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The Issue of Attracting Students to the Practice of Sports

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Abstract

The present research has an ascertaining-interpretive character and refers to the bidirectional osmosis between sports (recreational and competitive) practised by students, on one hand, and the standard of living and quality of life (*liveability*), the resilience of the socio-economical and environmental system, on the other hand. The authors consider that recreational sports also play a social protection role (in case of crises), by being an alternative to the presumed disorganized or even harmful spending of spare time. Therefore, attracting students to practise the three types of sports (recreational, competitive or adaptive) may become a consequence of long- and middle- term investments in education and logistic facilities. The interview method has been applied. The interpretation of the respondents' choices shows that the methods of attracting students emotionally to the systematic practice of sports (recreational or competitive – in addition to the academic practice) seem to be a palliative solution.

Keywords: recreational sports practised by students; quality of life; resilience; environmental system

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Introduction

We find it useful to mention from the very beginning that we mainly refer to the recreational sports (also known as *leisure sports*) practised by students. We are also considering the university competitive sports (in addition to the academic performance), as well as the adaptive sports (where applicable). The solutions to the problem would comprise modern ways of attracting by educational and emotional means, forms of rewarding or constraint, investments, etc. As a novelty, the problem and its solutions are linked to the nowadays bio-socio-cultural situation, to the *standard of living* and *liveability* (quality of life) in Romania. We also bring in, related to the context, the resilience of the socio-human environmental system (being an indicator of robustness, of shock resistance), as a sine-qua-non condition for the feasibility of the conclusions. The research has an ascertaining and interpretive character. We are interested in the argumentation of the mutual influences, in other words, of the bidirectional osmosis between the sports practised by students (be it recreational or competitive), on one hand, and the standard of living and the quality of life (*liveability*), analyzed in association with the resilience of the current socio-economical and environmental system, on the other hand.

Taking into consideration the actual temptations in using one's spare time, among which very many are harmful, we join the opinion of those who believe that *the students should be scientifically informed about the consequences of their extracurricular options* (with their joint risks and benefits). We especially believe that there is need for scientific argumentation of the *benefits of systematic sports practising* - not only for the individual but also for the socio- economic and environmental system nowadays.

Literature review

The university regulations and the law of national education represent the legal framework of practising organized sports activities within the universities in Romania. The White Paper on Sport (2007) issued by the Commission of the European Communities, at which Romania also adhered, defines sport as “a growing social and economic phenomenon which makes an important contribution to the European Union's strategic objectives of solidarity and prosperity”. This official document also emphasises the fact (commonly agreed upon) that sport has – through its values and virtues – an important role in maintaining and improving health. It also contributes to the fight against violence and racism, it facilitates professional inclusion, social integration of the people with disabilities, it is an important aid for people coming from difficult socio-economic background, immigrants, etc. The White Paper on Sport also mentions the surprising economical effects, resulting from scientific studies (such as the economical

impact of added value of 3,7% at the GDP in Austria; Report of the Commission on Sport – EU 2007, page 16).

The modern special literature and the official documents of the European Commission on sport draw a distinction between high-performance (competitive) sports practised by some restrained elite of highly skilled people and recreational sports and adaptive sports, respectively. Moreover, Gagea *et al.* (2010) consider that the “three main ways and goals of sports may be: recreational sport, high-performance sport, which in the countries of the European Union (Romania included) is practised by only 3-5 % of the adult active population, as well as adaptive sport – meant for persons with disabilities – which is being practised also in a low percentage”. Referring to the leisure sport or recreational sport, the same authors summarise this sintagm, in terms of “theoretical operators or as a common vocabulary concept, as representing activities carried out systematically, with pleasure and the awareness of the expected benefits. These relate to the regeneration of the work potential, in the sense of restoring the work capacity, the metabolic balance, the creative efficiency and skills; to the improvement, maintenance or enhancement of health, appearance and gestures (look); as well as to the attainment of physical and psychological comfort, of pleasure in its broadest sense, of hobby or lifestyle”. Recreational sports can enhance one’s subjective sensibility and therefore intensify the state of physical and psychological comfort (a factor of the so-called *subjective life quality*).

