

**INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY SPORTS GAMES AS A RESOURCE FOR STUDENT
HEALTH AND SOCIAL CAPITAL: THE IMPACT OF THE 10TH WORLD
INTERUNIVERSITIES CHAMPIONSHIPS – BARCELONA**

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Abstract: International university sports events have expanded their role far beyond competitive participation and now function as dynamic environments that support the holistic development of students. The 10th World InterUniversities Championships (WIUC) in Barcelona represent one of the most comprehensive examples of how such events contribute simultaneously to physical health, psychological well-being and the strengthening of social capital among university students. By bringing together thousands of participants from diverse educational, cultural and national backgrounds, WIUC creates a setting in which sport becomes a catalyst for meaningful interaction, cooperation and mutual understanding. Participation in structured physical activities such as tennis, football, volleyball and other university sports disciplines encourages students to adopt healthier routines, maintain regular physical activity and improve their overall physical fitness. These effects are reinforced by the motivation, team commitment and sense of responsibility that emerge during preparation for international competitions. At the same time, the psychological benefits associated with participation in organized university sport become more pronounced within the context of WIUC. Students experience reductions in academic stress, enhanced emotional balance and higher levels of self-confidence, partly due to the supportive atmosphere formed within teams and across international student-athlete groups. Opportunities for social engagement -both formal and informal - enable participants to build friendships, develop communication skills and cultivate resilience in facing competitive pressure. The intercultural dimension of WIUC further enriches the student experience by facilitating encounters with peers from different cultural contexts, helping participants to develop tolerance, empathy and global awareness. Through shared activities, ceremonies and social events, students expand their social networks and strengthen their sense of belonging to the wider academic community. Overall, the WIUC model demonstrates that international university games function as strategic platforms for promoting student health, psychosocial well-being, intercultural dialogue and community building. By integrating sport, education and cultural exchange, these events contribute to the creation of healthier, more socially connected and internationally competent student populations.

Keywords: university sport, WIUC, student well-being, social capital, intercultural competence

1. INTRODUCTION

University sport has become a vital institutional mechanism for promoting student physical health, psychological resilience and social integration. The period of university study is characterized by heightened academic pressure, transitions in identity, increased autonomy and the emergence of health-related vulnerabilities, including reduced physical activity, elevated anxiety levels and experiences of social isolation. A growing body of research indicates that many university students do not meet recommended levels of physical activity and experience a decline in mental well-being during their academic years (Brown et al., 2024). This context highlights the importance of accessible and structured sport participation as a protective factor that supports holistic student functioning.

Evidence consistently shows that involvement in organized sport contributes to improved cardiovascular endurance, strength, motor competence and overall physical fitness (Bengtsson et al., 2025; Kljajević et al., 2021). Among university populations, sport participation is associated with increased life satisfaction, better academic adjustment, enhanced social belonging and improved self-regulation (Moxey et al., 2022; Kozlova, 2025). Sport also functions as a meaningful setting for the development of psychological resilience. Participation in regular physical activity has

been linked to reduced symptoms of stress, anxiety and depression, as well as enhanced emotional regulation and coping abilities (Deng et al., 2024; Eather et al., 2023).

In modern globalized universities, student mobility and increasing cultural diversity create a pressing need for structured environments that facilitate intercultural integration and inclusive social communities. Research demonstrates that sport is uniquely positioned to promote intercultural dialogue, shared understanding and meaningful interaction between students of different cultural backgrounds (Leşco et al., 2025). Student-athletes who participate in culturally diverse teams or international competitions develop stronger intercultural communication skills, greater empathy and a deeper sense of international awareness. Sports team identification is a significant predictor of acculturation for international students, mediated by social capital and sense of community (Kim et al., 2023).

