

## PERSPECTIVE

# Sports Participation and Mental Health Among University Students: International Perspectives and Policy Recommendations

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## Abstract

*This paper examines how sports participation relates to the mental health of Korean university students and suggests policy directions to better support student well-being through structured physical activity. Although awareness of mental health issues among students has grown in recent years, regular engagement in sports remains limited. The primary objective of this study is to identify how international practices in university sports can inform policy frameworks in Korea and to propose evidence-based strategies that address student mental health more effectively. Drawing on government reports, previous studies, and policy cases from the United States, Europe, and Japan, this study identifies structural challenges in Korea's university sports landscape and offers practical recommendations. Existing research highlights that physical activity contributes not only to physical fitness but also to stress relief, improved emotional stability, and boosted self-esteem. Mental health in this paper is defined broadly to include reductions in stress and anxiety, alleviation of depressive symptoms, and improvements in self-worth and psychological resilience. The findings indicate that sports participation helps alleviate academic stress, enhances emotional stability, and strengthens self-esteem, thereby functioning as a critical mechanism for student well-being. Building on these insights, this paper presents a multi-layered policy framework that includes enhancing campus sports infrastructure; integrating physical activity with mental health services; fostering collaboration among governmental bodies, universities, local governments, and private companies; and promoting a long-term shift toward a more active and supportive campus culture. By drawing on comparative cases such as Title IX and the NCAA system in the U.S., the Healthy Campus Network and BUCS in Europe, and municipal-university partnerships in Japan, the study provides concrete international benchmarks that can guide Korean policy. This study frames sports as a strategic tool for student mental health and highlights the need for institutional reform in higher education. It contributes originality by linking international models with Korea's policy gaps and by proposing actionable strategies for sustainable well-being. However, the lack of primary data collection may limit the generalizability of the findings.*

### Keywords:

mental health, physical activity, policy recommendations, student well-being, university sports

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## Introduction

In recent years, mental health concerns among Korean university students have emerged as a pressing social issue. Having endured intense academic competition throughout their adolescent years, these students continue to experience high levels of stress and anxiety even after entering university. Pressures related to academics, employment prospects, and societal expectations have contributed to a growing prevalence of psychological challenges such as depression, lethargy, and diminished self-efficacy (Lee, 2023).

Although this stage of life represents a critical transition period during which physical health and psychological resilience can be restored and strengthened, many students continue to suffer from poor physical condition and lack of exercise due to limited opportunities for physical activity during middle and high school (Cho, 2023; Yang & Son, 2020). In particular, several barriers hinder sports participation among Korean university students, including academic stress, time constraints, inadequate access to sports facilities, and a generally low awareness of the benefits of regular physical activity (Yang & Son, 2020).

However, sports participation is increasingly recognised not merely as physical engagement but also as a highly effective means of improving mental health and overall quality of life. Regular physical exercise has been shown to alleviate stress, reduce symptoms of depression, and boost self-esteem. Furthermore, it enhances social interaction and fosters a sense of belonging, all of which contribute to improved mental well-being (Park, 2021). Participation in sports during early adulthood also encourages long-term engagement and re-engagement in physical activity, thereby laying the foundation for lifelong health and social self-actualisation (Ding, 2021).

Against this backdrop, the promotion of sports participation among university students should be understood not simply as an effort to expand recreational opportunities but as a critical component of achieving the broader educational goals of mental health support and holistic development. Lee et al. (2014) highlighted the need to implement integrated programs that connect sports and mental health at the university level, while Yoon (2020)

emphasised that sports participation can meaningfully cultivate both individual expertise and a sense of community, which are essential elements of university education. Nevertheless, institutional support and policy implementation within Korean universities remain insufficient.

Despite these valuable insights, prior studies have not fully addressed how university-level sports participation can be systematically linked to national mental health policy, nor have they explored its integration within broader international practices. This study builds on such research by directly linking sports participation to student mental health policy gaps and by situating Korean experiences within a comparative, cross-national framework. In doing so, it diverges from earlier work that focused mainly on individual or program-level effects.

This study aims to analyse the current state of sports participation among Korean university students, identify key influencing factors, and propose policy solutions to enhance students' mental health through greater engagement in physical activity. By examining international practices, this research also seeks to offer practical, evidence-based policy recommendations applicable to the Korean university context and to serve as a foundation for institutional reform. This study is original in linking Korean students' low sports participation with mental health policy and situating it within international comparisons.