From Veenhoven’s research onwards (1990), the concept of quality of life has been completed with new significances, such as the micro- (individual) interpretation or macro-systemic interpretation, related to the economical and social situation of the given community or of the nation. Alber *et al.* (2003) argument the need for a change in perspective, moving the concept of quality of life from the center of the stage to its economical and social décor. The subjective indicators of the concept’s evaluation are endorsed by the same authors with some relative relational aspects, such as the relation to the state institutions, to economical resources, to the labour force employment, social assistance, etc. However, the most important roles are assigned to education and health. In like manner, we agree upon this point of view of associating the concept of quality of life – through health and education – with sport (especially with the recreational sport).

On the other hand, quality of life (*liveability*) is a multifunctional concept; as it may be both a means and a purpose, an output or an input from/in a cybernetic (social) system (with feedback) (Ungar, 2004). According to Masten *et al.* (1990), the resilience, meaning the resistance of the system to shock, sudden changes, such as natural catastrophes or social conflicts, depends on health and education (by an individual’s aspiration and expectation). We believe that the appropriate individual reaction to sudden changes in the status of the socio-human environmental system would be a proper and necessary indicator to be taken into account during times of crises. Consequently, in this case, recreational sport can

also play a major role of social protection. It may be an alternative to the hypothetical “disorganized or even harmful spending of spare time, for both the individual and the society – such as the vices are, for instance. Consuming alcoholic beverages and/or drugs or displaying a disruptive behaviour like hooliganism and violence can be justified from a physiological point of view by an excess of energy and may also be associated with lack in education or psychic dysfunctions” (Gagea, 2009). We are not aware of studies regarding a potential statistical correlation or a causal dependence between the frequency, degree and diversity of practising sports by the students from a certain community or nation and the features of the socio-human environmental macro-system, such as liveability, and standard of living or the resilience.

There are however enough factual statements to regard the facts by themselves as a thesis: countries with advanced economy are assigning consistent funds for the infrastructure and university sports facilities and, accordingly, a high economic level is correlated with the degree of civilization (by education and investments). This may indirectly suggest some feedback relations between the environmental socio-economic system and sports practised by students. In return, there are many surveys revealing, in a separate manner, the involvement of people of various ages and professions in practising sport on a systematical and rational basis and, then again, there are studies showing the degree of economical development, the liveability or the resilience and stability and of the environmental socio-human system.

International studies on attracting students to the practice of sports

At European level, the concerns in this respect are quite numerous. From the vast number of research papers published in electronic data bases (Pubmed, Scencedirect, Springer), our attention was drawn to those which pointed out the negative effects of lacking physical activity and the standard of living among the reference category of population. The transition of young people from school to university has many health implications (Ansari, Stock and Mikolajczyk, 2012). Thus, a study carried out in Spain (Mantilla-Toloza, Gómez-Conesa and Hidalgo-Montesinos, 2011) on a number of 548 students from the social-health sciences area (431 females and 117 males) revealed the fact that 80% of them were categorised as being regularly active. Significant differences were found between the Physical Activity Index and the smoking prevalence (33%) respectively drinking alcohol (58%), while there were no significant differences regarding gender. No significant associations were found between physical activity, smoking and drinking alcohol. The authors of the research recommend intervention programmes, which are to be implemented at national level and promote healthy habits in university students, specifically aiming at optimizing the students’ participation in sports

activities as well as preventing and reducing smoking habits and alcohol consumption.

A socio-demographical study performed in the University Center of Bologna, Italy, on a number of 1249 students showed significant differences between those who practise sports (60,4% are non-smokers and 33,5% are habitual smokers) and those who do not practise any physical activities (52,9% are non-smokers and 40,1% smoke habitually). As far as smoking students or non-smokers are concerned, the study shows that smokers who are active in sports smoke a lower average number of cigarettes a day than the inactive group and therefore they belong to the category of light smokers (Bergamaschi *et al.*, 2002).