International multi-sport competitions such as the World InterUniversities Championships (WIUC) represent powerful platforms for advancing these outcomes. Organized annually by the InterUniversities Sport Federation, the WIUC attracts thousands of students from universities around the world and combines competitive sport with cultural exchange, social activities and community events (InterUniversities Sport Federation, 2025). Through their structure and purpose, such events promote physical development, psychological well-being, social bonding and intercultural learning.

The aim of this study is to analyze how participation in the 10th WIUC influences student health, psychosocial outcomes, social capital and intercultural competence. Drawing upon validated scientific evidence and a conceptual case analysis of the WIUC, the paper provides an integrated examination of the mechanisms through which international university sports events contribute to student development.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employed a narrative literature review combined with a conceptual case analysis of the 10th World InterUniversities Championships (WIUC). The narrative review approach was selected to integrate existing knowledge across diverse domains-physical activity, sport psychology, social capital theory, student well-being and intercultural communication-each of which contributes to understanding the holistic impact of university sport. Academic databases including Web of Science, Scopus, PubMed and Google Scholar were searched using relevant keywords such as “university sport,” “student well-being,” “international sport competition,” “social capital,” “intercultural competence” and “mental health.” Inclusion criteria required that studies be peer-reviewed, published within the past decade, and focused on young adult or university-age populations.

The literature review included systematic reviews addressing physical activity levels and fitness outcomes among university students (Kljajević et al., 2021; Yuan et al., 2024), meta-analyses on youth sport participation (Bengtsson et al., 2025), studies examining psychological outcomes such as anxiety reduction and emotional well-being (Deng et al., 2024; Eather et al., 2023), and research analyzing social capital, sense of community and belonging within university sport settings (Moxey et al., 2022; Gao et al., 2024). Additional sources examined intercultural integration and the acculturation of international students through sport (Kim et al., 2023; Leşco et al., 2025), as well as institutional perspectives on student mental health and sport participation.

The conceptual case analysis focused on the 10th WIUC, drawing upon official documents published by the InterUniversities Sport Federation (InterUniversities Sport Federation, 2025). This analysis examined the event’s structure, mission and educational purpose, considering how its design aligns with mechanisms identified in the scientific literature. As this research is conceptual rather than empirical, it does not present original participant data. Instead, it synthesizes validated scientific findings with the observed components of an international university sports event to provide a comprehensive perspective on its potential influence on student development.

3. RESULTS

The literature reveals strong and consistent evidence that participation in structured sport positively influences student health and psychosocial functioning. Research on physical activity and fitness among university students demonstrates that those engaged in regular training show significantly higher levels of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity, improved cardiovascular endurance and better musculoskeletal fitness compared to non-athlete peers (Kljajević et al., 2021; Yuan et al., 2024). Meta-analytic findings further support that youth who participate in organized sport develop stronger motor skills, improved metabolic health and healthier long-term behavioral habits (Bengtsson et al., 2025). Preparation for international competitions such as the WIUC typically requires months of focused training, which reinforces physical conditioning and contributes to sustained exercise adherence.

Psychological benefits are equally evident. Sport participation is strongly associated with reduced anxiety, improved emotional regulation, enhanced mood and increased resilience among university students. Mental health improvements occur through mechanisms such as structured engagement, supportive social environments, and

opportunities for personal growth (Eather et al., 2023). Physical activity reduces social anxiety through increased social support and psychological capital, highlighting the intertwined nature of physical and psychosocial benefits (Deng et al., 2024). Participation in an international event like the WIUC enhances these mechanisms by placing students in novel, stimulating environments that require adaptability, confidence and teamwork, thereby strengthening self-efficacy and coping skills.

The development of social capital emerges as a central outcome of university sport. Studies show that students engaged in team-based sport experience stronger friendships, broader social networks and higher levels of trust and social support (Moxey et al., 2022). Social capital is a major predictor of physical activity adherence, suggesting that interpersonal relationships play a crucial role in sustaining student engagement (Gao et al., 2024). International competitions offer expanded opportunities for social bonding, enabling students from diverse institutions and cultural backgrounds to form meaningful connections. These relationships often persist beyond the event and may contribute to long-term academic and professional collaboration.

