WORK-STUDY CHALLENGES IN HIGHER EDUCATION: TOWARDS INCLUSIVE AND ADAPTIVE ACADEMIC PRACTICES

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ABSTRACT
Introduction. The growing number of students who work alongside their studies presents new challenges for higher education institutions. Aim: This study aims to examine the potential for supporting working students by identifying institutional measures and exploring opportunities for developing effective academic interventions tailored to their specific needs. Methodology: The current sample includes 65 National Sports Academy (NSA) students, who completed a survey we developed and previously administered to 440 students from 27 universities across Bulgaria. This article analyzes the results of a survey with 65 students from the National Academy of Sciences "V. Levski". This article's discussion compares the main results of the previous study to reveal whether there is a difference in the results obtained from the survey conducted with students from other Bulgarian universities.
Participants shared their views on the alignment between their job and field of study, the impact of employment on their academic performance, and their perception of existing institutional support.
Results: The results show that only 15.6% of students work in positions related to their field of study, while 10.6% report difficulties attending classes due to their work schedules. Nearly 22% miss a large portion of their academic classes, highlighting the need for more flexible academic policies. The majority of students (80.2%) can take exams during regular sessions. A large percentage of the research contingent (89.2%) expressed a need for a dedicated team to support working students.
Among the proposed academic interventions, the most effective according to students is periodic assessment throughout the semester (31%), followed by additional exam dates (23%). Students also emphasized the need for flexible schedules, empathy from teachers, and more practical training.
Conclusions: The findings show a clear need for institutional support, which should be expressed in easing semester exams, which, by providing the opportunity to take colloquia during the semester and introducing additional measures, adequately reflect the reality of today's students.

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INTRODUCTION

Student employment accompanies university education in the modern world. Previous research has focused on the relationship between academic performance and employment, which requires universities to adapt to changing lifestyles. Student preferences are focused on opportunities for periodic assessment (Popova-Dobreva & Marinova, 2025).
Research further highlights the complex effects of student employment: while it can enhance career readiness and provide valuable experience, it may also reduce schedule flexibility, negatively impact mental health, and create academic pressures (Summer et al., 2023; Višnjić, 2024; Carnevale & Smith, 2018).
In the study designed to support working students, Summer et al. (2023) highlight that students face time and financial constraints and suggest that universities develop support policies.
Višnjić (2024) examines the relationship between academic success and work during studies, finding a positive correlation at the master's level. The author suggests the possibility of additional value to education when work is related to the studied specialty.
Carnevale and Smith (2018) discuss the potential trade-offs associated with combining work and education. According to the researchers, work associated with a specialty should be seen as an additional benefit, not a substitute for formal education.
Aim and objectives of the study
This study examines the potential for supporting working students by identifying institutional mea-

sures and exploring opportunities for developing effective academic interventions tailored to their specific needs.

METHODOLOGY

Participants and Recruitment. The current sample consists of 65 students from the National Sports Academy (NSA). They were recruited using random sampling from university students. Participants were selected without specific preference, using an open invitation. The survey was offered to several groups of students from the Faculty of Sport, the Faculty of Pedagogy, and the Faculty of Public Health, Health Care, and Tourism.

Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria. Participants were eligible if they were students in NSA Vassil Levski.

Survey Administration. The survey was administered online via a Google Form. Participants completed the questionnaire independently.

Ethical Procedures. Prior to filling out the questionnaire, all individuals were provided with an explanation of the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights as participants. Students are informed that the survey is anonymous and that the responses will be used for research purposes.

Survey Instrument. The questionnaire consisted of 11 questions. Participants provided insights into how their employment relates to their academic specialization, how working affects their studies, and how they perceive the institutional support available to them.

RESULTS

A total of 65 students from the National Sports Academy (NSA) are a contingent for the study. The monitored parameters are related to the availability of employment in the field of the studied specialty, as well as the opportunity to attend employment and examination sessions. The availability of institutional support for working students was studied.

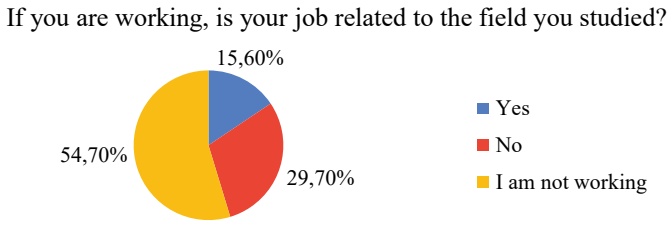

Figure 1. *Alignment Between Employment and Field of Study Among NSA Students (n = 65)*

This figure illustrates student responses to the question: *"If you are working, is your job related to your field of study?"* Most often (54.7%), students report that they are not currently working, with only 15.6% of those who are working indicating that there is a connection between their work and their studies. These results highlight the need for institutional partnerships to support career-related student employment.

The high percentage of working students is probably related to financial needs. In the past, two generations ago, most Bulgarian students were financially supported by their parents while they studied. This new social reality is related to the need for higher education institutions to adapt.