According to Woods, Mutrie and Scott (2002), the level of physical activity among students is generally low. To illustrate the issue, it seems convincing for us to point out the fact that in Australia for example 4.2 million young people are practising physical activity or various sports, from which 27% do it more than five times a week and 69% make increasing physical effort at least once a week (Figure 1).

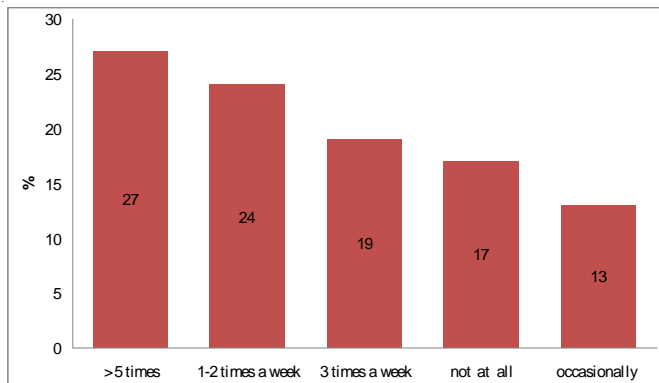


Figure 1. Youth practising physical activities and sports in Australia

Source: Annual Report (2003). *Weekly Frequency of Participation, Australian Sports Commission, Standing Committee on Recreational Sports*

Within the European Union (2003), the differences regarding national standards of life quality, of income (per capita income), etc. or the perceptions of *well being* are very high, which impairs the time budgeting, also the education and other factors connected with the practice of recreational sport or involved in it. For illustrating this, we extracted from the first report on the European Commission's survey of 2003 a suggestive graph on life quality of the EU member states and candidate countries (Albert, Delhey & Nauenburg, 2003).

From the graph below, it becomes evident that the perception of what is commonly agreed in Romania as *standard of living* (to us – the probably most popular syntagm associated to the concept of life quality) places our country on the last positions in Europe. Could this conjectural significant statistical correlation with the degree of practising recreational sport represent a cause–effect type of relation, as well?

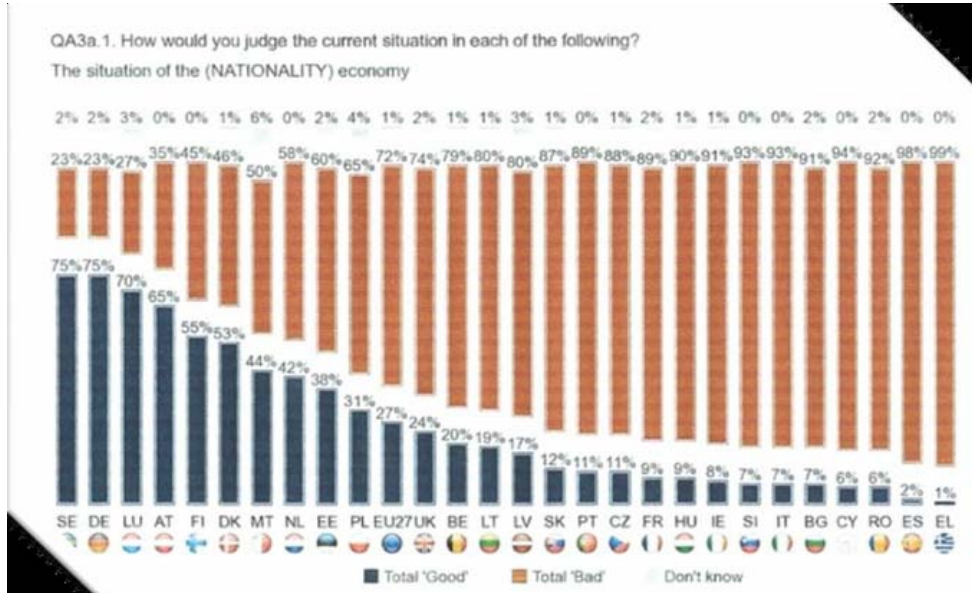


Figure 2. Perception of Quality of Life in European Countries

Source: Eurofound (2012)