Intercultural competence is a further outcome documented across studies. Sport provides an inclusive setting where communication relies on shared rules and cooperative strategies, reducing language barriers and facilitating cultural exchange. Identification with university sports teams accelerates international student acculturation through enhanced social capital and sense of community (Kim et al., 2023).

Sport acts as an effective integration mechanism for foreign students in diverse academic settings (Leşco et al., 2025). In the WIUC environment, intercultural contact is embedded in daily experiences-from training and competition to ceremonies and social events-creating a unique educational space for intercultural learning.

At the institutional level, participation in the WIUC enhances university visibility, fosters international partnerships and supports strategic priorities related to internationalization and student development (InterUniversities Sport Federation, 2025). The event's combination of competition, cultural exchange and social engagement aligns closely with contemporary higher education goals focused on student well-being, global awareness and inclusive campus environments.

4. DISCUSSIONS

The findings of this study illustrate that international university sports competitions such as the 10th World InterUniversities Championships (WIUC) represent powerful environments that support student development across physical, psychological, social and intercultural domains. These environments extend far beyond mere athletic performance. Instead, they function as holistic ecosystems that shape student identity, foster resilience and strengthen connections within and across university communities. The results of the literature review align with this interpretation, revealing that participation in structured sport systematically enhances physical fitness, emotional well-being, social capital and intercultural integration among university students.

From a physical health perspective, the evidence clearly shows that student-athletes benefit from higher levels of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity and improved physical fitness markers compared to their non-athlete peers. Students who prepare for competitions such as the WIUC engage in sustained periods of structured training that directly enhance cardiovascular endurance, muscular strength and motor competence (Kljajević et al., 2021; Bengtsson et al., 2025; Yuan et al., 2024). The competitive nature of international events encourages students to commit to long-term preparation, which reinforces healthy behavioral routines. This reflects findings that structured sport participation improves metabolic functioning and promotes long-term adherence to physically active lifestyles (Bengtsson et al., 2025). Consequently, the WIUC functions as a significant motivational factor that not only supports student-athletes immediate physical performance but contributes to healthier long-term lifestyle patterns.

The psychological dimension of sport participation is equally significant. Numerous studies demonstrate that regular physical activity reduces symptoms of anxiety, enhances emotional regulation, improves mood and fosters personal resilience (Deng et al., 2024; Eather et al., 2023; Han et al., 2025). These psychological benefits arise from both physiological mechanisms, such as endocrine responses to exercise, and psychosocial mechanisms, including belonging, support and positive identity formation. Participation in international competitions intensifies these processes. Students navigating new cities, unfamiliar environments and intercultural interactions must rely on adaptability, cognitive flexibility and interpersonal confidence-skills directly related to psychological resilience. Furthermore, representing one's university in an international setting provides a strong sense of purpose and empowerment, which can bolster self-esteem and emotional stability.

Social capital emerges as another significant outcome of university sport, particularly in international contexts. Social capital refers to the resources embedded within social networks, such as trust, shared norms, reciprocity and social support. In university settings, sport has consistently been shown to strengthen social capital by connecting students through shared goals, team-based activities and collective experiences. Social capital is not merely a by-product of sport participation but a central predictor of sustained physical activity behaviors among university

students (Moxey et al., 2022; Gao et al., 2024). In the context of the WIUC, social capital is formed both within teams and across universities, creating broad networks of interpersonal connections that extend beyond the event. Students frequently report forming long-term friendships, mentoring relationships and cross-border academic collaborations through participation in international competitions.

