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The role of academic sport in health promotion - the example of the Academic Sports Association in Poland

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Abstract

Academic sports are physical activities in which members of the academic community participate: students, doctoral students, research, teaching or administrative staff of higher education institutions. The academic community is extremely diverse, but as a rule, it is rarely associated directly with physical activity, but rather with the advancement of knowledge and the development of science. All the more reason why the promotion of physical activity in this community is extremely important for maintaining the psychophysical well-being of members of this group.

The AZS is the most numerous academic organization in Poland, with nearly 33,000 members. The Association's Academic Championships of Poland and community leagues are the primary system of rivalry between universities in the country. Among the objectives of AZS are those relating directly or indirectly to the promotion of health, including: the dissemination of physical culture and tourism, raising physical fitness and improving health among the academic community, working for the rehabilitation of the disabled or counteracting social pathologies, particularly addictions that threaten the environment of young students.

These goals are pursued through various types of programs and projects, including sports activation of the academic community within the framework of sports sections, especially within the framework of general sports, organized sports competitions both at the university, regional, national or international level. Academic sports are also often the only available opportunity for physical activity during college, where physical education classes

usually last no more than a year in the five-year cycle of study.

Key words: Academic Sports Association, Poland, Sport, Health Promotion, Public Health

Introduction

Academic sports is a relatively specific type of human physical activity. It is participated in by members of the academic community, and its peculiarity lies in the fact that, on the one hand, it can be recreational, health and even hobbyist in nature, and on the other hand, it is often associated with participation in sports competitions, and therefore with competition, setting further goals or exceeding one's own capabilities.

The history of world university sports dates back to the early 20th century, but the real boom came after the two world wars, when a new geopolitical order was taking shape. In 1948, the International University Sports Federation - or Fédération Internationale du Sport Universitaire in French (FISU) - was established as the academic equivalent of the International Olympic Committee (FISU 2022).

The Academic Sports Association (AZS) is one of the most numerous organizations present at universities in Poland. Currently (2022) it has nearly 33,000 members. The Association's Academic Championships of Poland and the Academic Championships of individual regions are the basic system of rivalry between universities. AZS clubs at universities train both professional athletes (including Olympic athletes) as well as simply students who practice their sports amateurishly as part of the activities organized by their universities (Zawadzki 2008, Hanusz, Korpak 2014).

The most important factor shaping people's health behavior is the lifestyle they lead. Physical activity plays a special role in creating a health-promoting lifestyle. According to the WHO, physical activity is any movement driven by skeletal muscles that requires the use of energy (WHO 2022). Physical activity is considered to be any movement, whether performed for recreation, transportation or work. Both vigorous and moderate physical activity are beneficial to health. Walking, bicycling, wheeling, sports, active recreation and play are common activities that anyone can do for fun and at any level. Regular exercise has been shown to help control and prevent non-communicable diseases such as diabetes, heart disease, stroke and many malignancies. In addition, they lower blood pressure, support a healthy body weight, and improve mental health, mood and quality of life (Hills, Dengel, Lubans 2015). Academic Sports Associations are an increasingly popular operationalization of intensified sports for young adults, aiming to offer an optimal environment for holistic development through a combination of sports and education.

Materials and methods

In particular, this paper uses an analysis of documents, including legal acts on sports competition in Poland and internal order documents of the Academic Sports Association, an analysis of the reporting documents of the Academic Sports Association for 2004-2022, data provided by statistical offices and obtained through netography. Case descriptions were also used - sports projects and events organized by the Academic Sports Association.

Results

The main legal act concerning sports activities in Poland is the 2010 Sports Act. Noteworthy, this document does not mention any health promotion issues at all. The main and practically the only purpose of practicing sports, according to the act, is to achieve a sports result. The health issues in this legislation only concern organizing health care for athletes and preventive and preventive measures related to athletes' health.