The logical arguments on the system’s reverberation with regard to the mutual influence exerted by the practice of sports (especially recreational sports) on the macro-system (as a factor of socio-economic progress; due to health enhancement, restoring the work potential, averting impropriety of leisure pursuits, etc.) are hypothetically sustaining the approach of this topic. In the report of the Secretary-General of the United Nations (2002) it is stated that the concerns of the United Nations in respect of the sport do not refer to the formation or development of the champions for sport, but to the use of sport as a factor of development and peacebuilding. The International University Sports Federation (FISU), to which our country is affiliated, points out in its existential philosophy the main mission of the organization, consisting in “promoting sports values and encouraging sports practice in harmony with and complementary to the university spirit. Promoting sports values means encouraging friendship, fraternity, fair play, perseverance, integrity, cooperation and application amongst students, who one day will have

responsibilities and even key positions in politics, the economy, culture and industry. As allies or competitors, perhaps even as antagonists, these men and women will have learned how to collaborate and deal with every eventuality, whilst respecting the ethical code enshrined in these values. Promoting sports values and sports practice also implies giving a new dimension to the university spirit in study, research, and discipline, through the strong affirmation of the full humanist development of the individual and of society at large. This development is not just intellectual, but also moral and physical”.

Păunescu (2012), referring to recreational sport practised in Romania in the leisure time, reveals a distinct perception compared to those encountered in countries with high civic level. Thus, most often, spare time is perceived as lack of activity, as a passive form, replacing the natural resting time associated with professional activity (compulsory). The author quotes a study conducted in 2000 by the National Institute of Statistics in Romania, which sustains this passive type of leisure by *activities* such as personal care, sleep, having meals, resting, reading, household care, various trips or volunteering and social life pursuits, etc.

We believe that a problem related to the practice of recreational sport resides in the management of the spare time – as recreation has to be understood, however, as an active time, different from the resting hours. We are not sure if the pursuits of *personal care* mentioned above include the components of liveability, such as physical and psychological comfort, the look (physical appearance) or health enhancement, in general.

Methodology

Premises and assumptions

Official surveys, earlier scientific research and comparative studies mentioned in the official records show that sports practice (recreational and competitive) by students in Romania does not make up a considerable proportion of their leisure time pursuits. Based on this premise, we can formulate a number of questions, with reference to the causality, the leisure time management and the satisfactory effects. A first cause could reside in the most students’ belief that the fact itself is not important, according to the popular saying that *it works like this, as well* or that, normally, fun activities would compensate for the academic effort, etc. Other likely causes could reside in the economic situation, because of which some students would have to perform other activities in their spare time, in order to supplement their income, or the temptation of other cultural or social activities. Another reason, quite harmful, may be the lure of the freedom of decision over one’s own mind and body (leading to consumption of alcohol, addictive substances, etc.). Finally, another hypothetical cause that may be regarded as an

effect, as well, would be the ignorance or disregarding of the fact that the society credits the students not only with their academic education but also with their future role in view of prosperity and liveability, on a macro-system's or nation's level. Any provisional answers to these questions might be relevant assumptions. In this paper, we confine ourselves to considering, hypothetically, that recreational sports can play a role of social protection within the meaning of an alternative to the presumed disorganized or even harmful spending of spare time. We also believe that recreational sport mutually correlates with the level of education and the economic standards, with the resilience of the socio-human and environmental system and with the indicators of the quality of life.

Subjects and methods

Every scientific endeavor requires, in order allowing logical inferences in relation to the assumptions, good knowledge about the gnoseological level acquired up to time from which it proceeds. For this, we have been taking a critical look at the literature data on the one hand and on the other hand, in practice, we have applied the method of interviewing (which, compared to the method of the questionnaire, does not necessarily require specialized psychological validation). We have used the algorithm of an elementary interview with dichotomous responses, sequentially connected (see diagram below).

