



PROJECT-BASED LEARNING AS AN EDUCATIONAL APPROACH IN THE NATIONAL SPORTS ACADEMY ‘VASSIL LEVSKI’, SOFIA

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ABSTRACT

Operating in free-market conditions urges sport organisations in Bulgaria to embrace a new way of thinking in an attempt to handle recent challenges. Today’s sport managers hence need new knowledge, skills and competences. This has instigated the adoption of new approaches and methods in the educational process of students aimed to advance their professional and personal career development.

The study aims to explore the attitudes and motivations of students from NSA regarding the prospective benefits and impacts resulting from their involvement in projects. Methods. The study used a marketing-focused survey as a primary method of investigation. As additional methods of data collection and processing both a theoretical analysis of extant literature and descriptive statistical analysis were completed.

The results reveal a set of positive impacts of the project-based educational approach on learning process. More specifically, these concern the development of students’ personal and professional capabilities. In practical terms, the study outlines some opportunities for changes in the curriculum aimed at embracing an ‘out-of-box’ approach to the preparation of graduates.

Keywords: sport, students, pedagogy.

INTRODUCTION

Providing essential knowledge and skills through traditional forms of instruction (lectures, seminars, practical training) presents significant challenges, particularly due to standardized curricula and the lack of adequate practical settings, which hinders students’ self-awareness and career orientation. In this context, project-based learning emerges as an effective complementary method that fosters student autonomy and engagement, with the teacher acting as a mentor and guiding students through the resolution of real-life or theoretical problems (1).

This approach promotes "learning by doing," in line with the constructivist model, helping students develop teamwork, communication, critical thinking, and creativity. Despite its advantages, the project-based approach is often

misunderstood or underutilized within the conservative structure of the Bulgarian educational system, where its implementation typically depends on individual initiative rather than systemic integration (2).

A study conducted among students at the National Sports Academy “Vasil Levski” seeks, through a marketing perspective, to assess attitudes toward the effectiveness of project-based educational activities, understood not as isolated efforts but as tools for implementing sustainable policies and achieving strategic educational goals. Project management is widely recognized as an essential managerial tool that enables organizations to adopt innovations and boost competitiveness, making project management skills critical for modern professionals (3, 4).

From a didactic standpoint, project-based learning is viewed as a method for activating learners’ cognitive and creative potential (5, 6). However, educational projects often require significant resources, coordination, and specific competencies, as they differ substantially from

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routine tasks due to their unique and time-bound nature (7-11).

METHODS

To conduct this study, a combination of research methods was employed, including:

- **Theoretical analysis of specialized academic sources** – To meet the research objectives, a review and analysis of academic sources was carried out.
- **Survey research** – Designed to collect data and assess the attitudes and interests of students from the National Sports Academy “Vasil Levski” regarding the benefits and impact of their participation in projects. A survey instrument was developed, comprising 19 indicators (12).
- **Mathematical and statistical methods** – Used to process the results in accordance with established statistical procedures, calculating the relative percentage distribution of responses using the statistical software "SPSS for Windows". A descriptive and multivariate analysis was performed based on this data.

RESULTS

The central focus of the study was to explore the **impact and benefits of student participation in projects**, and how this engagement influences their professional, personal, and educational development. Furthermore, the study aimed to identify:

- Which types of projects are considered most effective;
- Which project topics are most preferred by students at the National Sports Academy “Vasil Levski”;
- Which projects are perceived as most useful, and how they impact students’ development in professional, educational, and personal dimensions.

To achieve these objectives, a **survey was conducted in 2024** involving 152 students from the National Sports Academy “Vasil Levski.” A survey form was developed, featuring questions grouped into four key areas:

1. **Respondent profile;**
2. **Awareness of projects;**
3. **Interests, skills, and qualities related to projects;**
4. **Opportunities for project management and its future improvement.**

The first section of the questionnaire, which covers respondents' personal information, enabled the formation of a general profile of the surveyed students. This includes analysis based on gender, age, and field of study.

