



10th FISU FORUM

Sub Topic D

University Sport and Academic Recognition



by

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The Modern 21st Century University, which is heir to its Persian and Arabic forebears and today is taking the place of what is known as the traditional university due to the need to increase speed of production and management of knowledge, should have not only a (higher) educational and scientific commitment and responsibility, but, unlike its predecessors, should also possess a social function that is concerned not just with specific academic training of professionals for the development of society, but also with responsibility in the training of complete professionals, which will be especially beneficial for the development of the professionals themselves, and will also allow the optimization of social development.

In this sense, some of the sections of the Strategic Plans of today's universities cover their mission, vision, and of course, their values. The list of values is endless; some are general values as a public service institution (equality, solidarity, sustainability, autonomy, free and critical thinking, international development, etc.), while others refer to the products that they generate (personal and social development, achievement, teamwork, respect for the rules, tolerance, self-discipline, responsibility, etc.).

Starting now and in the lines that follow, we will try to highlight, analyze, and promote the values that universities have reserved to respond to the needs of its current students and future graduates, to whom, in addition to offering them the academic training that they require (based on the contribution of specific knowledge), must also be capable of offering them comprehensive training (individual and social training, based on complementary knowledge) by implementing a system made up of mechanisms to offer, reconcile, and recognize this non-specific training.

The practice of Physical Activity (PA) and Sports has always been related to a multitude of benefits associated with both the most individual aspects (psycho-biological) as well as the social or relational aspects of human beings. We are aware of a multitude of benefits for anatomical and physiological systems (motor, circulatory, glandular, nervous, cardio-respiratory systems, etc.), psychological functioning (self-esteem, stress tolerance, perceived quality of life, confidence, capacity for suffering and overcoming challenges, responsibility and respect for norms, concentration, etc.), social functioning (capacity for relationships, teamwork, socialization of the individual, solidarity, trust, formation of identity, etc.) and in general, health-related aspects (improved cardiac function, lower



blood pressure, reduced levels of toxins, balanced body weight , etc.) and finally, slowing of the aging process.

This makes it possible to confirm how the social function of today's universities seeks and pursues a series of added values (in addition to the specific and academic values), to which the universities have strategically committed themselves, and many of which are common and shared with the objectives and goals that can be obtained through the practice of PA and Sports.

Sports and the university have begun their path together, complementing each other, responding to each other, and using each other, but we are not yet ready to confirm and affirm that they are now holding hands and moving forward as one.

In Europe, the US, Central America, South America, Australia, and Canada mainly, the organization and management model for what we know as university sports is being studied, analyzed, and researched. An analysis of legislative frameworks, the role of their directors, and the agents involved in their organization, in other words, the elements that form part of each model, and the analysis of the function and objectives that are sought, offers us valuable information to be understood and to compare the meaning that PA and sports have for each one of the aforementioned models.

In these models, and with respect to the concept of university sports, we can confirm the absence of international unanimity in regard to its definition, making it impossible to generalize whether the meaning is associated with sports at universities, sports for university students, sports for the university community, sports in the university age range (28 years of age), etc. For example, in Spain, it refers to sports played by university students and organized by the Sports Services of each University, including not only competitive sports, but also frequently aiming at the execution of recreational sports activities to use leisure time in a healthy manner. While it is clear that this definition conforms to what in our opinion we would accept as logical and true, there are more than a few countries that differ and that do not conform exactly to this concept.

The first step would therefore be to unify and accept a single specific and concrete concept, which would later allow us to reflect and debate, in order to carry out global projects that optimize the objectives that we are proposing today. This would allow us to respond to the need to articulate, for example, at the international level, academic recognition for university sports. The activities that we are going to include under the heading of university sports must be clearly and specifically defined; in other words, the activities that will be open to the association of academic recognition in higher education. In this sense, the additional values designed by the Modern University, which coincide with the intrinsic values and benefits and provided by the practice of PA and Sports, may be modulated by the different governmental administrations, and by the university institutions that consider it and desire it.

In Spain, despite the fact that the last two General Acts of Parliament regarding universities (LRU and LOU) show an express absence in the articles on university sports (in the LOU, only one additional article 17, titled On sports activities in universities), the current Act from 2007, which modifies the LOU from 2001 at least offers Title XIV devoted to Sports and university extension. This same Act, stipulates in article 46.2i that it is a right of university students to obtain academic recognition for their participation in cultural, sports, theater activities in the university (this aspect is also covered in the articles of the draft of the University Student Statutes, currently being prepared by the Spanish government), and Royal Decree 1393/200, on the organization of official university instruction, limits ECTS credits to a maximum of 6 out of the total credits of the course of study. This is therefore the recognition, in legislation itself, of the formative value of physical-sports activities, and it indicates the importance that the implantation of this culture of PA and Sports has for this social and age group.