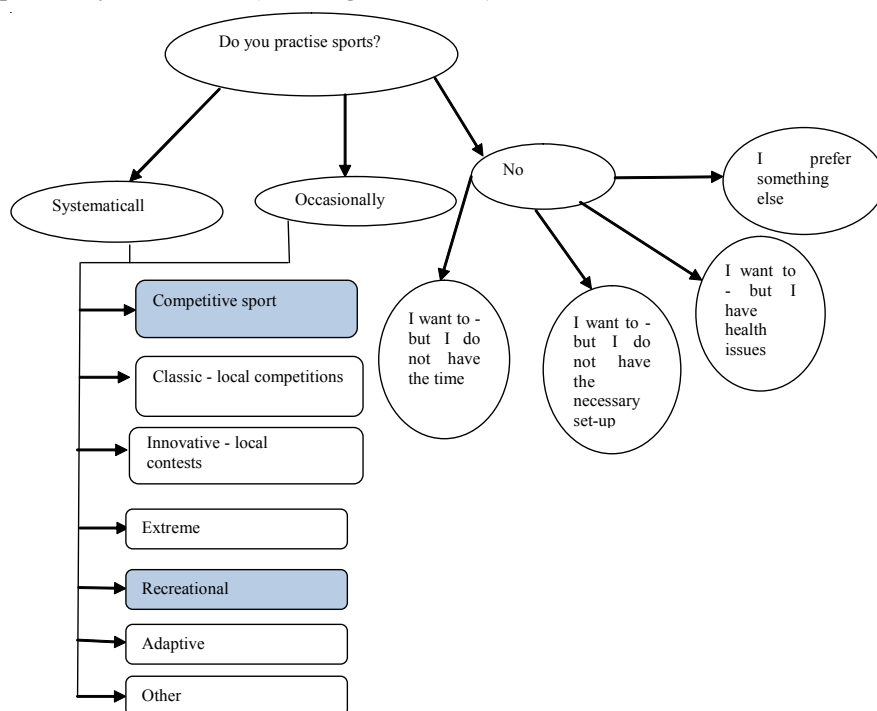


Figure 3. Orientative algorithm of the interview

In order to encourage honest answers, our survey did not include personal data of the students except for the information needed for statistical sampling (such as year of study and cultural profile of the university). There were 231 subjects interviewed. We admit that this number is lower than it would have been necessary to consider the sample statistically representative for the statistic population segment of all university centers or for all the cultural profiles of the universities. According to maccor statistical norms, the confidence interval offered by our survey (with dichotomous questions and with the practical size of the sampling) is 6.4 %. Consequently, the structure of the sampling and the statistical interpretation of the results are acceptable for humanistic studies, at the limit. The gender distribution of respondents is shown graphically in the figure below. The number of male students responding to the survey is insignificantly higher in comparison to that of the female student respondents.

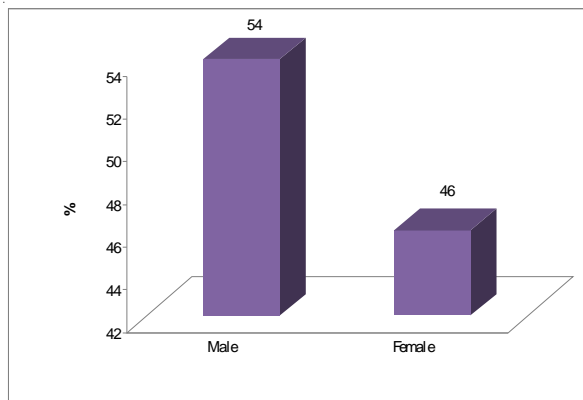


Figure 4. Respondents' gender

Regarding the cultural profile of the respondents, it was established by taking into account the model of educational domains of the framework programme of the EU (2007-2013).

