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STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES AS AN INTEGRAL PART OF RESPONSIBLE MANAGEMENT EDUCATION

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OBJECTIVE

While curriculum has typically been the focus of discussions surrounding higher education institutions (HEIs), extracurricular activities (ECAs) have increasingly gained recognition for their impact on overall student academic satisfaction. These activities importantly influence personal, professional and social growth, making them an indispensable part of student development.

Extracurricular engagement refers to participation in different activities conducted independently of the formal curriculum programs offered by HEIs (Javed & Srivastava, 2024). Beyond traditional domains like sports, arts, and student organizations, ECAs also encompass informal learning, collaborative learning, volunteering, as well as activities focused on mental health improvement. The wide range of ECAs offers individuals the opportunity to find the type of ECA that best aligns with their personal needs. Not only do these activities foster skill enhancement and personal development, but they also

contribute to students' overall well-being (Javed & Srivastava, 2024). Research has shown that students view ECAs as a means to maintain a healthy work-life balance, avoid loneliness and isolation and reduce academic stress (Winstone et al., 2022). Moreover, these activities foster a sense of achievement and ease adaptation and transition to the university environment (Winstone et al., 2022).

Students are starting to consider extracurricular opportunities as a vital component when deciding on their future university (Winstone et al., 2022), which indicates the rising importance of ECAs. Facilitating student participation in ECAs positively impacts their academic satisfaction and academic experience. Notably, student satisfaction has demonstrated to have a significant effect on academic performance attained throughout university studies (Maniriho, 2024). Therefore, student satisfaction plays an important role not only for students but also for HEIs (Wong & Chapman, 2023). It is the HEIs themselves that bear the responsibility for ensuring a sustainable and inclusive environment capable of meeting diverse needs of all students (Maniriho, 2024).

Apart from its impact on student satisfaction, extracurricular engagement fosters the development of socially conscious individuals who recognize the value of their education not only for meeting career goals, but also for addressing broader social challenges. Hence, the responsibility of HEIs is paramount in shaping individuals who succeed professionally and act as catalysts for societal progress (Javed & Srivastava, 2024).

Active extracurricular engagement has proven to be a crucial aspect of student life, strongly contributing not only to professional success but also to cultivation of future society members (Javed & Srivastava, 2024). To ensure this, it is essential to gain deeper understanding of youth perspectives, which enables universities to build supportive environments that nurture student development in all areas (Herdlein & Zurner, 2015). Nevertheless, there is still limited insight into students' subjective perceptions of different extracurricular opportunities. This research seeks to explore students' perceptions regarding the significance of various ECAs for their overall academic satisfaction, thus providing valuable guidance for HEIs' strategies and initiatives for fostering supportive learning environments.

METHODOLOGY

To understand the perspectives of young individuals and their perceptions of ECAs they consider important for academic satisfaction, a survey was developed. In November 2022, data were gathered throughout the second phase Design Concept (2.2. Pilot Study with University Students) of the SHINE project. A total of 276 first-year undergraduate students from the Information systems and technologies and Management and organization programs of the Faculty of Organizational Sciences, University of Belgrade participated.

Using Microsoft Forms, the survey was distributed, where students responded to an open-ended question: "Which extracurricular activities are most important for student satisfaction?" The open-ended question offered valuable insights into young individuals'

thoughts by allowing them to freely express their perceptions without imposing predefined answers.

Once the responses were gathered, they were categorized according to defined ECA groups, based on what students emphasized as relevant to academic satisfaction, with the aim of determining the mention frequency for each ECA type. Additional analysis focused on the mention frequencies comparison of ECAs by gender and study program.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Based on student responses, ten categories of ECA types were identified, shown in the table below. Nearly half of the participants highlighted student organizations and projects as key contributors to academic satisfaction (123), making them the most frequently mentioned ECA type, followed by social life and connections (86). At the lower end of the frequency scale were volunteering and social impact activities (7), with mental health activities being the least mentioned (3).