The analysis draws primarily on national policy documents, government reports, and domestic statistics, combined with literature-based comparisons of international models. The comparative framework is grounded in document analysis. Sources were selected according to the following criteria: (1) publication primarily after 2020, (2) language in Korean or English, and (3) focus on university students' sports participation and mental health, while also including some studies on younger student populations for a broader context. Both academic articles and official government documents were included. To ensure methodological rigour, documents were cross-checked for credibility and relevance, and the analysis process followed a policy-analysis framework emphasising feasibility, effectiveness, and transferability to the Korean context.

Based on these aims, this study addresses the following three research questions:

1. What are the main factors contributing to the low rate of sports participation among Korean university students?
2. What policies have been implemented in other countries to promote university students' participation in sports, and what effects have they produced?
3. What types of sports promotion policies are feasible and applicable in Korean higher education settings?

### *Current Status of Sports Participation in Korea*

#### **Participation Gaps and Barriers.**

According to a recent report by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism (2022), Korea's national participation rate in physical activities—defined as exercising at least twice per week—rose by approximately 13.1% from 2012, reaching 48.1% in 2022 (Kwak, 2022). This trend reflects a growing public interest in sports as a part of health and leisure culture. However, such positive developments are not yet adequately reflected in the university student population.

Data from the Ministry of Health and Welfare (2021) indicate that fewer than 20% of university students engage in moderate-to-vigorous physical activity for at least 30 minutes, three times a week (Song et al., 2021). Moon (2010) argues that the Korean education system's emphasis on exam-oriented academic instruction and parental educational aspirations has long marginalised physical education. As a result, by the time students reach university, physical activity has become largely absent from their daily lives. Taken together, these government statistics and meta-analytic findings provide robust, student-specific evidence of a persistent participation gap in this population.

Several factors have been identified as barriers to university students' participation in sports: lack of time, academic and job-search pressures, low motivation, limited

access to sports facilities, financial burdens, and restricted opportunities for organised activities (An et al., 2024). For example, although university sports facilities are often open to the general student body, research by Olmedilla et al. (2023) shows that both club participation and facility usage rates remain low, particularly during the academic semester.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further shifted students' leisure behaviours toward sedentary, solitary activities. Kim et al. (2020) found that students increasingly devoted their time to watching television, consuming mobile content, and engaging in social media, while physical activity was further deprioritised. Sa, Lee, and Lee (2021) caution that such passive leisure habits can negatively impact both physical and mental health, contributing to sleep disturbances, accumulated fatigue, and increased levels of depression and anxiety.

Given these trends, universities need to recognise sports participation not simply as a form of exercise, but as a valuable and accessible mode of healthy leisure. Institutional interventions are necessary to encourage student engagement and create enabling environments for participation (Lee et al., 2022).

**Mental Health Impacts of Sports.** Mental health, as discussed in this study, encompasses a broad spectrum of psychological well-being, including reduced levels of stress and anxiety, alleviation of depressive symptoms, enhanced emotional stability, and improved self-esteem. It also refers to an individual's capacity to cope with academic and social pressures, form healthy relationships, and maintain motivation and confidence in daily life. This comprehensive understanding aligns with current public health perspectives that view mental health not merely as the absence of illness, but as a positive state of psychological resilience and functioning.

Mental health is one of the most critical challenges currently facing Korean

university students. According to Hong and Jeon (2017), students' levels of stress, depression, and anxiety have been steadily rising, primarily due to academic pressure and uncertainty regarding their future careers. Some studies suggest that the prevalence of depression among university students is even higher than that of the general adult population, underscoring the need for more proactive support systems.

In this context, sports participation is increasingly recognised as an effective form of both prevention and intervention for mental health issues. In particular, team-based sports can provide opportunities for peer interaction and a sense of belonging, which are especially beneficial for students facing interpersonal stressors.

Despite this potential, most universities in Korea do not fully utilise sports to support mental well-being. Outside of basic physical education courses, few structured programs actively promote student involvement in sports. At the same time, mental health services are often limited to individual counselling and rarely integrated with physical activity initiatives. The lack of programs that bridge sports participation and mental health support constitutes a significant policy gap. This indicates that the challenge is not merely to reaffirm the benefits of exercise, but to critically evaluate why these findings have not yet shaped university-level policies. However, previous Korean studies have primarily examined sports participation and student mental health in isolation, without linking them to broader policy frameworks. This gap underscores the originality and importance of the present study.

To address this issue, it is imperative to design policies that enable students to build psychological resilience and restore self-efficacy through participation in sports. University-based physical activity should not be viewed merely as a general education requirement but as a viable tool for enhancing mental health. This calls for a paradigm shift that integrates sports and psychological well-being, which could

serve as a central focus in the future development of university sports policies.

