they involve only part of the student population. For this reason, the most useful arrangements are those that combine these components and allow students to move gradually from compulsory or guided participation toward autonomous physical activity during and after university studies.

Perspectives for sustaining physical activity in university physical education and university sport in the Republic of Moldova

In the Republic of Moldova, the problem of students' physical activity cannot be solved only by keeping physical education in the curriculum. This is important, but it is not enough. Participation also depends on what students are willing to practise, what forms of movement they need, how motivated they are and how they understand the risks of a sedentary lifestyle [7, 17, 20]. Competitive sport also has its role, but it usually involves a smaller group of students. For this reason, universities need a wider and more practical way of organizing physical activity.

A possible direction is to combine three components. The first is a curricular component with clear rules: when students attend, how participation is validated and what minimum level of involvement is expected. The second is a service-based offer that functions throughout the academic year, not only as an occasional activity. This means accessible schedules, activities for different levels and interests, simple registration procedures and clear information for students. The third component is the gradual development of clubs, associations and inter-university events, organized with institutional support and, where possible, with free or low-cost access. In this way, participation can become available not only for students already involved in sport, but also for those who need an easier entry point [2].

A practical difficulty remains the limited time allocated to physical education and sport within university studies. Under these conditions, the issue is not only the number of hours, but also how these hours are used. The content needs to be organized progressively, and the sessions should be structured so that students can develop competences even when contact time is reduced [5]. This also explains the usefulness of ICT tools. Digital resources, guided tasks and support materials can help students continue learning and practising beyond the lesson itself, especially when they are used for individual study or independent physical activity [21].

Assessment can also support this direction. Portfolios or other forms of alternative assessment make it possible to recognize physical activity carried out outside the university, when it is documented and related to the objectives of the discipline. Such an approach encourages students to assume more responsibility for their own practice and may help connect curricular participation with independent activity [3]. Therefore, in the case of the Republic of Moldova, the central question is not which model should replace the others. The more relevant issue is how the curricular component, sport services and competitive opportunities can be connected in a way that students can actually use during their university years [3, 5, 7, 21].

Conclusions

The analysis shows that students maintain physical activity more easily when participation is simple to start and can be continued without major difficulties. It is not enough for physical education to exist formally in the curriculum. What matters first are the conditions students meet in everyday university life: clear access, information that is easy to find, activities for different levels of preparation, suitable timetables and the possibility to practise physical exercise even during periods with a higher academic workload.

For the Republic of Moldova, the emphasis should be placed on access and continuity. University sport services should be developed as a permanent offer, not only as an additional activity beside the curriculum. This means activities organized by level and interest, simple enrolment, clear schedules, monitoring of participation and better communication with students. At the same time, such measures cannot function without practical support: functional spaces, minimum equipment, timetables compatible with the academic programme, common access rules and, where possible, free or low-cost participation.

The curricular component remains necessary because it keeps students in regular contact with physical activity. However, it should not remain isolated. It needs to be connected with sport services and with recreational or competitive opportunities, so that students have options after compulsory or scheduled activities end. In this logic, university sport can help students move from the intention to be active toward the formation of a routine and, gradually, toward independent practice.

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