The gender ratio among respondents was **69.7% male to 30.3% female**, which closely reflects the actual gender distribution at the Academy. Therefore, it is assumed that this proportion does not distort the findings.

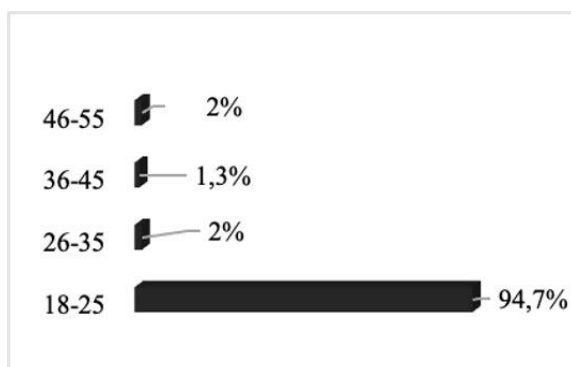


Figure 1. Age Distribution.

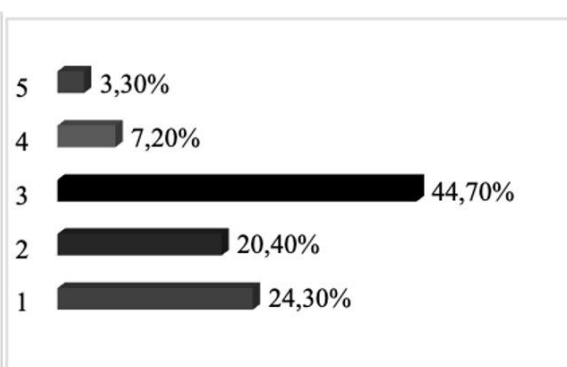


Figure 2. Level of Awareness.

Regarding the second variable examined — “**age**” — a clear dominance of the **18–24 age group** is evident, comprising **94.7% of all respondents (Figure 1)**. This result is expected given the student profile of the sample and corresponds with the target demographic of programmes such as **Erasmus+** and the **European Solidarity Corps**, which are aimed at individuals aged 18 to 29. This creates

a favorable foundation for the collection of empirical data.

Another analyzed indicator (**Figure 2**) explores the **level of awareness regarding project activities**. A five-point scale was used, with the majority of participants demonstrating a **moderate level of awareness**. Only a small proportion of respondents rated themselves as “fully informed,” which is likely due to

their **limited prior engagement in projects**. This highlights the need for **systematic efforts to encourage student participation in**

project-based initiatives, with the aim of increasing their **awareness, motivation, and active involvement** in this area.

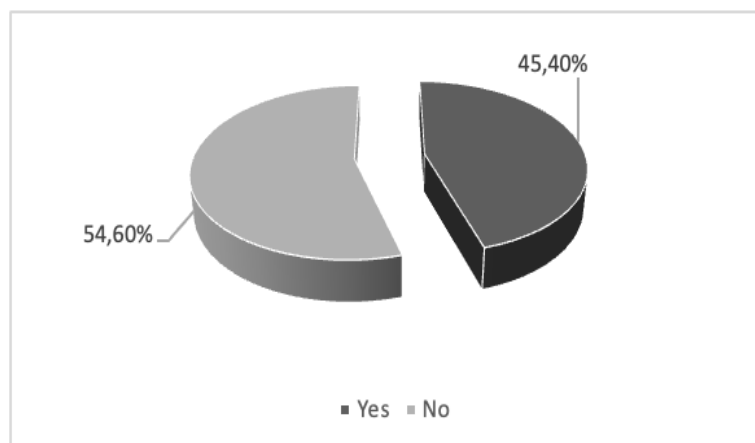


Figure 3. Project Participation.