Table 2: Mention frequency by ECA type

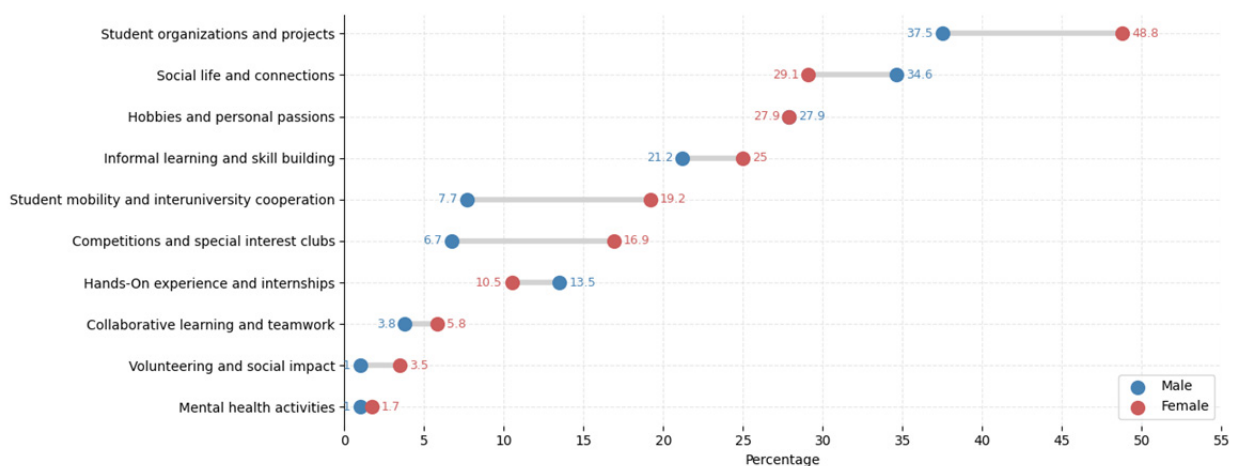
ECA type	Student organizations and projects	Hands-On experience and Internships	Informal learning and skill building	Competitions and special interest clubs	Collaborative learning and teamwork
Mention frequency	123	32	65	36	14
ECA type	Student mobility and interuniversity cooperation	Social life and connections	Hobbies and personal passions	Mental health activities	Volunteering and social impact
Mention frequency	41	86	77	3	7

Additionally, the mention frequency was examined in relation to gender. Due to unequal representation of gender groups, percentage distributions were used to enable fair comparison. For both male and female respondents, student organizations and projects, as well as social life and connections, are the most important ECA type for academic satisfaction, whereas mental health activities, and volunteering and social impact are the least important.

Table 3: Mention frequency of ECA types by gender

	MENTION FREQUENCY			
	Male (104)	Male (%)	Female (172)	Female (%)
Student organizations and projects	39	37,5%	84	48,8%
Hands-On experience and Internships	14	13,5%	18	10,5%
Informal learning and skill building	22	21,2%	43	25,0%
Competitions and special interest clubs	7	6,7%	29	16,9%
Collaborative learning and teamwork	4	3,8%	10	5,8%
Student mobility and interuniversity cooperation	8	7,7%	33	19,2%
Social life and connections	36	34,6%	50	29,1%
Hobbies and personal passions	29	27,9%	48	27,9%
Mental health activities	1	1,0%	2	1,7%
Volunteering and social impact	1	1,0%	6	3,5%

The following chart shows gender differences in perceived importance of certain ECA types. The largest gaps appear in perception of student organizations and projects, mobility and interuniversity cooperation, and competitions and special interest clubs, with female respondents rating them as more important for academic satisfaction than male respondents.

**Figure 1:** ECA type mention frequency differences by gender

The analysis also explored differences based on students' chosen study programs. The findings show that IT students value student organizations and projects, and social life and

connections, whereas Management students consider student organizations and projects, and hobbies and personal passions as key contributors to student satisfaction. Both groups perceived volunteering and social impact, and mental health activities as the least significant ECA types for academic satisfaction.

Table 4: Mention frequency of ECA types by study program

	MENTION FREQUENCY			
	Information systems and technologies (193)	Information systems and technologies (%)	Management and organization (83)	Management and organization (%)
Student organizations and projects	79	40,9%	44	53,0%
Hands-On experience and Internships	20	10,4%	12	14,5%
Informal learning and skill building	41	21,2%	24	28,9%
Competitions and special interest clubs	16	8,3%	20	24,1%
Collaborative learning and teamwork	9	4,7%	5	6,0%
Student mobility and interuniversity cooperation	17	8,8%	24	28,9%
Social life and connections	66	34,2%	20	24,1%
Hobbies and personal passions	52	26,9%	25	30,1%
Mental health activities	2	1,0%	1	1,2%
Volunteering and social impact	4	2,1%	3	3,6%

The most notable disparities in mention frequency based on study programs appear in mobility and interuniversity cooperation, competitions and special interest clubs, as well as student organizations and projects, with Management students referring to those ECAs more often. Another distinct mention frequency disparity is IT students' increased reference to ECAs focused on social life and connections.

