



## EMPOWERING THE GIRL CHILD THROUGH TWO-FOLD EXCELLENCE: PROMOTING PARTICIPATION IN SPORTS AND ACADEMICS

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### **Abstract:**

This study adopted the qualitative approach of research to ascertain the female students' access to and success in academics and sports. An investigative interview was conducted with twenty female sports students from Kumasi and Ashanti Mampong campuses of the Akonten Appiah-Menka University of Skills Training and Entrepreneurial Development (AAMUSTED) in the second semester of the 2024/2025 academic year. A semi-structured interview Guide was designed as the research instrument for this study. The data was collected within ten working days and was subjected to a Thematic data analysis. Results from the research revealed that female sports students have to master the acts of discipline, time management, and resilience in order to attain success in combining both sports and academics. Students' major challenge in combining both academics and sports is the clash between academic demands and sports demands. Sports have both positive and negative impacts on students' academics. The sense of purpose and fulfillment, coupled with the thrill of competition and the satisfaction of pushing themselves to new limits, are the major motivators that inspire students to participate in sports. It was suggested that flexible scheduling of class and training times to accommodate both academic and athletic commitments should be inculcated, granting of scholarships to female sports students, establishment of sport governing bodies, a supportive environment, and female lecturer-coaches should be brought on board to offer help and encouragement to the female sports students in their pursuit. It was recommended among others that tertiary institutions adopt a flexible curriculum and schedule that will lessen the burden of sports students as they blend both academics and sports on campus. Scholarships, grants, and other benefits should be made available to

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female sports students to motivate them and inspire other female students to participate in sports.

**Keywords:** gender equity, empowerment, participation

## 1. Introduction

The pursuit of excellence in both academics and sports often appears daunting for students who participate in competitive athletics (Huml *et al.*, 2019; Jonker *et al.*, 2009). The demands of training, travel, and competition can easily overshadow their academic commitments (Debois *et al.*, 2015). Yet, Condello *et al.* (2019) and López de Subijana *et al.* (2015) contend that the ability to balance these dual roles is critical to students' holistic development and prospects. The expanding recognition of sports as a tool for social transformation, particularly for girls, further underscores its potential to promote gender equity, confidence, and personal growth. Sports participation strengthens leadership, discipline, self-regulation, and collaboration skills, all of which enhance academic performance (Aquilina, 2013; Bowes *et al.*, 2021). Armour *et al.* (2020) note that for girls, sports can become empowering social spaces where they challenge restrictive gender norms and assert their presence in male-dominated environments. Yet, despite these benefits, girls continue to face structural barriers such as limited access to facilities, cultural taboos, inadequate representation in leadership, and fears of prejudice (McCormack & Walseth, 2013).

These realities align strongly with Empowerment Theory, which posits that empowerment involves the development of personal capabilities, access to supportive relationships, and the dismantling of structural barriers that limit one's agency. In the context of girls' participation in sports and academics, empowerment occurs as girls build the confidence, skills, and resources needed to make strategic life choices and negotiate gendered expectations. Smith *et al.* (2022) emphasise that student-athletes' lives are defined by demanding academic and athletic schedules that require careful time management and sustained commitment. Moss *et al.* (2021) add that managing full academic workloads alongside high-intensity training can be challenging, yet the competencies developed perseverance, discipline, and time management, extend far beyond the sporting field (Christensen & Sørensen, 2009; Hirschberg, 2020). Through the lens of Empowerment Theory, these competencies are not merely functional skills but vital psychological assets that enhance girls' autonomy, self-efficacy, and ability to navigate societal barriers.

Despite progress in girls' access to formal education, their participation in extracurricular activities such as sports, critical avenues for physical, cognitive, and socio-emotional empowerment, remains comparatively limited (Aquilina, 2013; Condello *et al.*, 2019). In many socio-cultural contexts, female students continue to encounter systemic norms that restrict their involvement in areas deemed non-traditional for women, such as competitive sports (Reina *et al.*, 2020; Tekavc *et al.*, 2020). Empowerment Theory

stresses that such structural and cultural barriers impede girls' capacity to build confidence, leadership skills, and agency. The dual pursuit of academic and athletic excellence, therefore, becomes an essential empowerment process, supporting the development of intellectual abilities, physical fitness, self-confidence, and resilience (Debois *et al.*, 2015; Harrison *et al.*, 2022; Martín-Rodríguez *et al.*, 2024).