The data presented in Figure 3 indicate that the ratio between students who have participated in projects (45.40%) and those who have not (54.60%) is relatively balanced. Nevertheless, the higher share of non-participants points to **insufficient effectiveness in the promotion and encouragement of student involvement in project activities**. Considering that project engagement is directly linked to positive outcomes in students' **personal, professional, and educational development**, the need for

more **proactive institutional support** in this area is evident.

The main sources of project-related information for students are **the university and academic staff (67.8%)**, followed by **online platforms (50.0%)** (Figure 6). Combining these two channels could significantly enhance student motivation and engagement, raising important questions about the **effectiveness of communication strategies** and the **use of digital tools in higher education**.

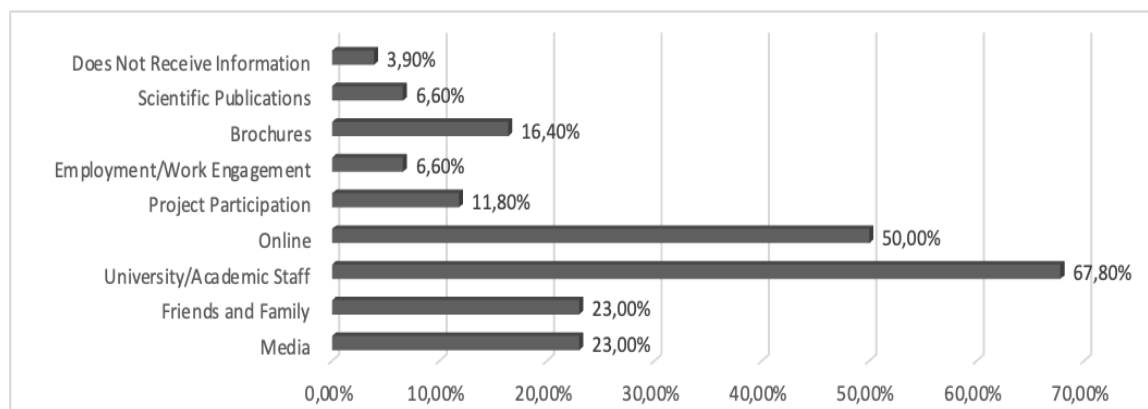


Figure 4. Sources of Information on Projects and Programmes.

Note: The results in the figure exceed 100% because respondents were allowed to select more than one answer.

57.2% of the respondents identified projects on the topic of "Sport and Active Lifestyle" as beneficial, indicating a high level of interest and strong potential for expanding participation and developing initiatives in this area (Figure 5). In contrast, topics such as **"Prevention," "Empowerment,"** and **"Active**

Citizenship" generated lower levels of interest, likely due to their **perceived abstractness**. This highlights the need for **further clarification and systematic integration** of these themes into the educational process, with the goal of increasing students' **awareness and engagement**.