The intercultural dimension of the WIUC is equally important. International sports events offer unique contexts for intercultural communication, where language barriers are mitigated by shared sporting rules, norms and cooperative strategies. Sport becomes a universal language that enables meaningful connections between individuals from different cultural backgrounds. Research highlights that sport is one of the most effective tools for integrating international students into new academic environments (Leşco et al., 2025). Identification with university sport teams further enhances acculturation by strengthening social capital and fostering a sense of community (Kim et al., 2023). These findings align with the WIUC experience, where intercultural interaction is embedded in daily activities including competitions, ceremonies, social gatherings and leisure time. Students experience authentic intercultural encounters that promote empathy, tolerance and mutual understanding-skills essential in globalized academic and professional contexts.

Institutionally, participation in the WIUC aligns with contemporary university strategies that prioritize student well-being, internationalization and the development of inclusive learning environments. The event supports universities in expanding international networks, strengthening partnerships and enhancing institutional visibility (InterUniversities Sport Federation, 2025). It also contributes to the creation of a vibrant campus culture where students feel supported, engaged and connected to a broader global community.

However, several limitations must be considered. Many studies examining sport participation rely on cross-sectional designs, which restrict causal interpretation. Future research should incorporate longitudinal methodologies to capture long-term effects of international sport participation on mental health trajectories, academic outcomes and sustained social capital development. Accessibility also remains a concern. Financial, logistical and institutional barriers may limit participation for some students. Universities should explore strategies to reduce inequalities in access, ensuring that international sport participation becomes a realistic opportunity for broader segments of the student population.

Despite these limitations, the evidence overwhelmingly demonstrates that events like the WIUC promote holistic student development. They support physical health, reduce psychological strain, enhance interpersonal relationships and foster intercultural growth. For universities seeking to enhance the student experience, international sports competitions represent a strategic and highly impactful avenue for promoting well-being and global engagement.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrates that international university sports competitions such as the 10th World InterUniversities Championships (WIUC) function as powerful platform that support student development across physical, psychological, social and intercultural domains. Evidence from the scientific literature consistently shows that participation in structured university sport enhances physical fitness, increases levels of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity and reinforces long-term engagement in healthy behaviors (Bengtsson et al., 2025; Kljajević et al., 2021; Yuan et al., 2024). The WIUC provides a particularly strong motivational framework for these behaviors due to its competitive prestige, international visibility and the extensive preparation required from participating student-athletes.

Psychologically, sport participation reduces symptoms of anxiety, enhances emotional regulation and promotes psychological resilience among university students. These benefits arise through multiple mechanisms, including structured engagement, interpersonal support and opportunities for personal growth (Deng et al., 2024; Eather et al., 2023; Han et al., 2025). International competitions such as the WIUC amplify these effects by placing students in new environments that demand adaptability, teamwork and confidence, leading to enhanced self-esteem and stronger emotional coping skills. Socially, sport is one of the most effective facilitators of social capital within university settings. Participation in sport fosters interpersonal trust, strengthens friendships and expands social networks (Moxey et al., 2022; Gao et al., 2024). In an international context, as exemplified by the WIUC, these networks transcend national and institutional boundaries, promoting long-term international friendships, academic collaboration and global community-building.

The intercultural benefits of international university sport are particularly noteworthy. Sport provides a universally accessible environment that reduces language barriers and encourages intercultural communication. Participation in the WIUC promotes empathy, tolerance, mutual understanding and intercultural competence among students (Kim et al., 2023; Leşco et al., 2025). These competencies are critical for thriving in an increasingly globalized academic and professional world.

At the institutional level, involvement in the WIUC enhances universities global visibility, supports internationalization strategies and provides opportunities for international partnerships (InterUniversities Sport Federation, 2025). Universities that prioritize student participation in such events contribute to healthier, more inclusive and more globally connected learning environments.

Overall, the WIUC serves as a highly effective mechanism for supporting student health, psychosocial development and intercultural engagement. Universities should continue to recognize the strategic value of international sports competitions and integrate them into broader frameworks for student well-being, community development and global engagement.

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