

TRANSITIONS AND PARTICIPATION PATHWAYS

TRANSITIONS BETWEEN EDUCATION STAGES

Across studies, the move from school to university emerges as a consistent drop-off point for physical activity and sport participation. Wilson (2021) reports a significant decline in overall physical activity among first-year students after leaving high school, alongside a clear shift away from team-based, competitive sport toward more individual, flexible and socially oriented forms of activity. Importantly, the reasons students are active also change across this transition: motives span competence and mastery, social recognition, body/health, psychological benefits (e.g., mood and stress), and interpersonal connection, with patterns varying by gender, background and prior activity level. As structure from school and family reduces, students' motivations become more autonomous and choice-led, suggesting that university environments need to support variety, flexibility and multiple motives rather than relying on traditional club pathways alone.

This transition is reinforced by Aysha (2019), which found significant decreases across light, moderate and vigorous activity over the first year, alongside increases in inactive leisure time. Organised sport participation dropped sharply across multiple formats (team, endurance, competitive, PE and recreational sport), with intramural sport the main area that remained stable - suggesting that lower-commitment, campus-based options can be easier to sustain through disruption. The study also maps a layered barrier picture that escalates across the year: intrapersonal barriers such as stress (the highest for both sexes), confidence/self-skill, shyness (notably for women) and fear of failure; interpersonal barriers such as lacking friends to be active with; and structural barriers led by academic workload, timetabling, facility overcrowding or access issues, and time scarcity. These findings help explain why previously active students may still relapse into inactivity during the transition, and why students gravitate toward flexible, low-pressure options (e.g., fitness classes for women and weight training for men).

Diehl (2016) further demonstrates how unstable physical activity becomes during educational transitions. Around 80% of students reported a change in activity compared with school, with 45% becoming less active and 37% becoming more active. The most vulnerable period was the first semesters of university, where over half of students were "relapsers" showing reduced activity. A similar dip appeared at the start of master's study, indicating that multiple transition points carry risk. Moving away from home intensified decline: students who relocated were more likely to reduce activity, and frequent returns to their hometown were associated with higher relapse, suggesting weaker integration into new routines and facilities. The findings point to the importance of early onboarding, social integration and targeted support for movers and first-year students. Universities are positioned as a final large-scale opportunity for health promotion before students enter working life, making transition-sensitive programming especially valuable.

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Belanger (2015) longitudinal study provides longer-term perspective by showing that the number of years adolescents spend in certain activities predicts physical activity in adulthood, but this relationship depends on activity type. Sustained participation in portable, individually maintainable activities such as running or fitness-based exercise- was associated with higher adult activity, whereas involvement in some organised or context-dependent sports was less predictive once school structures ended. This suggests that continuity across transitions is shaped not only by how active young people are, but by whether their activities can be easily sustained as life circumstances change. The findings reinforce the idea that promoting flexible, self-directed forms of activity during adolescence may support longer-term participation trajectories.

During transitions between education stages, sustained sport participation often depends on whether young people continue to find sport meaningful. Research by Thedin Jakobsson (2015) shows that adolescents value sport when it supports learning and personal development such as acquiring new skills, improving performance, and seeing tangible progression help reinforce commitment. Many young people also seek an appropriate level of challenge: non-elite competitive experiences can be motivating when they balance effort and ability without the pressure of high-performance pathways. Social involvement remains central, with team bonds and club culture fostering belonging and shared identity that encourage continued engagement. Importantly, many adolescents maintain interest through multi-sport participation, which allows skill transfer, reduces burnout, and keeps experiences varied. Together, this evidence suggests that learning, challenge, and social connection form a combination that helps sustain participation across transitions. For schools and universities, this points to the value of offering opportunities for development, balanced competition, and strong social integration, alongside flexible multi-sport pathways that support adaptable sporting identities and longer-term engagement.