Health promotion, expressed primarily in the promotion of physical activity, is among the main goals of the Academic Sports Association. This goal is expressed directly in the organization's statutes as: "working for the promotion of health and health education adapted to the needs of different social groups" (AZS 2020 STATUTES). Indirectly, it can also be found in other goals related to health and physical activity, such as: "dissemination of sports, physical culture and tourism, increasing physical fitness and improving the health of the academic community," "activity for the protection of the environment," "activity for physical culture and sports and rehabilitation of people with disabilities," "counteracting social pathologies, in particular drug abuse, alcoholism and nicotine addiction threatening the environment of student youth," or "conducting scientific research on issues related to sports, rehabilitation, wellness, health care and ecology" (AZS 2020 STATUTES).

References to health promotion can also be found in documents relating to sports events organized by the Academic Sports Association. Among the objectives of organizing the Academic Championships of Poland, we can find such goals as "Popularization of physical culture and sports competition in the academic environment", as well as "Counteracting social pathologies, especially drug addiction, alcoholism and nicotine addiction, threatening the environment of young students". More goals related to health promotion appear in the general regulations of the AZS Polish Integration Championships - a series similar to the Polish Academic Championships, but designed for people with disabilities. The cited document lists 11 objectives for the implementation of these events, which, broken down into objectives directly and indirectly related to health promotion and those unrelated to health promotion, are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Objectives of the AZS Integrative Championships of Poland, listing objectives directly and indirectly related to health promotion

Objectives directly related to health promotion	Objectives indirectly related to health promotion	Objectives unrelated to health promotion
1. activation of people with disabilities through sports and activities in the University Sports Association. 4. popularization of physical culture and sports competition among people with disabilities 6 Integration of people with disabilities through sports. 8. counteracting social pathologies, especially drug addiction, alcoholism and nicotinism, which threaten the learning environment for young people. 10. dissemination and promotion of sports for people with disabilities.	2. review of sports, educational and organizational work of AZS Clubs. 5. knowledge and implementation of Paralympic sports. 9. working for volunteer organizations. 11. popularization of active recreation among people with disabilities.	3. sports level test to determine the Integral AZS Polish Champion in individual sports. 7. promotion of the logo, name and colors of the university and the University Sports Association.

Source: own compilation based on Regulations of AZS Integration Polish Championship (2021) (pol. Regulations of AZS Integration Polish Championship) http://imp.azs.pl/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/IMP20_regulamin-end.pdf

As can be observed, the goals of these competitions are more focused on promoting health, including the mental and social well-being of people with disabilities, healthy

lifestyles and counteracting addictions, and less focused on sports competition itself and achieving outstanding sports results.

Over the past 20 years, the number of members of the Academic Sports Association has ranged from 27,000 to 55,000. It reached its highest value in the 2007/2008 academic year and was 55,564 members (Table 1). Since then, a systematic decline in the Association's membership can be observed (Figure 1). Contrary to the prevailing opinion within the Association, this does not mean a decline in the organization's popularity, but is related to the prevailing demographic decline in Poland and the decline in the number of students overall. Admittedly, among the members of the Academic Sports Association there are not only students, but also other people professionally connected with universities, but it is students who constitute the vast majority, which can be estimated at more than 95% of AZS members. Thus, for simplicity of analysis, it was assumed that the organization's members are students. As can be seen in Figure 2, over the past 15 years the percentage of AZS members among students has remained at 2.5-3%. The exception to this is the 2020/2021 academic year, but this is due to the lower interest in classes and sports competitions during the COVID-19 pandemic, when many competitions were canceled and university classes (including those in physical education) were largely held online. One could even venture that there was a gentle upward trend in this regard until the beginning of the pandemic.

Table 2. Percentage of AZS members among total students in Poland from 2003 to 2020.