However, the literature consistently shows that girls are often forced to choose between academic success and sports involvement due to societal expectations, limited institutional support, inadequate role models, and persistent gender stereotypes (Bowes *et al.*, 2021; McCormack & Walseth, 2013; Mohammadi, 2019; Walseth *et al.*, 2017). In contexts where academic achievement is viewed as the primary route to empowerment, sports are sometimes dismissed as distractions for girls (Stambulova *et al.*, 2021). This narrow view overlooks the critical role of sports in building personal agency, social capital, and leadership, key components of empowerment. Although global policy frameworks such as SDGs 4 and 5 and UNESCO's "Quality Physical Education Guidelines" call for inclusive educational and physical activity environments, implementation remains inconsistent (Kuśnierz *et al.*, 2020; Ozcan, 2021; Preece & Bullingham, 2022). Empowerment Theory illuminates these gaps by highlighting how structural inequalities and gender-insensitive policies restrict the opportunities available to girls.

Evidence shows that girls who engage in both academics and sports tend to perform better academically and exhibit higher emotional and social well-being (Smith *et al.*, 2022; Kirkendall & Krstrup, 2022). Yet, balancing these dual roles remains difficult, especially in contexts where gender expectations and resource limitations place additional burdens on girls (Humi *et al.*, 2019; Kegelaers *et al.*, 2024; Osipov *et al.*, 2021). Teachers and parents may inadvertently discourage girls from pursuing sports, urging them instead to prioritize academics or domestic responsibilities (Preece & Bullingham, 2022; Kuśnierz *et al.*, 2020). From an empowerment perspective, these constraints not only limit girls' participation but also reduce their opportunities to develop autonomy, resilience, and competence across multiple domains.

Although the empowerment of the girl child through education has long been a focus of global development discourse (Condello *et al.*, 2019; McCormack & Walseth, 2013; Murdock *et al.*, 2016), far less scholarly attention has been devoted to the combined role of sports and academics as dual pathways to empowerment. Researchers note that sports participation offers unique cognitive, emotional, and social benefits that complement academic learning, yet the integration of these domains remains underexplored (Aquilina, 2013; Kegelaers *et al.*, 2024; Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019; Reina *et al.*, 2020). Existing studies confirm that education and sports each contribute significantly to the holistic development of girls, but their synergy, especially in developing countries, requires deeper investigation (Jonker *et al.*, 2009; Lopes Dos Santos *et al.*, 2020; Tekavc *et al.*, 2020).

Despite isolated research on girls in sports or girls in education, little is known about the lived experiences of girls striving to excel in both domains. Questions remain

about how these girls navigate competing demands, cultural expectations, and institutional challenges, and what support systems enable or impede their full development. This gap reflects what Empowerment Theory describes as the need to foreground the voices of marginalized groups in understanding their pathways to agency and self-determination. Therefore, this study adopts a qualitative approach to explore the lived experiences of female undergraduate students pursuing excellence in both academics and sports. By centering their narratives, the study seeks to uncover the structural, relational, and personal factors that shape their dual engagement and to contribute knowledge that can inform gender-sensitive policies and practices aimed at empowering girls through integrated academic and athletic development.

## **2. Materials and Methods**

### **2.1 Research Design**

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore and interpret the lived experiences of female undergraduate athletes who combine academic responsibilities with sports participation. A qualitative approach was deemed appropriate because it facilitates an in-depth exploration of social, cultural, and institutional dynamics shaping students' dual engagement in academics and athletics (Jilcha Sileyew, 2020). Such an approach supports the discovery of emerging patterns, the explanation of complex social behaviour, and the generation of context-specific insights about the phenomenon under study.

The methodological orientation was grounded in a constructivist paradigm, which assumes that reality is socially constructed and best understood through individuals' subjective experiences. This paradigm enabled the researchers to explore how female student-athletes construct meaning around their academic pursuits, athletic commitments, and the broader sociocultural expectations that influence their choices and aspirations.

### **2.2 Ethical Considerations**

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the relevant authorities at Akenten Appiah-Menka University of Skills Training and Entrepreneurial Development (AAMUSTED). Participants were given detailed information sheets and consent forms prior to participation. To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned, and identifiable information was omitted from the transcripts.

### **2.3 Sampling Procedures and Participants**

The target population comprised all female undergraduate students in the Kumasi and Ashanti-Mampong campuses of AAMUSTED. The accessible population included female student-athletes in Levels 200, 300, and 400 during the second semester of the 2024/2025 academic year.

