Research investigates higher education students' difficulty in balancing academic life with physical activity and sports

Alexandre Briozo Gomes Filho / 24 de julho de 2025 / In English

Health | Including physical activity in higher education helps to manage anxiety and stress, while lack of time, tiredness, and the risk of injury are noted disadvantages

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**First published March 21, 2024*

**Photo: Marcelo Pires/JU*

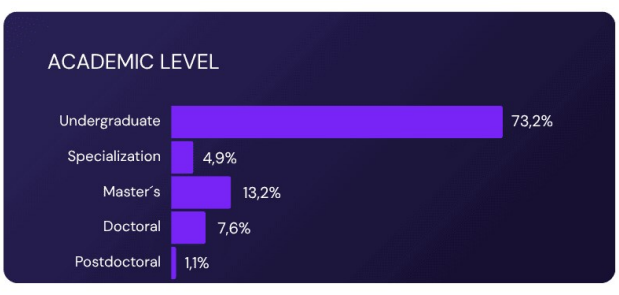
According to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), 47% of the Brazilian population is sedentary. A portion of this can be attributed to limited access to leisure and sports activities—factors that often reflect not institutional shortcomings but individual motivations. The World Health Organization (WHO) ranks Brazil as the most sedentary country in Latin America and the fifth most sedentary in the world.

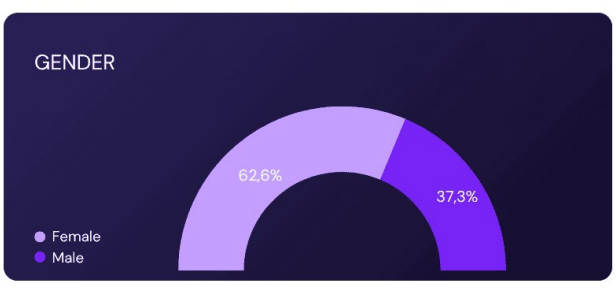
While people often focus on the demands of academic life in higher education—such as classes, assignments, and extracurricular obligations—they may overlook the toll this routine takes on students' physical health. And yet, physical well-being is closely connected to mental health, which is frequently neglected.

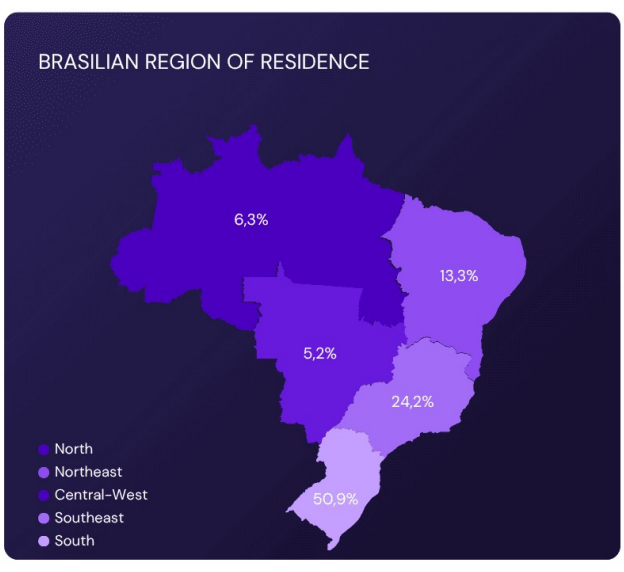
Mikael Almeida Corrêa, who holds a PhD in Psychology from the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS), has been researching topics related to sports psychology since his undergraduate years. The field addresses aspects such as personal sports performance, anxiety management, pre-competition pressure, and burnout in athletes. Currently working as a psychologist at the Student Affairs Office (PRAE) at the Federal University of Rio Grande (FURG), Corrêa has focused—since his master's studies—on exploring the relationship between physical activity and the academic routines of university students.

In an article published in the journal *Estudos e Pesquisas em Psicologia*, from the State University of Rio de Janeiro (UERJ), the psychologist reported improvements in the academic performance of higher education students who exercise regularly, as well as the challenges they face in balancing academic life with exercise. The study was based on a survey conducted with students from various levels of higher education, including undergraduate, postgraduate specialization (*lato sensu*), master's, doctoral, and postdoctoral studies, nationwide, totaling 260 respondents. Together with Professor Ana Cristina Garcia Dias from UFRGS, Corrêa concluded that institutional measures to promote physical activity in higher education are necessary.