Academic year	Number of students in Poland	Number of AZS members	Percentage of AZS members among total students
2003/2004	1.858.680	34.512	1,86%
2004/2005	1.926.122	43.019	2,23%
2005/2006	1.953.832	48.198	2,47%
2006/2007	1.941.445	51.840	2,67%
2007/2008	1.937.404	55.564	2,87%
2008/2009	1.927.762	48.815	2,53%
2009/2010	1.900.014	50.057	2,63%
2010/2011	1.841.251	46.858	2,54%
2011/2012	1.764.060	43.219	2,45%
2012/2013	1.676.927	42.204	2,52%
2013/2014	1.549.877	42.014	2,71%
2014/2015	1.469.386	41.042	2,79%
2015/2016	1.405.133	41.130	2,93%
2016/2017	1.348.822	39.190	2,91%
2017/2018	1.291.870	38.058	2,95%
2018/2019	1.230.254	37.783	3,07%
2019/2020	1.203.998	31.693	2,63%
2020/2021	1.215.307	27.287	2,25%
2021/2022	1.218.166	32.983	2,71%

Source: own compilation based on reports on the activities of the Academic Sports Association in 2003-2022.

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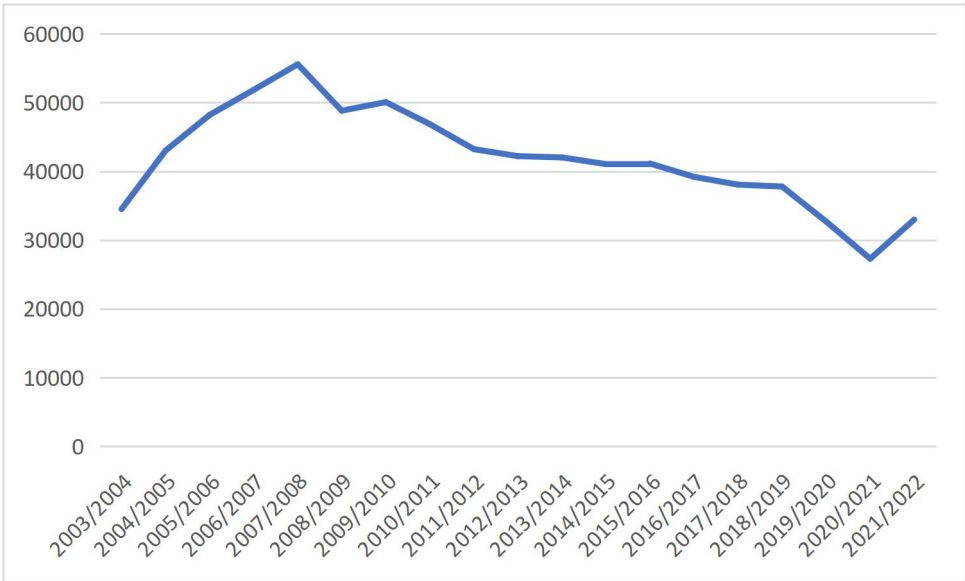


Figure 1: Number of members of the Academic Sports Association from 2003 to 2022
 Source: own compilation based on reports on the activities of the Academic Sports Association in 2003-2022.