A purposive sampling technique was adopted to recruit participants actively involved in competitive university sports, including football, handball, volleyball, athletics, basketball, table tennis, hockey, long jump, and high jump. Some participants were engaged in a single sporting discipline, while others were multi-sport athletes. A total of 20 female student-athletes participated in the study, with equal representation from both campuses.

**Table 1:** Sample Distribution by Campus and Level

Campus	Level 200	Level 300	Level 400	Total
Kumasi	4	3	3	10
Ashanti-Mampong	3	5	2	10
<b>Total</b>	7	8	5	20

Source: Field Data (2025).

**Table 2:** Sporting Disciplines Represented

Sport	No of Participants
Football	3
Volleyball	2
Handball	2
Basketball	2
Athletics	2
Table Tennis	2
Hockey	2
Long Jump	2
High Jump	2
<b>Total</b>	20

## 2.4 Research Instrument

A semi-structured interview guide was developed as the primary data collection instrument. Semi-structured interviews allow researchers to explore predetermined themes while also providing flexibility to probe emerging issues (Jilcha Sileyew, 2020). The guide consisted of open-ended questions designed to elicit rich descriptions of participants' experiences balancing academics and sports. The interview guide underwent expert review by two senior lecturers at AAMUSTED to enhance content validity, clarity, and relevance. The instrument comprised two sections:

- **Section A:** Demographic and Academic Information
  - 1) Current academic level,
  - 2) CGPA range (3.5–4.0; 3.0–3.49; 2.5–2.99; 2.0–2.49; 1.0–1.99; below 0.99),
  - 3) Sporting activity/activities engaged in,
- **Section B:** Core Interview Items
  - 1) How do you combine sports with your academic work?
  - 2) What major challenges do you face in balancing sports and academics?
  - 3) Does your sports participation affect your academic performance? Explain.
  - 4) What motivates you to pursue both academics and sports?

- 5) What measures do you think should be put in place to help female students excel in both areas?

**Table 3:** Summary of Interview Guide Structure

Section	Focus Area	Number of Items
Section A	Demographic & academic background	3
Section B	Experiences, challenges, impact, motivation, support	5
<b>Total</b>	—	<b>8</b>

### 3.5 Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected through one-on-one, face-to-face semi-structured interviews with the 20 participants. Each interview lasted between 6 and 10 minutes, depending on the participant's depth of reflection.

Interviews were conducted over a period of ten working days—five days on each campus. Prior to the interviews, participants were assured of confidentiality and informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. With participants' consent, an audio recorder was used to capture their responses verbatim. Field notes were taken concurrently to document non-verbal cues and contextual observations. Participants were given time to reflect before responding to ensure that their thoughts were fully expressed and not interrupted by probing.

### 3.6 Data Analysis

The data generated from the semi-structured interviews were organised and analysed using a thematic approach. In order to present a clear structure of the analytic process, the findings were arranged according to the themes that emerged from the data, the interview questions that guided the responses, the categories derived from participants' narratives, the specific codes generated during line-by-line analysis, and the frequency with which these codes appeared across the dataset. This structure ensured transparency and allowed for a systematic connection between participants' responses and the final themes developed.

During the initial phase, each interview transcript was read multiple times to familiarise the researchers with the content and provide an overall sense of the participants' perspectives. The interview questions were then mapped directly onto the responses, helping to identify early patterns that later informed the categories. Through inductive coding, the researchers generated multiple codes that captured meaningful units of information. These codes were subsequently grouped into broader categories that aligned with the research objectives. As the analysis progressed, the categories were further refined into themes that reflected the larger ideas represented in the data.

### 3.7 Trustworthiness

To ensure methodological rigor, the study adhered to Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research. Credibility was strengthened

through prolonged immersion in the data, the use of verbatim quotations, and peer debriefing. Two qualitative researchers from AAMUSTED reviewed the coding process and emerging themes to ensure that the findings accurately reflected the experiences of the participants. Dependability was enhanced by maintaining a detailed audit trail, which documented all stages of the research process, including interview procedures, transcription, coding decisions, and theme development. The consistent use of the semi-structured interview guide also contributed to the reliability of the process.

