

Research Proposal

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Contents

1. Introduction and Topic of Focus
2. Review Question and Objectives
3. Rationale
4. Methods
5. Ethical Considerations
6. References

1. Introduction and Topic of Focus

This research proposal focuses on **the effect of physical activity on the mental health of university students** in the United Kingdom. The planned secondary research will adopt a scoping review methodology to map and synthesise existing peer-reviewed evidence. Review Question: What evidence exists regarding the impact of physical activity on the mental health and wellbeing of university students? Objectives: (1) identify the types of physical activity investigated, (2) explore reported mental health outcomes such as anxiety, stress, depression and wellbeing, and (3) identify gaps in the current evidence base.

2. Rationale

Mental health problems among university students have become an important public health concern. Recent reviews highlight increasing levels of stress, anxiety and depression within student populations. Evidence suggests that physical activity may improve mental health through biological, psychological and social mechanisms. A systematic review of higher education students found that physical activity interventions can improve mental health and quality of life, while more recent reviews report reductions in anxiety, depression and stress among university students. Understanding this evidence is relevant for health, social care and public health professionals because physical activity may represent a cost-effective and accessible strategy to support student wellbeing and reduce demand on support services.

3. Methods

A scoping review will be conducted following the PRISMA-ScR framework. Electronic databases including PubMed, CINAHL, MEDLINE and Google Scholar will be searched. Search terms will include physical activity, exercise, mental health, wellbeing and university students. Inclusion criteria will consist of peer-reviewed primary and secondary studies published in English and focused on university or higher education students. Studies unrelated to mental health outcomes will be excluded. Data extraction will record author, year, study design, participant characteristics, intervention type and key findings. The results will be analysed using thematic synthesis and descriptive mapping to identify common themes and research gaps.

4. Ethical Considerations

As a secondary study using publicly available published literature, no direct contact with participants will occur and formal ethical approval is not expected to be required. Nevertheless, academic integrity will be maintained through accurate reporting, proper

referencing and avoidance of plagiarism. The review will present findings objectively and acknowledge limitations within the evidence base.

5. References

Donnelly, S., Penny, K. and Kynn, M. (2024) The effectiveness of physical activity interventions in improving higher education students' mental health: A systematic review. *Health Promotion International*, 39(2).

Mahon, A. et al. (2025) A scoping review of physical activity interventions to support the mental health of students aged 16 to 25. *Discover Public Health*, 22(1).

Martín-Rodríguez, A. and González-Prieto, N. (2026) Influence of physical activity on perceived stress and mental health in university students: a systematic review. *Frontiers in Sports and Active Living*, 7.