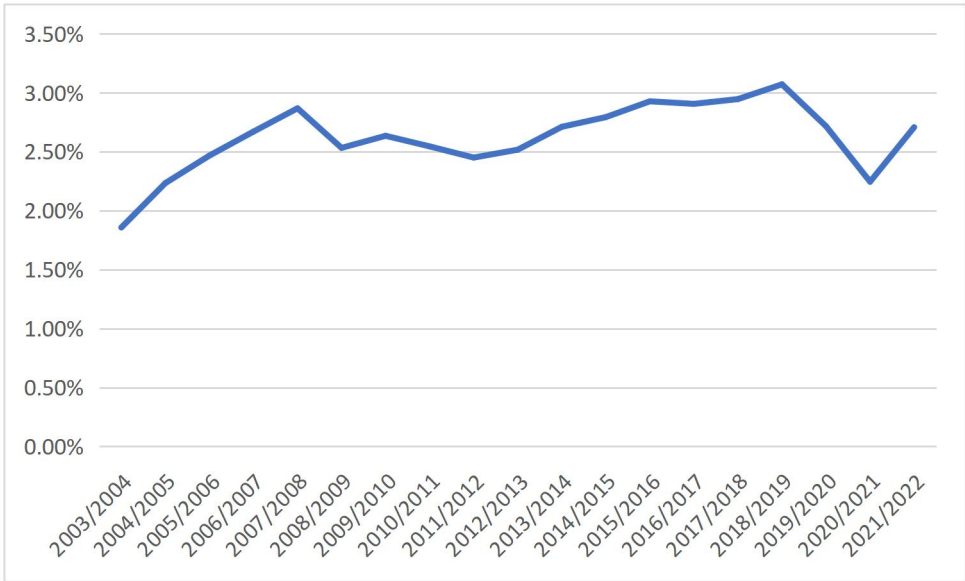


Figure 2: Percentage of AZS members among Polish university students from 2003 to 2022
 Source: own compilation based on reports on the activities of the Academic Sports Association in 2003-2022.

A considerable problem with the activities of the Academic Sports Association is its reliance on funding derived largely from targeted grants from the ministries of sports, education, health or other central units. Thus, the organization's expenditures vary greatly from year to year and depend in particular on the political situation, the efficiency of the organization's staff in obtaining funds in the competitive formula, and less on the effectiveness of statutory activities and results. A detailed summary of the expenses of the AZS General Board from 2003 to 2021 is presented in Table 3. It is worth noting that the largest group of costs are those classified as general sports. This group includes the development of sports disciplines in clubs and universities, the organization of national and regional sports competitions for students, the training of sports organizers, the implementation of sports tasks for people with disabilities, the training of young people gifted in sports, events popularizing sports and physical activity. Expenditures on professional sports, account for less than 20% of all expenditures, and in recent years, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the reduction of international sports competitions, accounted for less than 5% of expenditures.

Table 3. Summary of the main groups of expenses of the General Board of the Academic Sports Association from 2003 to 2021 (in PLN).

Year	AZS Expenses Total	High-performance sports	General sports (including youth sports)	Other expenses
2003	8.038.449,00	774.000,00	5.062.638,00	2.201.811,00
2004	7.255.713,00	800.000,00	4.443.780,00	2.011.933,00
2005	11.127.565,96	1.249.100,00	8.680.800,00	1.197.665,96
2006	20.004.421,00	1.352.000,00	17.489.615,00	1.162.806,00
2007	21.943.938,77	2.350.000,00	18.470.652,65	1.123.286,12
2008	22.110.137,02	1.550.000,00	19.048.952,00	1.511.185,02
2009	23.389.940,97	1.818.500,00	19.621.829,00	1.949.611,97
2010	13.003.692,78	1.818.500,00	9.706.719,62	1.478.473,16
2011	12.885.689,16	1.838.500,00	8.547.418,00	2.499.771,16
2012	13.212.296,35	2.117.675,43	9.775.897,45	1.318.723,47
2013	14.224.294,28	2.410.000,00	10.496.591,89	1.317.702,39
2014	12.761.089,08	1.363.800,00	9.858.661,30	1.538.627,78
2015	14.436.272,46	2.273.000,00	10.664.057,46	1.499.215,00
2016	13.854.930,59	1.818.200,00	10.534.286,34	1.502.444,25
2017	20.254.034,45	2.503.000,00	16.246.683,63	1.504.350,82
2018	21.255.629,82	2.273.000,00	17.465.430,62	1.517.199,20
2019	21.659.970,20	2.168.696,15	17.882.884,60	1.608.389,45
2020	20.318.369,72	307.406,45	18.014.022,07	1.996.941,20
2021	23.659.768,87	391.353,98	20.761.219,01	2.507.195,88

Source: own compilation based on reports on the activities of the Academic Sports Association in 2003-2022.