Transferability was promoted by providing rich and detailed descriptions of the study setting, participant selection, and demographic characteristics. Such contextual information enables readers to judge whether the findings may be applicable to similar groups or environments. Confirmability was ensured by minimising researcher bias through reflexive practices. The researchers kept reflective notes to critically examine their assumptions, and all interpretations were grounded in direct evidence from the participants' responses. The use of audio recordings and verbatim transcripts further strengthened objectivity, ensuring that the findings were rooted in the participants' actual experiences rather than the researchers' subjective viewpoints.

#### **4. Results**

Data obtained from the one-on-one interviews with female undergraduate student-athletes were analysed using a thematic analysis approach. Interview recordings were repeatedly reviewed alongside field notes to ensure accuracy and depth of understanding. To maintain confidentiality, all participants were assigned aliases (A01–A19). The analysis yielded five major thematic areas:

- 1) strategies for combining academics and sports,
- 2) challenges associated with dual participation,
- 3) perceived impact of sports on academic performance,
- 4) motivation for pursuing both academics and sports, and
- 5) suggested institutional support mechanisms.

##### **4.1 Strategies for Combining Academics and Sports**

Participants reported employing deliberate and structured strategies to manage the demands of academics and sports. Time management, discipline, and prioritisation emerged as dominant approaches. Several students described meticulous daily planning to allocate time for lectures, training, studying, and rest. For example, one participant explained that she carefully structured her day to ensure attendance at lectures and scheduled training during free periods, noting that this routine left her with limited time for non-academic and non-sporting activities:

*“Hmm, it has not been easy at all. I only try my best to stick to time. I plan my day meticulously, ensuring I have carefully dedicated adequate time for studying, training, and rest. I make sure I am always in class during lesson periods and on the field later in the*

*evening from 4-6 when I don't have a lesson. I do more training sometimes on weekends as well. Because of this, I am always busy and do not have enough time for other stuffs". (A01).*

Similarly, other participants emphasised prioritisation and intentional scheduling as essential to balancing both roles. Students reported allocating specific time slots for academic work and sports participation, maintaining consistent communication with lecturers and coaches, and seeking academic support when necessary:

*"For me, combining academics and sports requires a delicate balance. I prioritize my time, making sure to allocate specific slots for studying, attending classes, and participating in sports. I also communicate regularly with my coaches and lecturers to ensure they're aware of my schedule and any potential conflicts. I always make sure to review my lecture notes and assignments regularly. When needed, I seek help from tutors or study groups to ensure I don't fall behind in my coursework. Ultimately, it's about being intentional with my time, staying focused on my goals, and being proactive about seeking support when I need it." (A02)*

Organisational tools such as calendars and to-do lists were also reported as helpful in managing academic deadlines alongside training and competition schedules:

*"Balancing academics and sports is a constant juggling act for me. I rely on discipline and time management. I set clear goals for both my academic and athletic pursuits, and I prioritize tasks accordingly. I also make sure to stay organized, using tools like calendars and to-do lists to keep track of assignments, practice schedules, and competition dates. When I'm feeling overwhelmed, I reach out to my teammates, coaches, or academic advisors for guidance and support. It's not always easy, but I've learned to adapt and thrive in this environment. By staying focused, motivated, and committed to my goals, I'm able to succeed both in the classroom and on the field." (A03)*

## **4.2 Challenges in Combining Academics and Sports**

Despite the use of personal coping strategies, participants identified several challenges in combining academics and sports. The most frequently reported challenge was schedule conflict, particularly the overlap between lecture hours and training or competition times. Some participants indicated that they were often forced to choose between attending lectures and participating in training sessions, a situation that negatively affected performance in both domains:

*"The major challenge for me now is our lesson hours coinciding with training and competition hours. We have lectures from 4-6 pm on Tuesdays and Thursdays, which are also our training days and hours. I am always left in between decisions, not knowing what to do, since I want to excel in both fields. I choose to sacrifice the training hours for lectures*

*and have, for some few times sacrificed lectures for training, which has affected me in both fields. When there are inter-campus competitions, I miss days and even weeks of lectures just to participate. Also, balancing the pressure to perform in both areas can be stressful. I have to constantly remind myself to prioritize tasks, stay organized.” (A04).*

Another challenge commonly reported was missed academic activities due to competitions, including prolonged absences from lectures during inter-campus sporting events. Participants also highlighted physical and mental fatigue resulting from intensive training and competition schedules, which reduced their ability to concentrate on academic tasks:

*“...my biggest challenge is probably time management. With rigorous training schedules and competitions, it can be tough to find dedicated time for studying and assignments. Sometimes, I have to miss classes or study sessions due to competitions, which can make it hard to keep up with coursework. Fatigue is another challenge. After intense physical training, it can be mentally draining to focus on academics. I have to find ways to stay motivated and energized, even when I’m feeling exhausted.” (A05; A06).*

In addition, some students reported experiencing stress due to the pressure to perform well academically while meeting sporting expectations (A04; A07).