By virtue of university independence, and normally through the approval of their Governing Boards (in the case of Spain), these formative, academic and complementary rights of recognition for sports activities have been developed in regulations; however, these regulations have been based on heterogeneous and even divergent criteria (arbitrary or not, and more or less on target), rather than on an overall plan of common and convergent objectives, in the specific case of PA and Sports, and they should be promoted and carried out based on fulfillment of their social function as Universities in the service of a common society with common needs.





At the urging of governments of different countries that are aware of the aforementioned situation, initiatives such as the recently presented Integrated Plan for PA and Sports in Spain, have been initiated. These now express the concern and necessary attention to PA and Sports within the university environment, with the corresponding sector report including the proposal to prepare government directives for the development of sports programs in the university, which would be promoted by the institutions themselves in order to bring this type of activity to the largest number of people possible, and to allow and facilitate the possibility of students opting for the recognition of the 6 ECTS credits (objective number 6 of the aforementioned University sector plan).

The success of this measure, adds the report, can only result from the acceptance of the values (which we mentioned earlier) provided by physical activity and sports for comprehensive training, quality of life, and health of the students in this stage of their lives, also allowing the creation of habits that will endure in the future. The consequences of this measure translate into the fact that the people responsible for generating the sports offering will have to regulate, organize, and systematize these activities so that students can complete them, benefit from their specific programs, complement their higher academic education, and above all, obtain direct academic recognition, regardless of their chosen courses of study.

In general lines, the offering in universities (European, US, etc.) is very heterogeneous, and depends to a large extent on the role that the universities themselves give to PA and Sports, as either a core element or in a merely anecdotal role. The organization of athletic departments, the organizational diagrams that make up the units responsible for managing these activities, the professionalism of the directors, the percentage of the university budget allocated, the university's own reference in the area of sports, and many other factors, determine and condition the offerings at both public and private universities.

However, and although there is a high degree of variability in terms of numbers and types, universities offer an enormous range of physical-sports activities, which could be summarized as: sports activities focused on competition, sports schools, expressive activities, activities in nature, health-related activities (fitness), recreational, leisure, and relaxation activities, courses and seminars with a physical-sports orientation, etc., and this is the current situation because modern universities have decided to change the model, in the same way that the people who form part of the universities have been calling for.

Having reached this point, we can go so far as to say that in many universities, it has not been possible to execute this new concept in a coordinated manner with their respective administrations because the general legislation of many countries (including Spain) has not yet understood that even though certain aspects have been adapted and modulated over the last 20 years, the University is also capable of, and has the responsibility to respond to and promote PA and Sports as a public service, for both the comprehensive personal development of the student, as well as the social development of citizens.

Returning to the subject of the relationship between the offering of physical-sports activities and academic recognition, the heterogeneity of the proposals has become obvious and is now a reality. Some universities merely provide academic recognition in association with national and/or international participation and representation in sports competitions (this recognition may even be increased depending on the place in which the person finishes in the competition); others have included less demanding participation (local leagues or competitions) in their regulations as a requirement for this recognition, and in others, we have found that mere participation in programs and activities associated with physical activity, leisure, free time, what we understand as sports for all, etc., are now associated with academic recognition in the regulations.

To summarize, we can affirm that in the absence of general organization or directives for actions, universities, based on their independence and the absence of common criteria, have opted to determine for themselves what is considered to be university sports activities, and how to recognize that participation by students for the purposes of associating it and granting it its academic value.

Without these common directives, and to guarantee that the academic recognition conforms to the expectations that may be generated by the practice of physical-sports activities in the university, greater coordination will be required between the areas of the universities that are responsible for the





organization of sports and the responsible authorities in the area of academic organization, to design the necessary and pertinent strategies for the association, conciliation, compatibility, and recognition among these types of activities and higher academic education. In this particular aspect, the change of the student profile itself (increase in the percentage of women university students, as well as students with some type of disability) has forced a realignment of the physical-sports activity programs, in general more focused on other profiles.

In some cases (as in the case of Spain), these general directives were designed, in past laws, only in the aspects related to the national and international projection of university sport, in the sense of making top-level athletes and studies compatible. Currently, there is still nothing covered specifically with respect to the rest of the offering, something which is quite clearly demonstrated by the interest shown by administrations in regard to the type of university sports activities are of interest to them.

In this exact case, it is very well known that the purpose of external sports competition programs may be moving away from the objectives of the university as a public service.

It is therefore urgently necessary to open a serious debate in national and international university associations, in the different governments (and structures that make them up) with powers in this area, and in the agents who are ultimately responsible, the universities themselves, in regard to the need to legislate in this field, while at the same time requesting a more-than-essential coordination and cooperation between the administrations and the institutions.