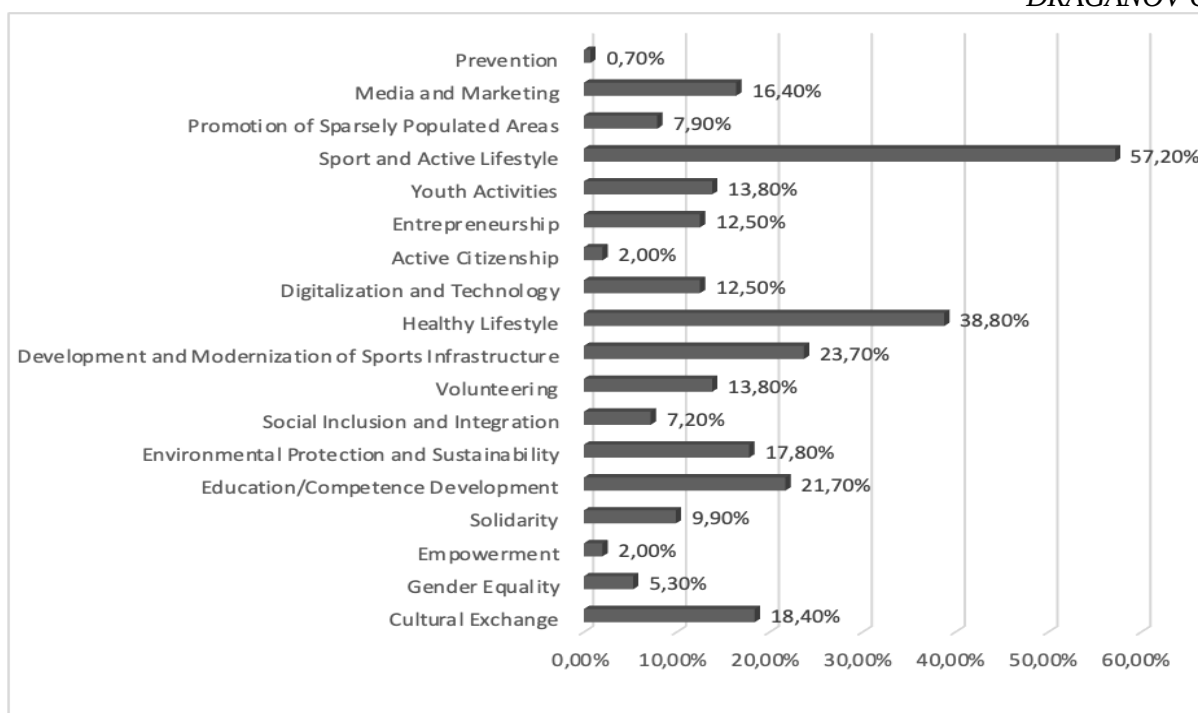


Figure 5. What Type of Projects Would Be Useful for You?

Note: The results in the figure exceed 100% because respondents were allowed to select more than one answer.

The results presented in Figure 6 highlight key skills that students associate with their future education and professional development. The most frequently cited competencies include: **knowledge of nutrition and diets (43.4%)**, **sports club management (41.4%)**, **event organization (41.4%)**,

and **intercultural communication (36.8%)**—aligning with the strong interest in projects related to "Sport and Active Lifestyle." These findings emphasize the **need for practice-oriented education** focused on developing these skills as part of the academic curriculum.