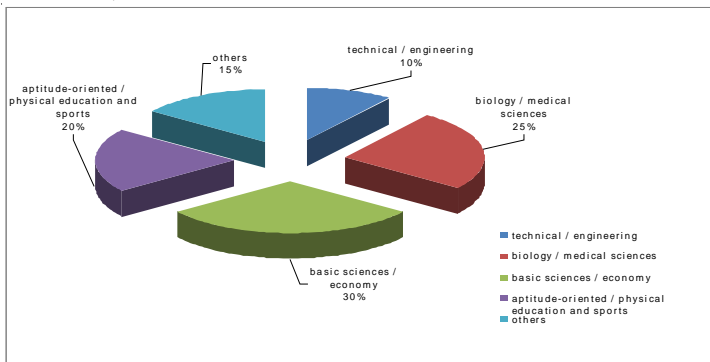


Figure 5. Cultural profile of the respondents

The subjects were cooperative, some of them even trying to justify their answers, although this was not required from them. The simple fact that they have been explained the purpose of the ascertaining and interpretative research, more than the idea of being anonymous, would be – in our opinion – the main reason why most of the people interviewed expressed bravely and consciously their critical opinions on the present situation of recreational sport as it is practiced by Romanian students. Their opinions stated a priori that the situation was inadequate.

Results and discussions

Applying the method of the interview and statistical processing of the results revealed the following situation: for the question *if they practice sport* (obviously extra to the university physical education classes) the respondents had to choose among four options. As per figure 6 we can infer that according to the majority of answers they occasionally practice sport or a form of physical activity requiring a gradual effort (such as jogging or fitness). Almost as many do not practice any sport at all, being aware of the real effects. Not immediately obvious in the graph – but noted as an attitude – was the fact that students from specialised universities (physical education and sports) do not excel in practising sports on a regular and organised basis, apart from the imposed curricula.

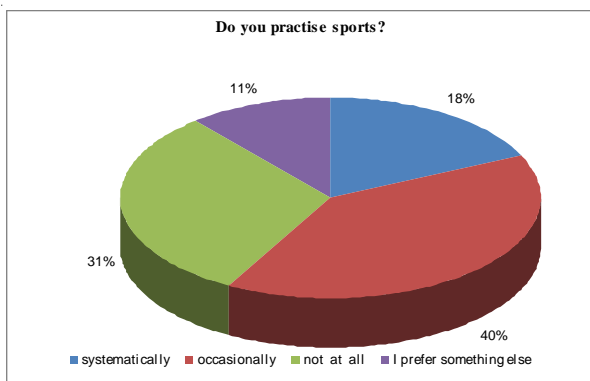


Figure 6. Proportion and manner of practising recreational, competitive or adaptive sports by the students interviewed (explanations in the text)

From those who practise systematically or occasionally any kind of rational and gradually built up physical activity, around 51% do recreational sports, mostly for health reasons, looks, fitness or as a form of self defense. Competitive sports, which are practised solely systematically, represent around 4,5% from the total of

responses. Other types of innovative sports, such as basketball scored at one basket and played in various groups/teams, improvised football with small-sized goals, special competitions, etc. are practised only occasionally by a low number of students, representing 2% of the respondents' total.

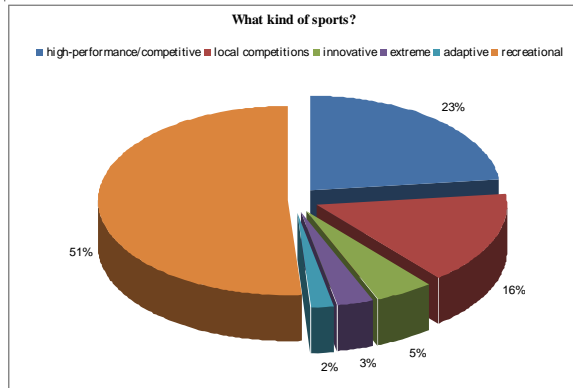


Figure 7. The respondents' options for those who practise sports systematically or occasionally (explanations in the text)

As per Figure 8 we can note that the percentage of those who practise recreational sport or competitive sport systematically is decreasing with their year of study. The relation to the occasional practice of sports or to not practising it at all is inversely proportional.