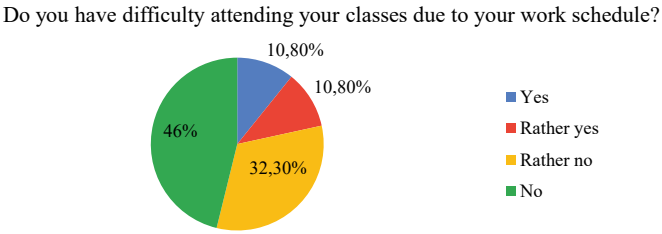

Figure 2. *Difficulties Attending Classes Due to Employment Among NSA Students (n = 65)*

This figure presents the distribution of student responses to the question: *"Do you have difficulties attending classes?"* A total of 21.6% of respondents answered "Yes" or "Rather yes", with 78.3% reporting little or no difficulty. 32.3% chose "Rather no" and 46% stated "No". Most students do not experience difficulty attending classes, but we consider it useful to have more flexible work policies or blended learning options.

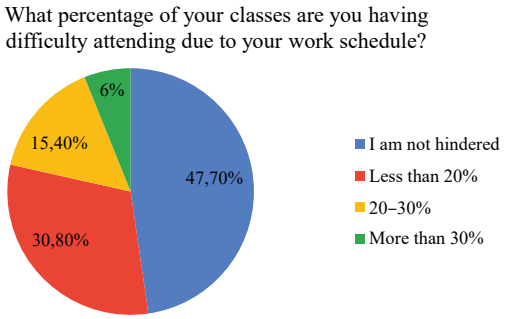

Figure 3. *Percentage of Missed Academic Activities Due to Employment Among NSA Students (n = 65)*

This figure illustrates student responses to the question: *"What percentage of your academic activities are you unable to attend due to work?"* Nearly half of the respondents (47.7%) reported that they had no difficulty attending classes. However, 30.8% reported missing less than 20% of their sessions, 15.4% missed more than 20% of their sessions, and only 6% were unable to use more than 30% of their academic activities.

Although the previous figure (Figure 2) shows that most students believe that they have no difficulty attending classes, it is a worrying fact that nearly a quarter of students have difficulty attending more than 20% of classes (Figure 3).

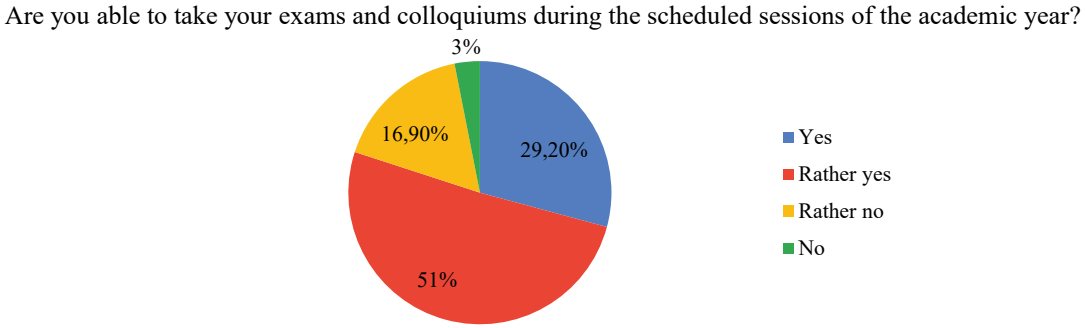

Figure 4. *Exam Success During Scheduled Sessions*

Over three-quarters of respondents (80.2%) believe they can participate in and/or pass their exams during the scheduled exam periods. This percentage shows that the academic structure is effective, even for students who combine work with their studies. The most vulnerable are the 3% of respondents who need additional academic support.

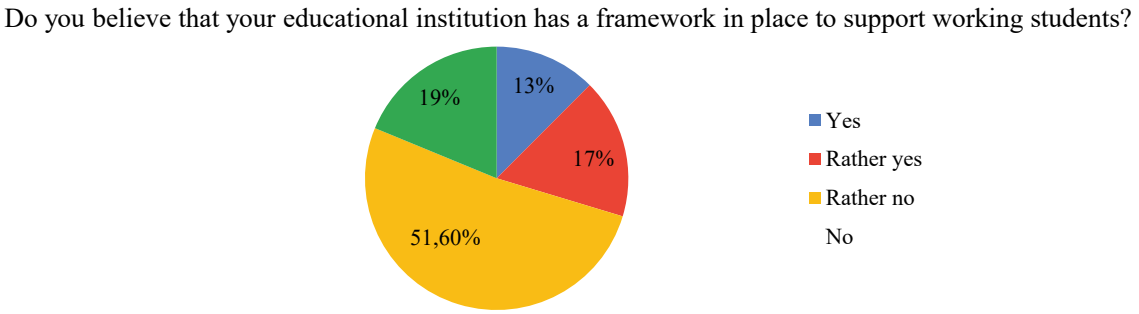

Figure 5. *Perceptions of Institutional Support Frameworks for Working Students*

The responses reveal a significant perceived gap in institutional support for working students. Only 13% of respondents said that such a support framework exists at their institution, with a further 17% saying " Rather yes ". A total of 70.6% of students are skeptical — 51.6% answer "Rather not," and 19% choose "No." This clearly shows the need for recognizable support, especially in institutions like the National Sports Academy, where students are often active athletes.