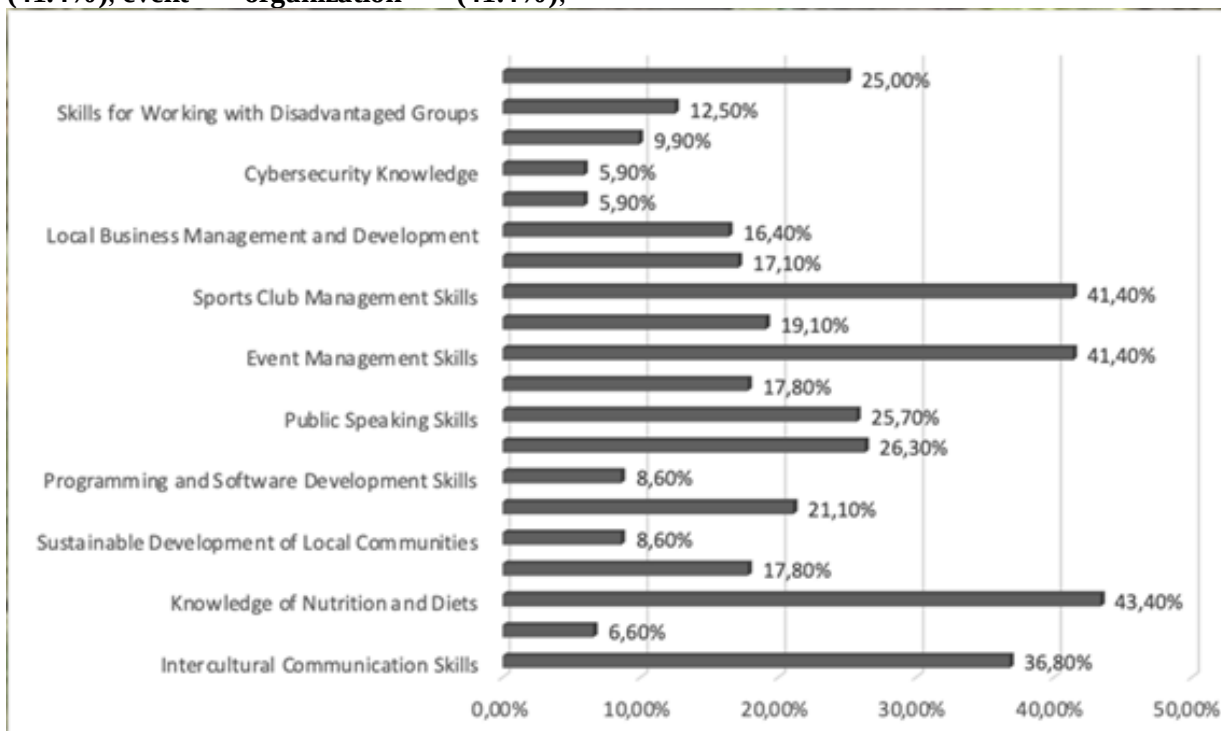


Figure 6. Which Skills and Qualities Acquired Through Projects Would You Apply in Your Work/Education?

Note: The results in the figure exceed 100% because respondents were allowed to select more than one answer.

The results shown in Figure 9 indicate that 76.3% of students agree or strongly agree with the statement that projects contribute to their personal development. This is primarily attributed to the impact of **non-formal education**, which fosters essential skills such as teamwork, leadership, and public communication—valuable in both personal and professional contexts.

Similarly, 75.6% of students agree or strongly agree that projects contribute to their professional development (Figure 8). These findings underscore the importance of **non-formal learning within project-based activities** as a key factor in building practical skills and enhancing the **competitiveness of young professionals** in the field of sport.

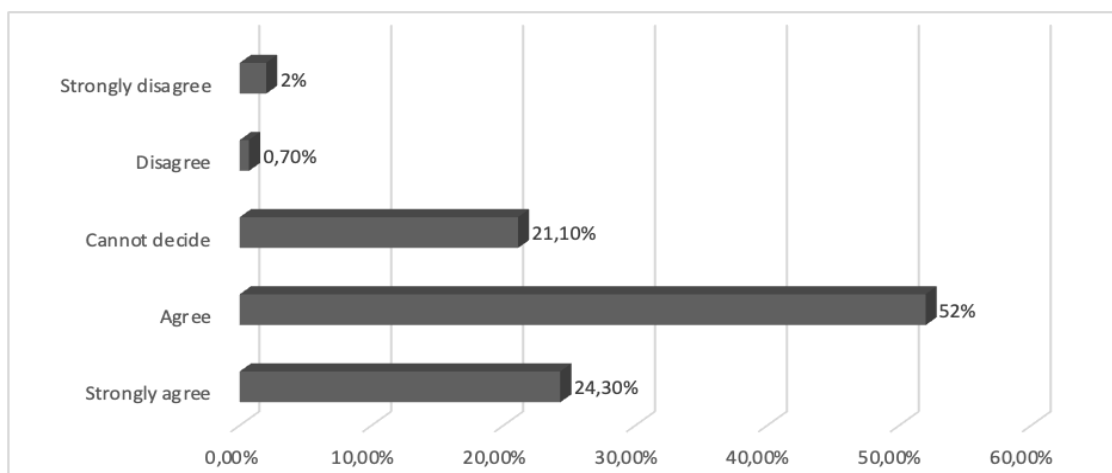


Figure 7. Level of agreement regarding the contribution of the projects to personal development.