### **4.3 Perceived Impact of Sports on Academic Performance**

Participants expressed mixed views regarding the impact of sports participation on their academic performance. Several students reported positive academic outcomes associated with sports involvement, including improved discipline, time management, focus, and motivation. These participants indicated that regular training routines helped them remain organised and mentally alert, enabling them to complete academic tasks more efficiently:

*“Yes, my sporting activities have both positive and negative impacts on my academics. On the positive side, participating in sports has taught me valuable skills like discipline, time management, and teamwork, which also benefit my academic pursuits. Sports help me stay focused, motivated, and energized, which can improve my productivity and performance in academics. However, the demanding schedule and physical exhaustion from sports can sometimes negatively impact my academics. I may have to miss classes or study sessions, or struggle to focus on assignments after intense training or competitions. Overall, I’ve learned to balance and manage both aspects effectively, leveraging the benefits of sports to enhance my academic performance.” (A08; A11)*

Conversely, some participants perceived sports participation as having a negative impact on their academics. These students reported limited time for studying, increased

stress levels, and physical exhaustion, which they felt placed them at a disadvantage compared to non-athlete peers.

*"Absolutely, my sporting activities have a significant impact on my academics. The structure and routine of training keep me organized and motivated. On the other hand, the time commitment required for sports can be intense, leaving me with limited time for studying and assignments. Fatigue from training and competitions can also affect my focus and productivity in academics. Despite these challenges, I've learned to adapt and find ways to balance both. By prioritizing tasks, managing my time effectively, and staying focused, I'm able to excel in both sports and academics."* (A09; A10).

Overall, the findings suggest that the academic impact of sports participation varied across individuals, depending on workload intensity, coping capacity, and contextual support.

#### **4.4 Motivation for Pursuing Both Academics and Sports**

Participants identified both intrinsic and extrinsic factors as motivating forces for pursuing academics and sports concurrently. Intrinsic motivation was evident in students' expressions of fulfilment, personal achievement, and a sense of purpose derived from succeeding in both areas. Several participants reported that achieving academic milestones and sporting success reinforced their commitment to maintaining balance (A12; A14).

In addition, participants described a desire to become well-rounded individuals and to prepare for future career opportunities as key motivators:

*"What motivates me is the desire to excel in multiple areas and become a well-rounded individual. Through academics, I aim to gain knowledge and prepare for a successful career. Sports, on the other hand, allow me to challenge myself physically and maintain a healthy lifestyle. Pursuing both academics and sports keeps me driven, focused, and motivated. By balancing both, I feel like I'm working towards becoming the best version of myself."* (A13)

Social support from teammates, coaches, lecturers, and family members also played a role in sustaining motivation and commitment. (A15)

#### **4.5 Suggested Institutional Support Measures**

Participants proposed several institutional measures to support female students in excelling in both academics and sports. Flexible scheduling of lectures and training sessions was the most frequently suggested intervention, with students emphasising the need to minimise timetable clashes. Access to academic support services, including tutoring and academic advising, was also highlighted as essential.

*"To help female students excel in both academics and sports, the first thing I will suggest is flexible scheduling. With this, I mean there should be flexible class schedules and training times to accommodate both academic and athletic commitments. Also, a supportive environment that encourages and empowers female students to pursue both academics and sports should be inculcated. I again suggest that mentorship programs that pair female students with role models who have successfully balanced academics and sports should be provided. (A16)*

Furthermore, participants recommended mentorship programmes involving role models who have successfully balanced academics and sports. The provision of adequate sports facilities and equipment was identified as another important support mechanism. Notably, one participant suggested the inclusion of female lecturer-coaches as a strategy to encourage participation and enhance support for female student-athletes:

*"To support female students in excelling in both academics and sports, I suggest the initiation of tailored support services, like tutoring and academic advising, to help manage coursework alongside training schedules as is done in other institutions. Again, there should be provision of quality sports facilities and equipment to ensure they can perform at their best. These measures can create an environment where female students feel supported, motivated, and empowered to succeed in both areas." (A19)*

## 5. Discussion

This qualitative research sought to find out how undergraduate sport ladies from level 200, 300 and 400 at the Akenten Appiah Menka University of Skills Training and Entrepreneurial Development (AAMUSTED) are able to combine their academics and sports on campus. The research found that most of the sportswomen were in level 200, followed by level 300 and level 400, having the least number since some students drop off from the sporting groups as they progress on campus. Sport-students CGPA's ranged from 1.0-4.0.