Brown (2015) shows that students, and particularly student-athletes, experience transition to university as a multifaceted process spanning athletic, academic, psychological, and social domains. Students must simultaneously adjust to new training environments, academic expectations, increased personal responsibility and unfamiliar support networks. Successful adaptation relied on internal resources such as self-awareness, work ethic and dedication, alongside external supports including flexible academic arrangements, accessible coaches, and strong staff relationships. Students who managed the transition well used proactive communication, dual academic-sport goal-setting and reflective learning from setbacks. However, barriers emerged where demands became excessive, where parental overprotection limited autonomy, or where relationship continuity with coaches and mentors was disrupted. The study highlights that motivated students do not simply “carry on” their sport habits; they require environments that balance structure with independence and provide coordinated academic-sport support. This reinforces the view that transition success depends as much on institutional flexibility and support systems as on student motivation.

Qualitative insight from Allin (2017) shows that this first-semester period can interrupt participation even for students who strongly identify as “sporty.” Students often expect sport to provide an easy route to friendship and belonging, but unfamiliar systems (trials, selection, club structures), anxiety about not fitting in, and perceived performance standards can make organised sport feel intimidating. When early experiences are negative, such as deselection or feeling out of place, students can become disillusioned and reframe sport as optional rather

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than central. Conversely, students who embed socially through sport are more likely to sustain involvement, underlining that sport operates as both a gateway to integration and a potential exclusionary space if entry points are too performance- or status-oriented.

Gill (2017) highlights that the transition from further education (FE) to higher education (HE) involves substantial shifts in learning culture that many students find destabilising. FE environments typically emphasise practical tasks and structured guidance, whereas HE requires independent study, critical thinking, and different assessment formats such as essays and research projects. Many students reported feeling unprepared for this autonomy and the reduced immediacy of feedback. The early transition period was commonly associated with anxiety, frustration, and a sense of being overwhelmed, alongside a loss of familiar support structures. Interventions such as pre-entry taster sessions, orientation activities, and bridging modules helped ease adjustment, particularly when combined with regular contact with tutors and peer mentors. Students also called for more subject-specific induction and embedded academic skills support. These findings underline why the first year can feel uncertain for many students and suggest that structured, socially supportive environments such as sport and physical activity settings may play a complementary role in easing transition and supporting wellbeing.

ORGANISED SPORT AND SPORTS CLUBS

Organised sport can support belonging and identity during transitions, but it does not automatically translate into sustained participation or sufficient physical activity. Logan (2023) synthesises evidence that enjoyment and fun are the leading reasons young people continue in sport, and that positive experiences are closely tied to feeling competent, receiving supportive coaching, and experiencing developmentally appropriate expectations. Organised sport can strengthen social identity, self-esteem and peer relationships, especially during school transition periods, yet participation can still involve substantial sedentary time, with evidence that young people may spend around half of sessions inactive and achieve only around 20 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous activity per hour. Retention is also shaped by the surrounding social climate: parental encouragement and autonomy-supportive coaching support continued engagement, while controlling, win-focused behaviours, bullying and exclusion increase dropout risk.

Springer (2025) further highlights the role of sport clubs as a key continuity pathway between school sport and adult participation. Clubs often function as a middle ground between varsity sport and intramurals, allowing students to maintain an athletic identity without the demands of elite performance. Their relatively informal structures, simple communication channels, and peer-led organisation can foster belonging and community, which are central to retention. Students frequently describe club environments as spaces where friendships form quickly and social integration into university life is accelerated. Participation also supports stress management and emotional regulation, reinforcing links between physical activity, wellbeing, and persistence in higher education.

However, accessibility is not automatic. Heavy reliance on informal practices, centralised leadership, and “insider knowledge” can make pathways into clubs less visible to newcomers, especially those without prior sport experience. Leadership transitions can also disrupt

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continuity when governance relies on tradition rather than documentation. Despite these risks, club involvement was strongly associated with identity reinforcement and personal development, including gains in confidence, communication, and time management. The findings suggest that clubs can play a powerful role in sustaining participation, but their impact depends on balancing informality with inclusive onboarding and institutional support.

