

Enhancing Engagement and Academic Success Through Combat Sports in Higher Education

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Abstract

This narrative survey evaluates the effects of combat sports together with physical education on student participation while developing discipline and academic achievements in higher education institutions. Physical education frameworks are widely recognized for wellness benefits yet academic employments of combat sports demonstrate limited study as education instruments for developing mental and social competencies that improve student learning achievement. This review analyses combat sports' structured discipline through domain-specific literature from sports science, educational psychology and higher education pedagogy which establishes the mechanisms through which combat sports develop university students' self-regulation, motivation and resilience and social cohesion. The study evaluates how these activities enable comprehensive pupil growth especially among minority student communities through developing personal identity together with increased self-assurance as well as social connection. Physical education provides an inclusive framework to merge educational success with physical activity through an examination of combat sports effectiveness as intervention methods. This study employed a qualitative review methodology, synthesising existing literature on combat sports, physical activity, and student development. To ensure sustainability, the paper recommends integrating combat sports and structured physical education into university curricula and co-curricular activities. These initiatives should be supported by inclusive student development policies. This approach fosters both academic success and holistic student wellness, particularly in under-resourced educational contexts where access and retention remain significant challenges.

Keywords: combat sports, physical education, higher education, student participation, academic achievement, discipline

1. Introduction

Universities worldwide face modern challenges to develop thorough strategies that support student growth through academic learning as well as physical and social and emotional wellness (Mathunjwa et al., 2025; Khatri & Duggal, 2022). Combat sports such as judo and boxing present valuable educational opportunities within physical education by promoting discipline, respect and emotional control. Academic literature lacks comprehensive research on combat sports development outcomes specifically within university environments although traditional PE programs have been established in promoting physical health for decades (Oh, Ryu, & Uhm, 2025; Yu & Mantuhac, 2024).

The combat sports Taekwondo, Judo, Boxing, Karate and Wrestling serve as physical training practices that teach mental strength and promote discipline along with ethical conduct (Moenig, Kim, & Choi, 2023; Mathunjwa, 2024). Core values and leadership in higher education centre on perseverance, emotional intelligence, ethical responsibility, and collaborative engagement. These qualities foster inclusive leadership, academic excellence, innovation, and social accountability vital for transforming institutions and supporting student success (Osuya & Cheta-Maclean, 2024).

University students who engage in combat sports develop critical life capabilities which improve their academic results while fostering their personal development. The skills taught have special meaning within current universities where mental health issues combined with student disengagement and declining retention rates exist (Rawlinson, 2025).

The incorporation of combat sports within higher education enables marginalized students to find platforms that help them express themselves and build communities while gaining self-empowerment (Kapilashrami, Quinn, & Das, 2025). The participation in combat sports leads to enhanced self-esteem alongside improved social cohesion and increased resilience in population groups according to Sullivan et al. (2024). These important study results matter notably for developing nations like South Africa since providing fair educational opportunities represents one of their major national objectives (January, 2022).

The application of combat sports inside academic institutions demands further academic analysis and empirical research. Research about combat sports mainly targets students of school age and elite athletes while missing the perspectives and achievements of standard university students who do these sports in recreation settings or co-curricular participation (Akehurst, Southcott, & Lambert, 2020). Students and higher education systems need to analyse methods of incorporating combat sports practices within physical education courses and broader learning methods for improved scholastic and psychological growth.

The review gathers evidence from sports science combined with academic psychology studies together with educational investigations to evaluate student development outcomes resulting from combat sports and PE practice. The research evaluates the effect of these physical activities on university students' mental performance as well as self-control and academic drive and general university community involvement. A descriptive model shows the conceptual potential for modifying educational physical activity approaches especially combat sports-based programs in universities. This review presents implications regarding curriculum development and co-curricular functions besides student wellness programs especially for educational environments focused on total student development.

2. Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

This review draws on Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which views learning as a socially mediated process, where knowledge develops through guided interaction and shared experiences (Vygotsky, 1978). Central to this theory is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), describing tasks learners can master with appropriate support. In sports like judo and taekwondo, this support from skilled coaches or peers enhances skill acquisition and personal growth. Through structured guidance, athletes build resilience and discipline—qualities essential for long-term health. This framework also applies to NCD prevention, where cooperative learning promotes lasting behavioural change.

Students mimic the habits and mental and emotional expressions that arise from observing their instructors along with coaches and senior peers according to Wade, (2024) Social Learning Theory. Learning through sports structure prepares students to meet role models while acquiring respect and self-control and perseverance which leads to better personal and academic discipline. Through his critical pedagogy Dixon and colleagues (2023) highlights praxis as well as self-reflection and practical action for world transformation. When viewed through this lens physical combat goes beyond being mere physical training because it creates space where students can engage dialogically with power dynamics along with identity and culture assessment.