From the research, it was revealed that female sports students didn't find it easy to combine sports and academics. However, they succeeded and were able to make their way out with both sports and academics by relying on discipline, time management, and support systems. Since combining academics and sports requires a delicate balance, Smith *et al.* (2022) found that sports students must prioritise their work appropriately and establish clear goals for both their academic and sports endeavours in order to maintain balance. According to Lopes Dos Santos *et al.* (2020), sports students must set time priorities, ensuring that they set aside particular times for studying, going to class, and participating in sports. Regular communication and seeking advice and counselling from academic counsellors, coaches, and lecturers can help them get through it.

Again, the major challenge female sports students face is in relation to the clash between lectures and training or sporting activities. Some students have to sacrifice the

training hours for lectures, and sometimes sacrifice lectures for training or sports competitions, which affects them in both fields. Research by Harrison *et al.* (2022) and López de Subijana *et al.* (2015) indicated that it is extremely difficult for athletes to balance their time between practices, competitions, and schoolwork. It can be challenging to balance the responsibilities of academics and athletics, particularly when unforeseen circumstances or injuries arise (Debois *et al.*, 2015). Mohammadi (2019) added that it can be difficult for sports students to find time for studying and other crucial academic assignments because of their demanding training plans and contests. Condello *et al.* (2019) and Walseth *et al.* (2017) found that it can be quite tough to keep up with the demands of both academics and sports. Sustaining energy and concentration is another difficulty. Sports-related physical and mental fatigue can occasionally affect academic performance, and vice versa (Debois *et al.*, 2015)

The majority of the female sport-students' responses indicated that indeed sporting activities have both positive and negative impacts on their academics. On the positive side, it was found that participating in sports has taught them valuable skills like discipline, time management, teamwork, and resilience, which translate well to their academic work and pursuits. With this, Lopes Dos Santos *et al.* (2020) asserts that, if sports students master the acts of prioritizing tasks, effective time management, and staying focused, they will be able to excel in both sports and academics. Kegelaers *et al.* (2024) also found that female sports students are always active and healthy, having sound minds for studies, which makes them able to catch up all the time and sometimes perform better than their peers who do not participate in any sporting activity. This is also in accordance with the findings of Harrison *et al.* (2022) and Tekavc *et al.* (2020) who found that sports participation helps female students stay focused, motivated, and energized, which can improve their productivity and performance in academics. Lopes Dos Santos *et al.* (2020) asserted that Students who compete and participate in school-sponsored activities have better academic and educational outcomes, including grades, test scores, and educational expectations. According to a study examining the associations between sport team participation, physical activity, and academic outcomes in middle and high school girls, the outcome suggested that both moderate to vigorous physical activity and sport team participation were associated with higher grade point averages in high school-age girls.

On the other side, some students reported that the demanding schedule and physical exhaustion, stress and fatigue from sports can be intense, leaving them with limited time for studying and assignments and sometimes negatively impact their academics. In relation to this, Stambulova and Wylleman (2019) propounded that the continual missing of classes, coupled with the struggle to focus on assignments after intense training or competitions, gives female students an extra burden trying to catch up with their peers, which in turn affects their academics adversely.

According to the students, what motivates them to pursue both academics and sport is achieving a balance between physical and mental growth. They also feel more fulfilled and purposeful when they pursue both. Some people are also driven by the

chance to push themselves in new ways and the ambition to become well-rounded individuals who succeed in a variety of fields. Research conducted by Moss *et al.* (2021) indicated that, while sports give students the opportunity to push themselves physically, develop resilience, and release stress, all of which help them feel like they are working towards becoming the best versions of themselves, academics aid them in developing critical thinking, problem-solving abilities, and knowledge in their field of study. Others take pleasure in the excitement of competition and the accomplishment of challenging themselves. To this, findings from Smith *et al.* (2022) conclude that students who succeed academically feel proud of themselves and have more options in the future. According to the students' responses, academics help them learn new things and get ready for a successful profession, whereas sports enable them to push themselves physically and lead healthy lives. According to Aquilina (2013) and Kuśnierz *et al.* (2020), participation in sports is frequently linked to lower blood pressure, a lower body fat percentage, improved fitness levels, and a lower risk of cardiovascular disease.