Within university settings, patterns of retention can be fragile even when motivation is high. Finne (2022) shows that feeling good immediately after exercise (positive affect) strongly predicts intention to return, and intention is the strongest driver of re-attendance. However, participation still declined sharply across a single semester, dropping from full attendance in week 1 to under 20% by week 13 despite consistently high intentions. This intention-behaviour gap highlights why programmes that rely on sign-ups and initial motivation may struggle without consistent session quality, social support and conditions that help students follow through week to week. The study also reports persistent gender differences, with women less likely to re-attend than men even after accounting for other factors, which aligns with broader evidence on confidence and belonging shaping continuity.

Taken together with Allin (2017), the evidence suggests that clubs and teams can support retention when they provide welcoming entry routes, protect psychological comfort, and allow students to build friendships early. Where club cultures feel elitist, highly selective, or overly performance-led, they can unintentionally accelerate withdrawal, especially during the first semester when routines and identities are already in flux.

TRANSITION OUT OF UNIVERSITY AND POST-UNIVERSITY MOTIVATIONS

Transitions continue to disrupt participation beyond graduation. Wilson (2019) reports that structured, competitive sport often declines after university even among highly committed participants, with many remaining active but shifting toward independent, self-directed activities such as running. A key mechanism is motivational change: ego-oriented motives that are reinforced within varsity environments (selection, ranking, comparison, winning) can become harder to sustain once the structured training context, coaching, and team accountability disappear. Post-university, participants described a move toward enjoyment, health, stress management, autonomy and flexibility, and some experienced resistance to returning to competitive settings where comparison could highlight reduced performance. Running and other self-paced activities allowed individuals to retain an “athlete” identity without external judgement, suggesting that sustainable pathways after university may depend on providing flexible, mastery-oriented options rather than assuming competitive structures will carry forward.

Jones (2022) provides a strong psychological explanation for why some graduates maintain exercise while others disengage. Using the Reasoned Action Approach, the study found that attitudes, norms, autonomy, and perceived capacity explained 67% of the variance in intentions to exercise after leaving university. Enjoyment, perceived benefits and autonomy were the strongest drivers. However, intentions alone translated poorly into behaviour. When past behaviour, habit and identity were included, predictive power rose substantially, with the final model explaining 43% of post-university exercise behaviour. Self-

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identity (“I am someone who exercises”) emerged as the decisive factor, fully mediating the effect of past behaviour on both intentions and actual activity. Habit alone was insufficient during life transitions; identity was more influential. These findings suggest that sustaining participation beyond university depends less on past involvement and more on whether students internalise exercise as part of who they are. For universities, this points to the value of identity-based approaches that help students see themselves as active people, rather than relying solely on programme attendance or short-term motivation.

Beyond immediate transitions in activity motives and identity, participation in sport during education has also been linked to graduate employability and labour market outcomes. Research synthesising student, employer, and institutional perspectives suggests that engagement in organised sport, especially when it includes volunteering, leadership roles or team involvement, can enhance employability by developing valuable skills such as teamwork, communication, motivation, resilience, and time management, which employers recognise as desirable traits in recruitment and career progression¹. Sport participation has even been associated with higher future earnings, with some evidence showing that university graduates who played sport earn more and experience fewer periods of unemployment than their non-participating peers, reflecting a potential economic return on sporting engagement².

Labour market research also points to heterogeneous effects across types of sport: team sports may signal attributes such as cooperation and leadership that are particularly valuable in early employment, whereas other activities like outdoor or individual sports are more strongly linked with long-term income opportunities and productivity³. While empirical evidence remains limited and more work is needed to unpack causal pathways, these findings suggest that sport participation does not just shape health and wellbeing but can also contribute to skill development, confidence and human capital that support graduates’ employability, labour market access and potentially career earnings⁴.

¹ <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/university-sport-helps-graduates-earn-more/2005700.article>

² <https://shura.shu.ac.uk/16226/3/Griffiths%20-%20Impact%20of%20engagement%20in%20sport%20on%20graduate%20employability%20%28AM%29.pdf?>

³ <https://ftp.iza.org/dp7690.pdf>

⁴ <https://healthycampuses.unisport.com.au/research/the-impact-of-engagement-in-sport-on-graduate-employability-implications-for-higher-education-policy-and-practice/>