Physical literacy serves as the foundation to introduce combat sports into higher educational institutions. Stevens, & Cooper, (2023) explains that physical literacy gives people the ability to perform physical activities with skillful competence and self-assured confidence thus supporting both lifelong educational development and personal advancement essential to higher education restructuring.

3. Combat Sports and Student Development in Higher Education

3.1 Role of Combat Sports in Promoting Self-discipline and Resilience

The various combat sports including Taekwondo, Judo, Karate, Boxing and Wrestling generate multiple advantages past physical training capabilities. Combat sports establish essential roles in university student development by promoting psychosocial development together with academic achievements and emotional stability (Yang, Xu, & Le, 2024). Combat sport disciplines match up well with what university students need developmentally since these students frequently experience problems with self-reliance and transition while dealing with academic strain (Xu, 2024).

Combat sports provide the most significant teaching opportunity for developing disciplined behavior along with resilient characteristics. Athletes involved in these sports need to train regularly while setting goals alongside adhering to rules and traditions which develop academically beneficial skills such as time management and resilience together with delayed gratification abilities (Nansubuga et al., 2024). Martial arts participation leads students to develop better concentration skills as well as higher work dedication and effective strategies for handling challenges (Mathunjwa et al., 2024; Mathunjwa et al., 2023). Young individuals can learn academic perseverance by adopting

combat sports' structured framework which combines respect with responsibility alongside clear advancement criteria (Dawson, 2024; Hlasho et al., 2024).

Table 1. Summary of Selected Studies Linking Combat Sports/Physical Education to Academic and Student Development Outcomes

Author(s) & Year	Study Focus	Sample/Setting	Key Findings	Implications
Lee & Kim (2015)	Physical activity and mental behaviour	University Taekwondo participants, South Korea	Taekwondo improved responsibility and goal-setting behaviour	Martial arts foster character and behavioural development
Aithal (2016)	Physical activity and academic performance	Medical students, India	Regular physical activity improves focus, discipline, and academic outcomes	Supports integration of physical education into academic routines
Mahadeva et al. (2018)	Sport participation and academic performance	Medical students, Malaysia	Students engaged in sports achieved better academic results	Emphasizes role of discipline and time management
Pourranjbar et al. (2019)	Physical activity and mental health	Health sciences students, Iran	Sport involvement reduces stress and builds psychological resilience	Highlights psychological benefits of physical activity
Zamri & Raman (2020)	Physical activity, mental health, and academics	University students, Malaysia	Sport participation supports mental health and academic achievement	Promotes holistic development through physical education
Muriel et al. (2020)	Physical education, mental health, and academics	College students across disciplines	Regular PE linked to improved academic performance and lower dropout rates	Advocates for PE as integral to student success
Yaghmour et al. (2022)	Physical activity and GPA	University students, Saudi Arabia	Moderate-to-high physical activity is associated with higher GPA	Encourages promotion of active lifestyles in universities
Khan et al. (2022)	Sports engagement and academic focus	Undergraduate students, Pakistan	Positive correlation between regular sport participation and academic discipline	Suggests integration of sport in curriculum development
Romdhani et al. (2024)	Verbal encouragement in sports science education	University students in structured PE programmes	Verbal encouragement improves endurance and motivation	Useful pedagogical strategy in combat sports training
Mathunjwa et al. (2025)	Informal sports and student social integration	First-year university students, South Africa	Informal participation enhances social bonding and emotional well-being	Highlights the role of informal sports in easing student transitions
Mathunjwa (2025)	Module scores and academic achievement	First-year university students, South Africa	Physical and cognitive development supports academic success	Enhances student retention and inclusion in higher education
Mathunjwa et al. (2013)	Physical activity and cardiometabolic health	Aerobics student-athletes, South Africa	Aerobics training reduces cardiometabolic risk factors	Supports aerobic training as a preventive health strategy
Ziv & Lidor (2013)	Combat sports and mental health	Student combat sport practitioners (18–24 yrs)	Enhanced self-discipline, emotional regulation, and focus	Validates psychological benefits of judo and karate
Mathunjwa et al. (2016)	Taekwondo Health	Student Taekwondo athletes (20–26yrs)	Improved body composition and physical performance	Contributes to health and enhanced combat skills

Studies which evaluate physical activity effects on student development including combat sports and physical education follow the chronological order depicted in Table 1. Various studies throughout South Africa, India, Malaysia and South Korea demonstrate that consistent physical activity leads to better achievements in academics and improved mental health and emotional resilience and behavioural development. Students who practice Taekwondo and judo achieve better emotional control and self-discipline and enhanced responsibility which students gain from structured physical education support improved focus and GPA scores and retention rates. Informal and formal sports participation also support social integration and cognitive growth. Multiple studies prove that education should incorporate physical activity because it produces complete student development.