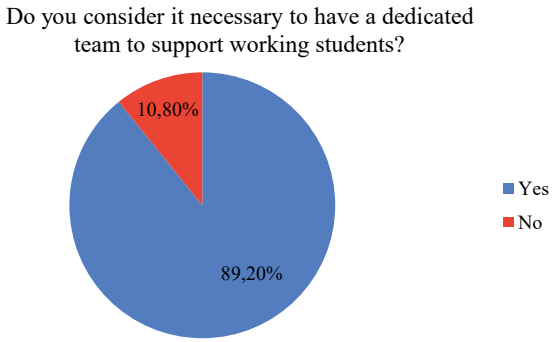

Figure 6. *Student Opinions on the Need for a Support Team for Working Students*

A significant majority of respondents – 89.2% – believe that a dedicated support team is needed for working students. Only 10.8% disagree. The data highlights the importance of additional support measures to improve academic success and student retention.

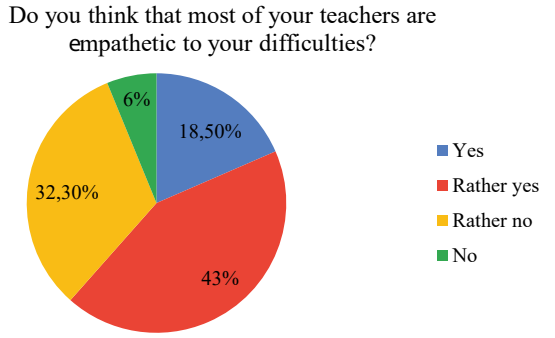

Figure 7. *Empathy of teachers towards working students*

Most students (61.5%) believe that faculty demonstrate empathy towards these issues, suggesting a generally strong level of communication between students and faculty at the academy. We consider it important to examine faculty attitudes towards potential risks to the overall quality of education. The results of Figures 5, 6, and 7 demonstrate a sense of lack of support and understanding from higher education institutions, and at the same time, a desire for current developments. This trend also applies to the opinions of students from other Bulgarian universities surveyed in a previous study by Popova-Dobreva and Marinova (2025).

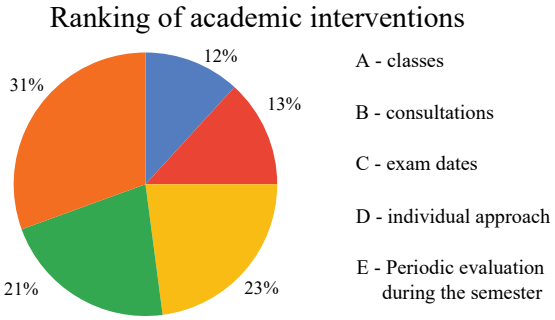

Figure 8. *Ranking of academic intervention*

Students cited periodic assessments throughout the semester (31%), followed by the possibility of additional exam dates (23%). Their responses highlighted the importance of flexible schedules, greater empathy from faculty, and increased opportunities for hands-on learning.

DISCUSSION

Our previous study included 440 students from 27 Bulgarian universities (Popova-Dobreva & Mari-

nova, 2025). The same author's survey was used in the current study, which included students from the National Sports Academy. The research reveals the presence of a significant number of working students. The number of students who do not work during their studies is 37.7% for those in the country and 54.7% for the studied contingent from the National Sports Academy. The higher percentage of unemployed students from the National Sports Academy may be related to their participation in sports activities. This is, of course, a hypothesis that could be studied.

However, the research findings indicate that, in the current economic situation in the country, a large proportion of students likely need to support themselves financially.

On the one hand, the main priority of universities is to provide quality education, and on the other hand, they could provide opportunities for working students, such as additional classes, consultations, and exam dates.

In terms of possible support measures, the most preferred by students are the opportunities to take colloquia during the semester. This implies a gradual, qualitative mastery of the exam material. In this area, there are good contemporary practices, in which the final grade is formed in up to 75% of the partial exams during the semester and, respectively, 25% of the grade obtained during the semester exams. We can emphasize that such good practices are available in the National Sports Academy, Bulgaria.

In light of the fact that a large percentage of students are working, we are discussing the possibility of incentivizing employers who hire interns in relevant specialties to support quality education.

Various aspects of problems related to combining study and work have been examined by a series of researchers (Bagdonas et al., 2021; Curtis, 2005; Dundes & Marx, 2019; Lizy et al., 2023; Matić et al., 2016; Popova-Dobreva & Marinova, 2025; Ostoj, 2020; Wellington & Obanawu, 2024; Wojciechowska, 2020; Šmitiņa, 2018; Sikyr et al.,2020).

CONCLUSION

The research conducted reveals the need for stronger institutional support for working students and a rethinking of existing academic policies, without this being at the heart of the main priority, namely, the quality of education. According to students, periodic assessments throughout the semester, as well as additional exam dates, more flexible scheduling, and empathetic teaching approaches are most needed. These results highlight that adapting the academic environment is essential to adequately meet the needs of modern students.

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