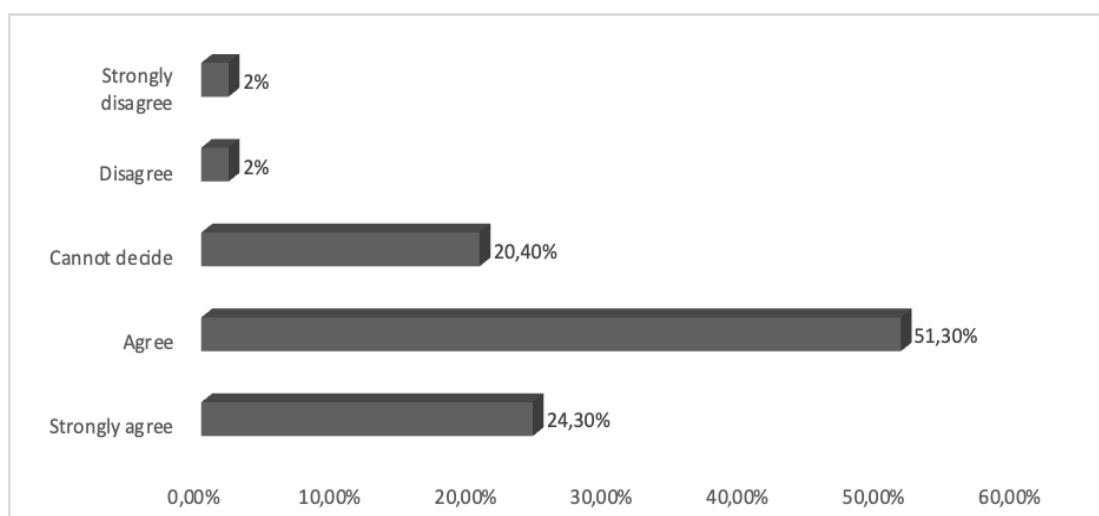


Figure 8. Level of agreement regarding the contribution of the projects to professional development.

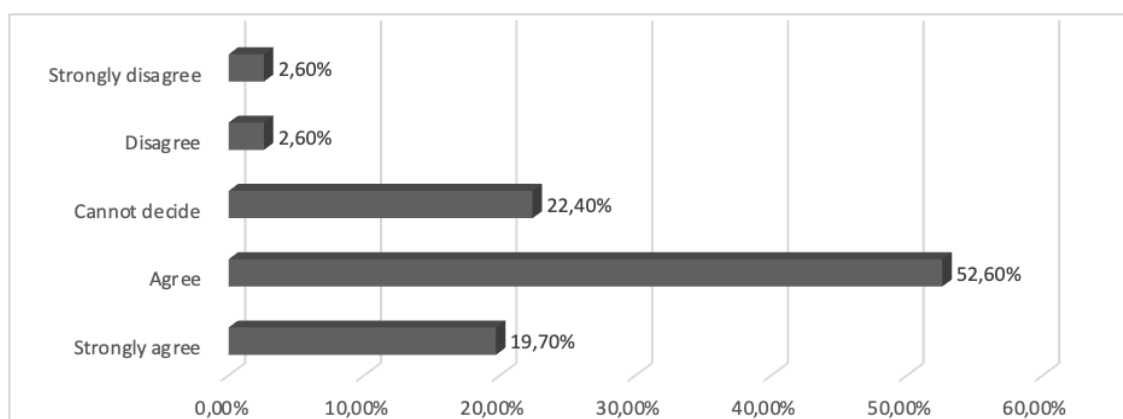


Figure 9. Level of agreement regarding the contribution of the projects to education.