3.2 Psychosocial Benefits: Confidence, Self-regulation, and Mental Health

The practice of combat sports produces psychological advantages for mental health. Various investigations show martial arts participation in university students leads to reduced anxiety levels and depression symptoms as well as decreased stress (Oh et al 2025; Kaufmann, 2022; Mathunjwa et al 2024, Shandu et al., 2023). The activities enable students dealing with identity issues and cultural transformation and self-esteem battles to express their feelings through contact sports. Some martial arts through their meditative components like Aikido or traditional Karate teach mindfulness which supports better emotional control together with psychological strength (Kwok, 2024; Spring, & Veasey, 2024).

3.3 Cognitive and Executive Functioning Enhancement through Martial Arts

Cognitive abilities together with executive skills receive direct impact from combat sports. The brain areas which control attention and planning and problem-solving and memory become activated when people regularly perform complex motor skills such as sparring and pattern execution (Campanella, 2024). Students in higher education benefit greatly from the cognitive upgrades martial arts provide when they need to handle big amounts of information while juggling various academic obligations. The practice of martial arts produces three specific benefits which help students perform better academically while reducing their reaction time and enhancing inhibitory control and sustained attention (Johnstone, 2021).

Combat sports platforms provide a specific environment where individuals can develop their identities as well as establish social bonds. People from diverse backgrounds can use combat sports practices to create social connections while exchanging cultures and developing acceptance for diverse peoples within inter-cultural university settings. Students learn to cooperate with people representing different backgrounds through combat sports which both improves their communication skills and combats social separation between individuals (Bytautas, & Daukilas, 2025). The physical accomplishments in combat sports create an opportunity for first-generation alongside disadvantaged students to build self-confidence academically and in their athletic abilities.

4. Physical Education as a Vehicle for Holistic Student Development

4.1 Physical Education's Contribution to Academic Success and Retention

Physical education (PE) serves as a fundamental element for promoting the complete development of higher education students throughout physical and mental as well as emotional and social dimensions. Traditional insight restricts PE to sport performance and physical fitness training yet contemporary movimiento education shows how physical movement shapes the entire student (Barbara, 2024). The educational tool of Physical Education at universities helps to develop students who practice physical movement while building emotional strength and social abilities and mental engagement (Huang, 2024).

Physical development maintains its central role as the initial focus point of academic institutions. Physical Education leads to better lifestyle choices through its positive impact on heart fitness along with muscle development and stretch abilities and complete physical aptitude. The outcomes prove essential for universities because they face substantial sedentary conduct (Lines et al., 2021). Physical exercise programs with proper structure help students increase their energy levels while improving their immune systems, quality of life and improving their academic performance.

4.2 Inclusion and Social Integration through Physical Activity

Physical Education supports the basic elements of holistic growth because it builds emotional alongside psychological well-being. Studies indicate physical activity participation effectively decreases anxiety symptoms alongside depression symptoms and stress symptomology among university students according to Huang (2024). University students who participate in PE classes using reflective methods and mindfulness or expressive physical

activities can express emotions while enhancing self-awareness and emotional regulation according to Kwok (2024). Academic adjustment as well as psychological resilience improves through these favourable outcomes.

The team-building activities through PE teach students useful social capacities including teamwork and communication which aid them in building connections with others in their multicultural university communities. Group sports activities along with sports develop interpersonal cooperation and trust which teaches students how to solve conflicts and build relationship competences (Železnik Mežan et al., 2023). Marginalized students benefit from PE programs because these activities provide equal opportunities which reinforce respect and sense of belonging for all participants.

4.3 Physical Literacy and Lifelong Learning Outcomes

PE programs deliver documented improvements for students' mental processes together with their academic achievements. Scientific research shows that people who exercise consistently have better brain functioning which benefits their cognitive skills for attention and management of tasks alongside their abilities to remember (Shaw et al., 2023; Mathe et al., 2023). When physical education accepts students through strategic games and problem-solving activities and physical skill creation exercises it drives academic results and educational progress. The benefits brought forth by PE make valuable additions to academic results among students who manage multiple academic demands through schedules.