Respondents' Profile







Advantages and disadvantages

"We do not have exercise opportunities on campuses and, when we do, the activities are poorly structured," said Corrêa. According to him, there is an untapped potential in the university in this regard, because the institution still does not consider physical activity as essential to students' health.

> *"Of course, it is important for students to have access to psychological support, to benefit from the university restaurant and transportation, all of that is great. But having opportunities for social interaction and access to recreational spaces is also very important, and it may be a major preventive factor against mental health issues."*
> — Mikael Almeida Corrêa

In the survey, four questions were asked about the advantages and disadvantages that physical activity may have on academic performance and adaptation to university life. Improvements in cognitive functioning and physical well-being were among the responses related to physiological benefits. Regarding psychological benefits and the learning of life values, the respondents mentioned anxiety management and the development of qualities such as a strong work ethic and respect for others.

Regarding the effort put into studying to achieve good results, athletic scholarships were identified as motivating factors. The reported improvement in academic performance is attributed to anxiety relief and the promotion of well-being.

"[Physical activity] helps to reduce stress, anguish, and sadness, which indirectly increases my social connections and academic performance," said one of the study's participants. Another participant reported engaging in physical exercise before studying as a way to manage anxiety and cope with stress.

Among the disadvantages reported by respondents, lack of time and exhaustion after physical activity were the most frequently mentioned. Some students reported they missed classes and exams due to training sessions and competitions. Others pointed to injuries from physical exercise, lack of sleep, and poor nutrition as factors that negatively affect academic life.

> *"These days, I no longer separate physical and mental health—they're deeply connected. If I'm hungry or living in an area without proper sanitation, my mental health is likely to suffer. Likewise, if I have joint problems, if I'm overweight, or if my body isn't getting the stimulation it needs to release endorphins and serotonin, my mood will probably be low, and my sleep affected too".*
> — Mikael Almeida Corrêa

This reality is also experienced by the study's author, who reports that his undergraduate years were the most sedentary period of his life. "I benefit from exercising, but I come to class feeling tired. Or I have to skip class to work out. After all, who said the academic curriculum is designed to support physical activity?" said the psychologist. Between physical activity and academic performance, the latter often takes priority. According to him, being kind to oneself and exercising within one's limits may be a way to mitigate the negative effects. According to WHO recommendations, exercising for 20 minutes every day is enough to move someone out of a sedentary lifestyle.

The demands of excellence

In his recently defended doctoral dissertation in the Graduate Program in Psychology at UFRGS, Mikael Almeida Corrêa built on his master's research by evaluating the predictive impact of physical activity and sports on positive mental health indicators, such as optimism, creativity, and self-esteem. His study also examined university students' perceptions of the barriers that limit access to physical activity.

"It's very problematic to view this only through an individualistic lens without recognizing the institutional and social pressures that constrain people," Corrêa explains. "If someone wants to remain competitive in other areas, they often have to sacrifice their health—otherwise, they won't even come close to keeping up."

With the publication of articles based on his dissertation on the horizon and having recently earned his PhD, Corrêa has decided to take a break from academic life. A postdoctoral position remains a possibility, but stepping away from academic pressure has become necessary. He is currently turning to the study of philosophy and intends to work in the field of clinical psychology.

Translated into English by **Cristina Gueths de Aragão**, undergraduate student enrolled in the course "Supervised Translation Training I (English)" of the Undergraduate Program in Language and Literature, under the supervision and translation revision of Professor Rozane Rebechi (P.h.D.) – IL/UFRGS.

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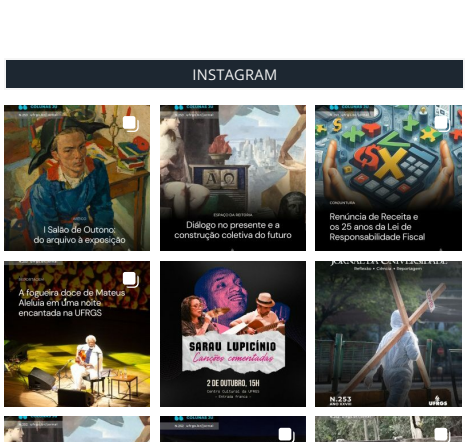

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ISSN 2966-4675

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