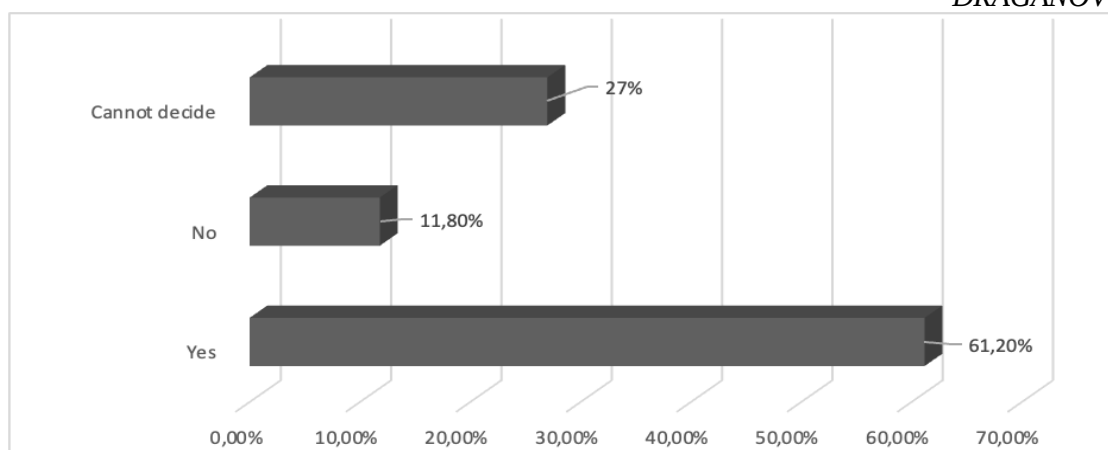


Figure 10. Do the projects help with career orientation?

72.3% of students agree or strongly agree that projects have a positive impact on their learning, while 22.4% are undecided (Figure 9). This confirms that **non-formal learning through project participation complements traditional education** by facilitating the practical application of acquired skills. Therefore, expanding student involvement in such projects is essential for enhancing the educational process.

Students also perceive projects as beneficial for their professional orientation (61.2%), while 27% remain undecided (Figure 10). This underscores the role of project-based

experiences in exposing students to different sports systems and career pathways, as well as the need for additional information and training on these topics within the academic curriculum.

Question 11 (Figure 11) aimed to determine whether the National Sports Academy “Vasil Levski” provides opportunities for project participation, with 62.5% of students responding affirmatively (“Yes” or “Rather yes”). This indicates the presence of a **favorable environment for project engagement** and highlights the potential for **expanding student participation** in such initiatives.

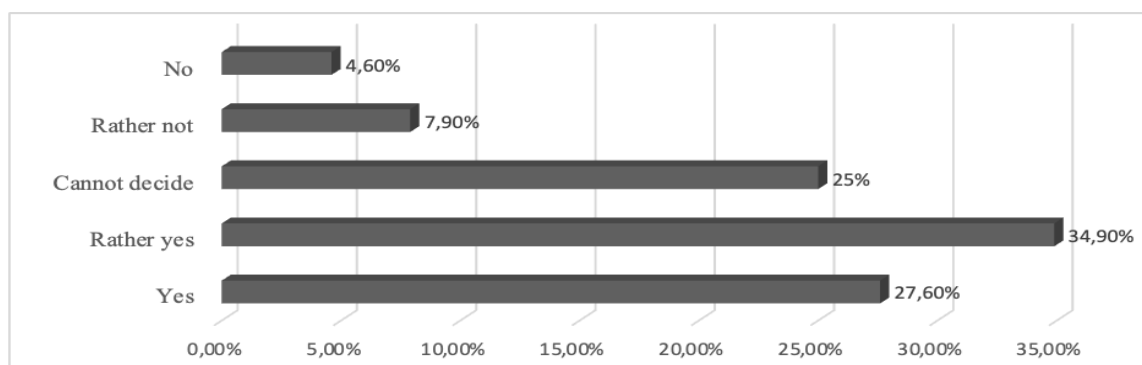


Figure 11. Does NSA "Vasil Levski" provide sufficient opportunities for participation in projects?