### *Current Comparison with International Cases*

Across the globe, many countries actively promote sports participation among university students as a means of enhancing mental health and supporting holistic development. In particular, the cases of the United States, Europe, and Japan offer practical insights—both policy-oriented and cultural—for revitalising university sports in South Korea. These three contexts were selected because they illustrate complementary approaches: the United States emphasises institutional systems that link sports and mental health, Europe integrates sports into public policy, and Japan demonstrates a culturally embedded bukatsu model.

### **United States: An Integrated Approach to Sports and Mental Health.**

In the United States, sports are regarded not merely as physical activity but as a key contributor to academic achievement and mental health. The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) oversees a well-organised nationwide collegiate sports system, offering student-athlete scholarships, professional coaching, and access to sports psychology services (Cho, 2006; Eckenrod & Nam, 2021). Integrated initiatives such as the Mind-Body Wellness Program combine exercise with therapeutic interventions to reduce stress and support emotional recovery (DePace et al., 2019).

Most U.S. university campuses are equipped with advanced athletic infrastructure, including fitness centres, swimming pools, and indoor gyms. In addition to varsity athletics, a wide array of intramural leagues and recreational programs is available to general students, encouraging voluntary engagement. These systems foster social connection, stress relief, and the restoration of self-esteem through sports participation—providing a valuable model for Korean universities.

Notably, a mixed-methods study conducted at the University of Arkansas found that participation in intramural sports significantly reduced student stress and improved mental health. Key mediators included social bonding through physical activity and enhanced self-efficacy (Comas, 2023). Furthermore, a recent meta-analysis reported that team sports were more effective than individual sports in alleviating anxiety and depression, while also improving self-esteem and life satisfaction (Zuckerman et al., 2021). These findings reinforce the psychosocial benefits of community-based sports activities.

**Europe: Public Policy Integration and Institutional Support.** European countries approach sports participation as a core component of public health and educational policy. In the United Kingdom, for example, some universities require physical education as a mandatory course or set minimum physical activity standards for graduation. The British Universities and Colleges Sport (BUCS) organisation manages nationwide university sports leagues, thereby encouraging sustained student participation (Brunton & Mayne, 2020).

Countries such as Germany and the Netherlands adopt a welfare-based perspective, providing public subsidies for university sports clubs and enhancing access to sports facilities at minimal cost to students. The Netherlands' "Healthy University" initiative represents a comprehensive well-being strategy that integrates physical activity, mental health, and nutrition. It has been shown to positively influence not only academic performance but also students' emotional resilience (Douwes et al., 2023). This example demonstrates that university sports can be positioned as a critical infrastructure within the broader context of higher education.

### **Japan: Culture-Embedded Participation and Mental Health Support.**

Japan presents a distinctive model through its long-standing *bukatsu* (extracurricular club) culture, which fosters structured participation in sports as an extension of the educational process. Rather than being limited to leisure, *bukatsu* involves academic, interpersonal, and character development dimensions, continuing into the university setting (Asakura, 2025). University-level *bukatsu* activities help students cultivate personal growth and social solidarity through sports.

In addition, several Japanese universities have established sports psychology centres that offer integrated support for physical activity and mental health. These centres provide professional interventions for psychological difficulties while promoting stress reduction through exercise, resulting in more substantial and lasting mental health outcomes.

*Bukatsu* culture emphasises "process-centred participation," valuing sustained engagement and community growth over athletic results or records. This experience nurtures autonomy and a sense of responsibility in students while also enhancing emotional resilience through peer support networks (Omi, 2015). Such holistic development translates into improved employability and interpersonal skills after graduation.

### *Policy Recommendations*

Authors: To enhance sports participation and promote mental health among Korean university students, a structural shift beyond mere activity-based approaches is necessary. This includes institutional reforms and strategic policy interventions. This section outlines four key policy directions: (1) strengthening the university sports infrastructure, (2) integrating sports with mental health initiatives, (3) establishing a multi-stakeholder cooperation framework, and (4) anticipating the policy impacts.

**Strengthening University Sports Infrastructure.** To create an environment where students can regularly engage in physical activities, institutional support for physical education, student clubs, and campus leagues must be reinforced. This is particularly urgent in Korea, where limited facilities and the dominance of elite-athlete programs have long restricted general students' access to regular sports participation.