Other female students' responses indicated that their motivations were all about personal growth and achievement. To these individuals, academics push them to expand their knowledge, think critically, build endurance and develop skills that will benefit their future career. Sports, on the other hand, allow them to test their physical limits and learn valuable lessons about teamwork. Reina *et al.* (2020)'s research found that the sense of achievement that comes from succeeding in academics and athletics tends to inspire female students. Additionally, some students find inspiration from their family, instructors, coaches, and teammates. Kegelaers *et al.* (2024) extols that the support and encouragement from coaches and other authorities and mates inspire sports students to work hard, stay focused, and go all-out for excellence in both academics and sports.

Participating students suggested that there should be a flexible scheduling of classes and training times to accommodate both academic and sports commitments. This is in accordance with the findings of Osipov *et al.* (2021), who propounded that students who are also involved in sports can benefit from the implementation of specialised support services, such as academic advising and tutoring, to assist them in balancing their training schedules and homework, as is done in other institutions and countries. Also, sports governing bodies should be established to assist female sports-students in the university. Scholarships, grants and the welfare of sports students should be the concern of the institution. In the United States, governing bodies such as the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA) and National Junior College Athletic Association (NJCAA), are available to offer college sport participation opportunities in the U.S. to females in a variety of sports in order for them to attain success on the field, in the classroom and for life (McCormack & Walseth, 2013). Students again suggested that a supportive environment that encourages and empowers female students to pursue both academics and sports should be inculcated. For female sports students to have interest and succeed in both sports and academics, Sayyid *et al.* (2020) suggested that, there should be mentorship programs that match female students with role models who have managed to balance sports and

academics Brettschneider (1999) and O'Neill *et al.*, (2013) added that, access to resources such as academic advisors, tutors, and sports equipment to support both academic and athletic pursuits can help female students excel in both academics and sports. Female lecturer-coaches can best understand and offer great help to students, encourage their pursuit and enhance success in both fields. Various institutions should offer encouragement and recognition for achievements in both academics and sports to boost confidence and motivation (Hickey & Kelly, 2008; Lupo *et al.*, 2015). By implementing these measures, female students can be empowered to excel in both areas and reach their full potential.

## **6. Recommendation**

It is recommended that tertiary institutions adopt a flexible curriculum and schedule that will lessen the burden of sports students as they blend both academics and sports on campus. Educational seminars should be held occasionally to educate females on the benefits of sports. It is also recommended that scholarships, grants and other benefits be made available to female sports students to motivate them and inspire other female students at the tertiary levels to participate in sports. Female coaches should also be brought on board to assist the sports-ladies in their pursuit.

## **7. Conclusion**

From the responses of the participating sports-students, it can be concluded that students do not find it easy in combining both academics and sports. However, they master the acts of discipline, time management and resilience to keep them going in both pursuits. Students' major challenge in combining both academics and sports is in the clash between academics and sports demands, that is, when lesson and class hours are interfered with by sports training and sporting competitions. Sports have both positive and negative impacts on students' academics. The mastered discipline and time management translate into their academics and help them attain good results, whereas the stress and fatigue after training make them restless and give them an extra burden as they want to catch up with their contemporaries. The sense of purpose and fulfillment coupled with the thrill of competition and the satisfaction of pushing themselves to new limits, are the major motivators that inspire students to engage in sports as well. Students suggested that flexible scheduling of class and training times to accommodate both academic and athletic commitments should be inculcated, granting of scholarships to female sports students, establishment of sport governing bodies, a supportive environment, and female lecturer-coaches should be brought on board to offer help and encouragement to the female sports students in their pursuit.

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### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

I declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this work. The research was conducted independently, without any financial or personal relationships that could be perceived as influencing the results or interpretations presented.

### **About the Author(s)**

The author is a Lecturer with a PhD in Physical Education. As a committed physical educationist, my research interests center on gender and sports, inclusive participation, women empowerment and the integration of traditional games to enhance physical fitness. My work reflects a strong passion for advancing knowledge and promoting equity within the field of physical education and sports.

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