However, these are not all sports expenses incurred by units of the Academic Sports Association. Due to the specific structure of the AZS as an association, expenses incurred by regional and local units of the AZS, which have legal personality and are therefore quite separate entities from the point of view of Polish tax law, are not included. In addition, some of the AZS clubs at universities function as student organizations and, as such, receive funds to operate and carry out their statutory tasks. However, they are classified as costs of implementing the own tasks of individual universities. Thus, the data presented should be treated as only those relating largely to organizing sports events and promoting academic sports, training activities. To a small extent, they only show the scale of AZS activities within the framework of sports sections, training, promoting physical activity at universities.

Summary

The most important form of sports activation of the academic community is the organization of various sports competitions, which, on the one hand, already enjoy a considerable reputation, and on the other, are often available to a large group of students without the need to represent an outstanding sports level. Most noteworthy are the nationwide cycles of the Academic Championships of Poland and the AZS Polish Integration Championships, as well as the academic championships of individual regions and various one-off, integrative, promotional competitions.

The Academic Championships of Poland is a series of competitions in various sports disciplines, which is a continuation of the Polish Championships of Higher Education and the Polish Championships of University Types, whose history dates back to 1961. The games have been organized since their inception by the Academic Sports Association. Financial support for their conduct and coordination is received by the AZS from the Ministry responsible for sports (in 2022 the Ministry of Sports and Tourism). The Academic Championships of Poland have a one-year formula and include 48 disciplines (academic year 2020/2021, no changes are planned for the following year), in which a team classification is conducted (AMP 2022).

In each discipline, a team classification of universities is conducted (in some of them jointly with individual classifications), and together an overall classification is created to determine the best university in Poland.

The cycle makes it possible to identify the best universities nationwide, as well as in individual types. On the basis of general classifications, titles and medals are awarded to the leading schools from among technical universities, universities, socio-natural science universities, physical education universities, as well as medical, vocational and non-public universities. (azs.katowice.pl 2022). The formula also allows students from universities not directly focused on competitive sports to win medals. Thanks to this, universities also compete with other similar units - by profile of graduate, size, ownership structure.

Among members of the academic community who participate in sports, we also find people with disabilities. For them, participation in sports activities and competitions is quite a challenge. It is also an opportunity for physical and mental development, as well as a form of health promotion among such people, especially due to the inclusive nature of the competitions organized at the academic level. In 2020, the series consisted of competitions in 12 disciplines, both those practiced by fully able-bodied people, such as swimming, badminton, chess, and those created for people with special needs, such as goalball and boccia. Here, the scale of activity is not as great as in the case of the Polish Academic Championships, but there has been a significant increase in interest in these events, and even during the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of people participating was increasing (from about 200 people per year in 2016 to about 500 people in 2020) (Sucheckki 2021).

Academic championships of individual regions of Poland, such as the Academic Championships of Silesia to a large extent the regional equivalent of the cycle of the Academic Championships of Poland. However, there are disciplines in these cycles that are not found in the national cycle (such as dart or windsurfing), on the other hand, there are disciplines in the national cycle that are not played at the regional level (such as fencing, karate) (azs.katowice.pl 2022). As a rule, in this cycle, athletes present a lower level than at national competitions, hence participation in them and even winning medals is more accessible to students who are not professional athletes. These competitions have a decidedly more amateur character, thus contributing significantly to the promotion of sports activities among students.

Applications

(1) The fundamental purpose of the functioning of the Academic Sports Association is to work for the promotion of health and health education adapted to the needs of different social groups.

2 In recent years, there has been a systematic decline in the number of members of the Academic Sports Association, which is related to the prevailing demographic decline in Poland and the decline in the number of students overall.

3 The expenses of the Academic Sports Association vary greatly from year to year and depend, in particular, on the political situation and the efficiency of the organization's staff in raising funds through the competitive formula.

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