First, universities need to expand their physical education curriculum. Currently, many institutions offer physical education only as an elective, and some do not offer such courses at all. Credit recognition should be expanded, and a certain level of physical education should be considered a graduation requirement. Moreover, a variety of courses should be offered across skill levels and sports types to accommodate students' diverse interests and fitness levels.

Second, tangible financial and facility support must be provided to student sports clubs and league activities. To ensure autonomy and continuity, basic operational funding should be guaranteed by the university, with scholarships potentially linked to participation or achievement. The parallel operation of both friendly leagues and competitive interdepartmental leagues could further encourage broader student participation.

Third, non-credit programs that combine physical activity with emotional recovery—such as yoga, meditation, and Pilates—should be expanded and offered as morning or regular extracurricular options. These programs would help stabilise students' emotional well-being and enhance academic focus.

**Integrating Sports with Mental Health Strategies.** In response to growing mental health concerns among university students, sport-based psychological support must be urgently implemented. A three-stage strategy is proposed: awareness campaigns, counselling, and integrated programs.

Given the post-COVID surge in student mental health issues, linking counselling services with physical activity is both feasible within current university structures and highly time-sensitive.

First, universities should launch awareness campaigns under the theme “Sports and Mental Wellness” to promote understanding of how exercise contributes to mental health. Multimedia content, testimonial videos, and promotional banners should be utilised to improve public perception of the psychological benefits of physical activity.

Second, hybrid counselling programs that link exercise with psychological support should be developed. These could include post-exercise therapy sessions and models that combine sports coaching with psychotherapy—approaches already proven effective at universities in the U.S. and Japan. Korean universities could implement such programs through collaboration between student counselling centres and physical education departments.

Third, structured programs that combine physical exercise and mindfulness should be officially recognised as non-credit extracurriculars. Incentives such as attendance-based mileage points or inclusion in career portfolios should be introduced to encourage participation.

**Building a Multi-Stakeholder Cooperation Framework.** Creating a sustainable ecosystem for university sports requires more than isolated efforts from individual institutions. A cooperative framework involving government, universities, local governments, and private companies is essential (Table 1). This recommendation is realistic in Korea, where government-university partnerships and corporate CSR initiatives already exist but have not yet been mobilised for university sports.

Table 1. Role Distribution among Policy Stakeholders

Stakeholders	Primary Responsibilities
Government (Ministry of Education, Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Develop a National University Sports Development Plan</li> <li>- Secure and allocate stable funding</li> <li>- Support modernization of sports facilities and implementation of student programs</li> </ul>
Universities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Expand physical education curriculum</li> <li>- Support student clubs and organize campus leagues</li> <li>- Develop extracurricular programs integrating sports and mental health</li> <li>- Operate integrated counseling services</li> </ul>
Local Governments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Establish facility-sharing agreements with universities (MOUs)</li> <li>- Share maintenance costs</li> <li>- Provide access to local sports infrastructure for students</li> </ul>
Private Companies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Sponsor university sports leagues and clubs</li> <li>- Offer scholarships based on participation or performance</li> <li>- Fulfill CSR through long-term support for campus wellness initiatives</li> </ul>

First, the central government should establish a “National University Sports Development Plan” and secure stable funding. The Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism should jointly create a dedicated budget line to support regular initiatives such as facility upgrades, programs for non-athlete students, and campus league operations.

Second, universities should partner with local governments to increase student access to public sports facilities at reduced cost. Facility-sharing agreements (MOUs) and cost-sharing for maintenance would alleviate spatial limitations.

Third, private sector involvement should be encouraged through structured corporate sponsorships. Companies can fulfil their CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) goals by supporting university leagues or clubs and offering scholarships based on participation or performance.

Fourth, a formal “University Sports Policy Council” should be established. This council, comprising university officials,

government representatives, corporate sponsors, student delegates, and mental health professionals, would serve as a governance body responsible for long-term policy planning, including legal reforms, certification systems, and program standards. Inspired by the European Healthy Campus Network, a governance model integrating health, sports, and welfare could be implemented at the university level to reduce inefficiencies and foster synergy across departments.

**Anticipated Policy Outcomes.** If the proposed policies are effectively implemented, several positive outcomes are expected, centred around increasing sports participation and improving mental health among university students. These outcomes would mark a transformative shift in the culture of Korean higher education. Highlighting that these outcomes directly address Korea’s policy gap will further emphasise the study’s originality and necessity.

First, student participation in sports is expected to increase significantly. Making physical education compulsory and expanding credit options, supporting sports clubs, and running well-structured campus leagues will provide a solid foundation for voluntary student engagement. Significantly, transitioning away from an elite-athlete model to one that ensures accessibility for all students will normalise physical activity as part of daily life. In the long term, this will also contribute to improved self-regulation and academic focus.