Furthermore, PE fosters the development of lifelong values and personal agency. PE curricula incorporate educational elements including goal-setting combined with self-regulation and discipline and resilience concepts to enable students to utilize them in various settings. PE develops into personal development beyond physical training which supports the educational mission to develop autonomous reflective and responsible citizens (Whitehead, 2010).

5. Intersection Between Combat Sports, Academic Performance, and Campus Culture

5.1 Engagement and Motivation among Student-athletes

Higher education institutes experience remarkable effects from combat sports which shape both student physical and mental strength as well as academic success and general campus atmosphere characteristic. The disciplined practices with focus on goals and strong mental stability match perfectly what students need for succeeding academically. Academic studies show that combat sport participants demonstrate superior abilities to regulate their actions and allocate time as well as better stress management skills which leads to better academic results (Kuzhelnyi, 2024; Shaw et al., 2022).

University programs provide their own examples together with personal observations to support these arguments. Combat sports train athletes to have focus and perseverance and emotional control which develops their concentration and memory skills to boost learning performance and examination scores (Campanella et al., 2024; Mahlangu et al., 2024). People participating in these sports learn disciplined habits which become applicable to academic life when facing academic challenges.

5.2 Gender and Cultural Dynamics in Combat Sport Participation

The participation in combat sports helps colleges establish an inclusive cultural environment that fosters diversity as well as identity shaping for all students. A broad spectrum of students from diverse cultural origins and racial groups alongside socio-economic categories chooses these sports which unite different communities in order to improve social acceptance among peers (Matvapayev, 2024). Student life benefits from intervarsity tournaments and martial arts events which strengthen school community bonding and generate school spirit. Through their dynamic nature combat sports serve as both an academic achievement booster and a cohesive community builder that connects academic greatness to student development and social inclusion.

6. Implications for Curriculum Design and Co-curricular Activities

Higher education must develop new curriculum and co-curricular approaches to implement combat sports along with physical education programs which support complete student growth. The discipline and focus together with resilience qualities of combat sports strengthen academic progress while supporting emotional welfare (Oh et al., 2025; Mathunjwa et al., 2024). Student curricula should contain optional classes about martial arts practices along with theoretical components of ethics psychology and cultural studies according to Yu and Mantuhac (2024). When students take interdisciplinary classes, they gain the ability to reflect critically while developing themselves personally.

The co-curricular domain should support combat sports clubs that operate as structured programs for development. These clubs provide leadership possibilities through their programs which also foster campus unity while encouraging member inclusion (Sullivan et al., 2024). Students' development will be measured through reflective writing and community service activities linked to sporting activities that encourage life-long education along with citizenship involvement.

Collaboration between Education and Human Movement Science and Student Affairs departments will establish well-supported inclusive programs which reflect institutional graduate attributes. The academic rewards and developmental advantages of combat sports create institutional backing while establishing them as essential tools to develop strong graduates who are also skilled individuals.

7. Gaps in the Literature and Future Research Directions

Maintaining limited presence in scholarly discussions about combat sports and physical education benefits in higher education is challenging especially in African research contexts. Findings from Western and Asian countries show limited cultural relevance in African higher education that features dissimilar socio-economic factors and infrastructure and policy conditions (Matvapayev, 2024). The level of attention is low regarding how African students experience and gain advantages from combat sports through empirical research.

A mixture of quantitative and qualitative approaches should be used to assess the measurable effects alongside personal experiences of students who participate in combat sports. Research over several years should measure how education through combat sports continually benefits participants during their progression. Analyzing program effects in African institutions compared to schools elsewhere would reveal the regional factors that influence outcome performance.

Institutional administrators need research focused on policy analysis to determine how combat sports fit into official teaching and student development systems. Studies should analyse participation limitations which stem from institutional backing practices and access limitations as well as gender stereotypes that create obstacles for students. Research findings will help develop all-inclusive evidence-based programs which make combat sports an academic and social transformation tool for higher education students.

8. Conclusion

This review evaluates how combat sports together with physical education leads to enhanced academic results as well as stronger psychological resistance and complete student maturation in higher education institutions. The practices of combat sports create students who demonstrate self-discipline and enhanced cognitive performance along with social unity which enhances the university culture. Empirical research conducted for both African and worldwide settings should be implemented to lead policy developments and practice implementation. Educational institutions need to teach combat sports through their instructional and extracurricular programs to provide open access and continuous backer support for students. Higher education institutions can enhance student growth while pursuing three key educational aims of wellness and academic achievement besides social change functions.

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