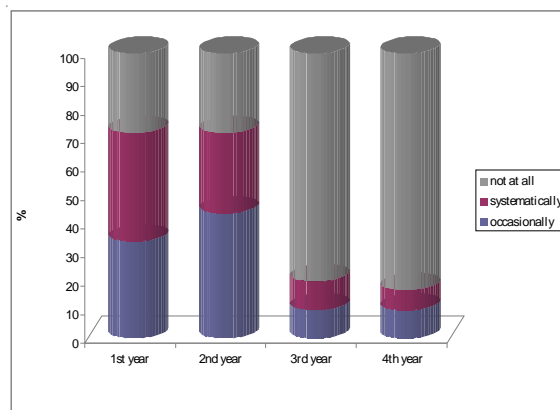


Figure 8. Dynamics of the ratio of sports practice among students – systematically, occasionally or not at all – according to the years of study (explanations in the text)

This phenomenon is quite natural, as the studies are becoming more and more demanding with every year going by. However, it seems difficult to comprehend why this phenomenon is noticeable also in students from the profile universities (physical education and sport).

For the question *why do you not practise sport?*, the respondents had four options. Part of them, quite a consistent percentage of around 35%, motivated their choice by saying they prefer other activities in their spare time, such as entertainment and cultural activities. Those who would have wanted to practise sport in an organised (or individual) and mostly recreational manner make for the majority of respondents, around 65%. Among these, around 19% have various health issues, whereas some of them actually require exercise as a health improving solution.

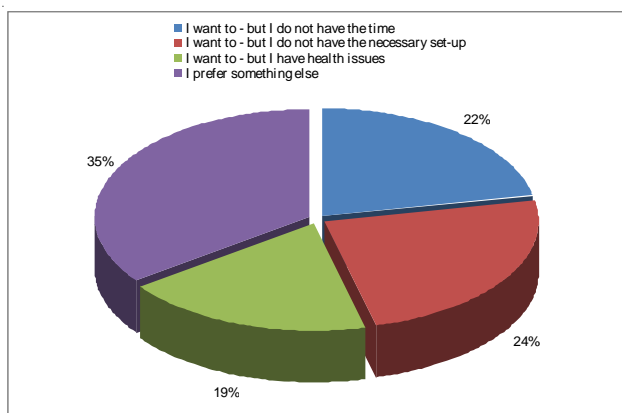


Figure 9. Various motivations for not practising sports

The interview did not include detailed information but for the majority of the interviewed we may say that the perception of the fact that there is not enough time for practising sport can be associated with the reasoning that the premises for practice are not suitable. In this sense, sport facilities and sport grounds seem to be insufficient or placed at long distance from the respondents' homes or workplaces, requiring a lot of time for accessing or reaching them.

If the data ascertained are analysed from a comparative perspective with the data found in special literature, there are obvious correlations of a statistical nature resulting from this analyse (sometimes brought in as arguments of the cause – effect relation). Thus, the ratios found for those who practise in a systematic manner the three types and goals of sports (recreational, competitive or adaptive) appear to be similar and associated with the economic and civic levels in the countries of the European Union.

Conclusions

The conclusion in refferal to the hypothesis, according to which the recreational sports is also playing a social protection role, besides improving, maintaining or enhancing the health, looks, appearance, gestures and reaching a certain level of psychological and physical confort, can only be accepted as an argument. The social protection role (in case of crises) resides in being an alternative to the presumed disorganized or even harmful spending of spare time. By logical inference, this situational condition raises the level of accuracy of the hypothesis of the research. However, it is not offering a solution to the initial problem.

Statistically, recreational sports are mutually correlating with a number of indicators of the socio-human and environmental macro-system, such as the educational and economic level, as well as with the resilience of the system, with indicators of the liveability, etc. We are not in the position to evaluate if this corellation is based on a causal connection or if the process relies on a cybernetics pattern, with a positive feedback. Nevertheless, it arises as a result that attracting students in practising the three types of sports (recreational, competitive or adaptive – as the case may be) can become a consequence of middle- and long-term investments in education and logistic facilities.

The interpretation of the respondents' options shows that the methods of emotionally (or coercively) attracting students to practising a sport in a systematic manner (be it recreational or competitive sports – subsidiary to the academic practice) seem to be rather palliative.

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