Second, a sports-based mental health support system will be established on university campuses. Counselling programs integrated with physical activity, therapeutic practices like yoga and meditation, and awareness campaigns will help students become more attuned to and capable of managing their emotional well-being. As the neurobiological effects of exercise on stress reduction and self-esteem recovery are increasingly validated, sports participation can function as a proactive mental health strategy.

Third, a more inclusive and robust sports culture will emerge within universities. Currently, the sports culture at Korean universities is often centred on elite athletes, limiting opportunities for non-elite students. With proper institutional support for campus leagues and clubs, students will come to view sports not as competition, but as a means of self-care and community engagement. This shift will redefine sports as a vital element in enhancing quality of life rather than as mere recreation.

Fourth, stable collaboration among government, universities, local governments, and private companies will lay the groundwork for a sustainable university sports ecosystem. With institutional funding and support, university educational and welfare-driven initiatives, infrastructure sharing by local governments, and private-sector contributions, university sports will evolve into a long-term, systemic platform for

student wellness. Such governance will not only prevent future mental health crises among students but also strengthen ties between universities and local communities.

Ultimately, the proposed policy framework can serve as a catalyst not only for individual students' physical and psychological well-being but also for transforming the overall educational and cultural environment of Korean higher education. In doing so, it can make a meaningful contribution to the long-term enhancement of educational quality in Korea.

## Discussion

This study examined the impact of university students' sports participation on mental health and, based on the findings, proposed policy directions to revitalise campus sports in Korea. The results indicate that engagement in sports contributes not only to physical health but also helps alleviate academic stress, enhances emotional stability, and improves self-esteem. These findings suggest that university sports function as a critical mechanism not only for individual student well-being but also for the psychological and social revitalisation of higher education.

Despite these benefits, Korea's current university sports environment faces multiple structural limitations: physical education is often relegated to elective status, programs for non-athlete students are lacking, connections between sports and mental health services are underdeveloped, and collaboration with local communities and the private sector remains insufficient. To address these constraints, this study conducted a comparative analysis of international models and identified applicable strategies for the Korean context.

The U.S. ensures gender equity in sports participation through Title IX legislation and maintains a highly institutionalised collegiate sports system

via the NCAA. In Europe, governance-based frameworks such as the Healthy Campus Network integrate sports, mental health, welfare, and education. The British Universities and Colleges Sport (BUCS) league exemplifies a successful model that links private sponsorship and scholarship programs to promote mass participation in sports. In Japan, municipalities and universities sign MOUs to share public sports facilities, offering a highly effective solution to infrastructural and financial limitations.

These international practices provide valuable insights for Korean university sports policy. First, the institutionalisation of physical education through curriculum integration and recognition of academic credit should be prioritised. Second, on-campus sports leagues open to all students should be expanded to foster a culture of recreational physical activity. Third, stronger integration between sports activities and mental health services—such as meditation, counselling, and group-based wellness programs—must be pursued to facilitate psychological recovery. Fourth, collaborative frameworks among universities, local governments, and the private sector are needed to enhance infrastructure and ensure stable financial support. Finally, a multi-stakeholder governance council should be established to oversee and coordinate sustainable sports policy ecosystems.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, university sports should not be regarded merely as leisure but recognised as a strategic instrument for promoting mental health, community restoration, and sustainable educational environments. With coherent collaboration among universities, government bodies, local authorities, and private companies, Korea can achieve not only an improvement in students' quality of life but also a qualitative advancement in higher education itself.

Future research should examine disparities in sports participation by gender, region, major, and socioeconomic status. It is also necessary to investigate the feasibility of online or remote exercise programs and assess the long-term psychological effects of sports participation. Such empirical foundations will help position university sports as a structural and sustainable driver of student-centred educational reform—beyond short-term campaigns or isolated events.

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### Ethical Considerations

This study did not involve human participants or primary data collection. All sources were publicly available documents and published research; therefore, ethics approval and consent were not applicable.

### Notes on Contributors

*Shinjae Park* is a professor at the College of General Education, Kookmin University, South Korea. Her research involves learner-centred pedagogy, interdisciplinary educational studies, and the use of AI to support personalised learning. With national research funding, she conducts studies on AI-based feedback systems for English learners and educational innovation. Her work has expanded to include the educational and psychological effects of sports participation and improving learning environments through interdisciplinary approaches. Please direct correspondence to [muhando@kookmin.ac.kr](mailto:muhando@kookmin.ac.kr)

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