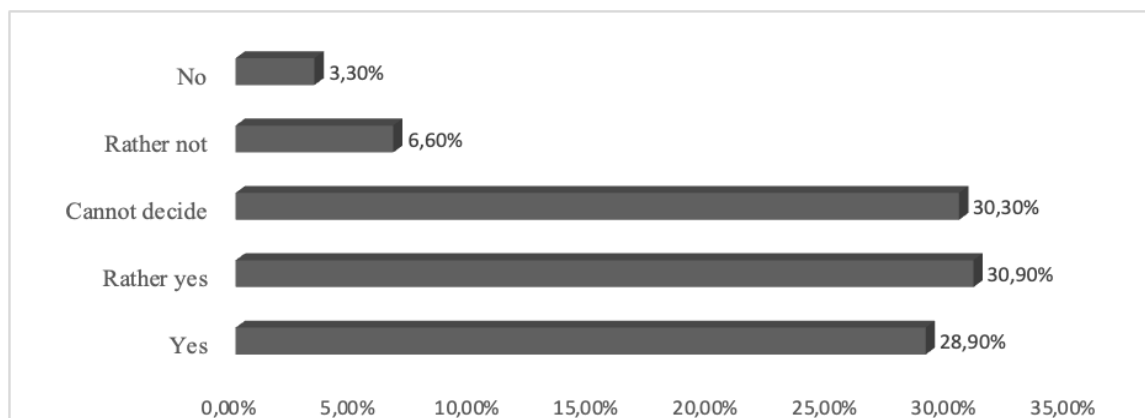


Figure 12. Does NSA "Vasil Levski" provide sufficient opportunities for training in sports project management?

Figure 12 shows that 30.9% of students believe that the National Sports Academy "Vasil Levski" offers opportunities for training in sports project management, with the positive trend aligning with the findings from Question 11. However, 30.3% of respondents are undecided, which suggests a lack of sufficient awareness or engagement with the topic. This highlights the need for more targeted and structured training to increase student involvement in the development of sports projects and to make more effective use of the available opportunities.

The study reveals that project-based activities have a positive impact on students in three main areas: personal, professional, and educational development. The greatest interest was observed in topics related to sport and active lifestyle. The high percentage of expressed willingness to participate (90.10%) compared to the actual participation rate (45.40%) underscores a significant untapped potential for expanding student engagement in project-related activities.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study confirm the significant impact of project-based learning on the development of students' personal, professional, and educational competencies. A clearly positive attitude toward project participation is evident, with a high percentage of respondents (90.1%) expressing willingness to engage in future initiatives—demonstrating the strong potential of such an approach in the university context. declared interest and the actual opportunities for participation, as fewer than half of the respondents have been involved in projects to date. This highlights the need to improve awareness, expand access to project-based activities, and systematically integrate them into the academic curriculum.

The prevailing interest in projects related to "Sport and Active Lifestyle" aligns with the profile of students at the National Sports Academy "Vasil Levski" and underscores the importance of tailoring project themes to students' needs and preferences. At the same time, topics such as "Prevention" and "Active Citizenship" remain less popular, indicating

the need for further communication and education in these areas.

The data show that projects contribute not only to skills development but also to personal growth and professional orientation. Non-formal learning, inherent in project-based activities, is perceived as an effective tool for building key competencies such as teamwork, leadership, and intercultural communication.

Despite the overall positive trend, some responses reveal gaps in awareness and training in project management, suggesting the need for a targeted update of educational content, methodologies, and communication channels between academic staff and students.

CONCLUSION

The results of the study confirm the significance of the programme- and project-based approach as an effective pedagogical strategy, demonstrating a clearly positive impact on personal development (76.3%), career orientation (75.6%), and educational engagement (72.3%).

Despite the high level of declared motivation to participate (90.1%), actual access to project-based activities remains limited, highlighting the need for an updated learning environment and methodological framework to ensure the sustainable integration of the project-based approach into the educational process.

LIMITATIONS

The study was conducted among students of the National Sports Academy "Vasil Levski," and its results are relevant to the target audience under investigation. By analogy, similar patterns and correlations could be explored in other educational institutions with a comparable academic profile.

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