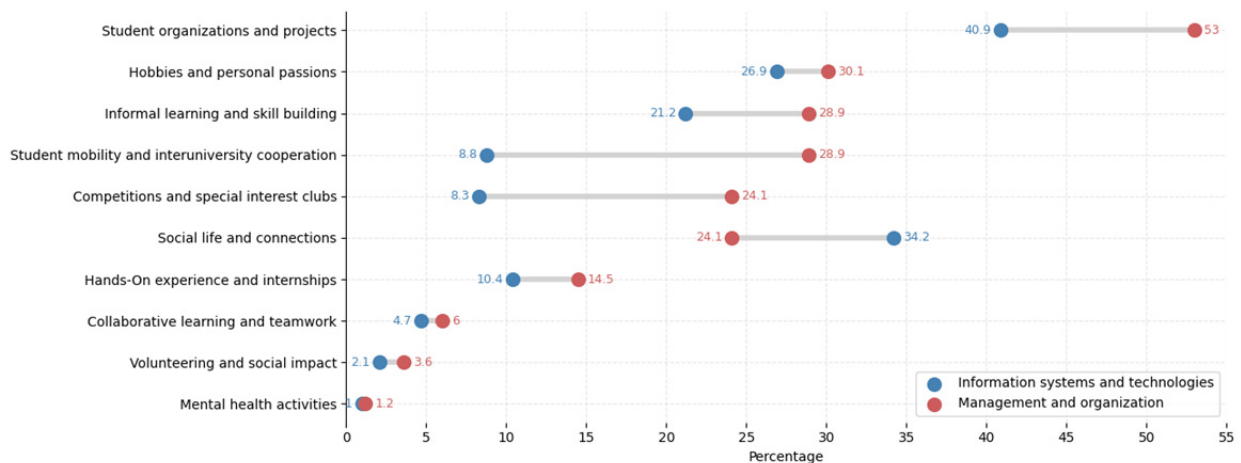


Figure 2: ECA type mention frequency differences by study program

DISCUSSION

Based on the results, both overall and across gender and study programs, it has been shown that students value ECAs and view them as significant contributors to academic satisfaction and personal development. The most highly regarded ECAs include participation in student organizations and projects, opportunities for social life and building connections, along with hobbies and personal passions. Universities should focus on creating more opportunities targeting these ECA types to address the identified student needs.

In contrast, mental health and volunteering were rarely mentioned, suggesting limited awareness of their role in academic satisfaction. With students showing low awareness of the significance of mental health-related ECAs, HEIs must emphasize their role as essential foundation for individual growth and sustainable success (Chu et al., 2023). Implementing support programs focused on mental health activities, like useful workshops and support groups, is vital to raise student awareness and reduce stigma around this topic (Shim et al., 2022).

First-year undergraduate students have low awareness of the importance of volunteering and social impact ECAs. This could suggest that such topics receive little attention during secondary education, underscoring the universities' responsibility to raise awareness and actively encourage students' involvement in volunteering and social impact ECAs. It is necessary to provide students with opportunities to participate in projects of broader social relevance (Coelho & Menezes, 2021). Such experiences help students understand that their knowledge can contribute meaningfully, not only to their professional development, but also to broader societal progress (Coelho & Menezes, 2021).

CONCLUSION

Based on the previously discussed aspects, these findings provide valuable insights for HEIs to refine their initiatives according to students' needs. Firstly, it is crucial to invest in ECAs, as young people clearly recognize their value. Secondly, it is important to offer a diverse array of options to effectively respond to the broad spectrum of student interests and needs. HEIs should not concentrate exclusively on the most frequently mentioned ECAs. Equal attention must be given to ECAs that support the development of young individuals as future contributors to society. By adopting such strategy, HEIs ensure educational environment that responsibly supports the development of young people into both successful professionals and active members of society.

Keywords: *university students, extracurricular activities (ECAs), extracurricular engagement, academic satisfaction, student satisfaction*

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