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Sociological sciences

WELLNESS AND SPA CONSULTANT IN BULGARIA: DEVELOPMENT, DEMAND, COLLABORATION AND PROFESSIONAL REALISATION

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Abstract

This study examines the development and academic positioning of the "Wellness and SPA Consultant" specialisation in Bulgaria, with a particular focus on its introduction at the National Sports Academy "Vasil Levski" (NSA), the dynamics of educational demand, the potential for professional realisation, and the interaction between higher education and the wellness and SPA industry. The study employs a structured documentary analysis of institutional materials, educational documents, accreditation information, professional sources, and international industry analyses, with a temporal horizon extending to 2026. The data are organised around seven research questions and interpreted through thematic analysis and the comparison of data from different sources. The results show that the programme, introduced in the 2023/24 academic year, occupies a distinctive position at the intersection of sport, health, tourism, and wellness-service management. As of 2026, the absence of graduates is attributable to the duration of the educational programme rather than to an absence of prospects for professional realisation. Key strategic potential lies in the closer institutionalisation of practice-based education, internships, and partnerships with employers. On this basis, the specialisation may be regarded as an educational instrument for enhancing the quality, professionalisation, and competitiveness of the Bulgarian wellness and SPA sector.

Keywords: wellness; SPA; Bulgarian higher education; professional competence; tourism industry; university – industry partnership

Introduction

The wellness sector is assuming an increasingly significant role in contemporary economic and societal development and is becoming established as a distinct domain within the global experience economy, while SPA tourism is increasingly positioned at the interface of tourism, prevention, recovery, and the comprehensive maintenance of quality of life. In the literature, wellness tourism is regarded as a specific segment in which consumers seek not merely a service, but a comprehensive experience oriented towards physical, psychological, and social well-being [1], [2]. The contemporary scale of the sector and the diversification of wellness consumption further increase the need for well-prepared professionals capable of working on an interdisciplinary basis [3].

The role of physical activity in supporting holistic development further underlines the need for professionals with a broad understanding of physical and psychosocial well-being [4].

Bulgaria possesses favourable conditions for the development of this segment – a combination of natural resources, balneological traditions, tourism infrastructure, and a gradually expanding supply of SPA and wellness services. At the same time, the need is growing for a professional environment in which service quality is associated not only with physical infrastructure, but also with staff competence, standardisation, and the capacity to personalise the customer experience. The use of digital technologies to support children with special educational needs also illustrates the growing importance of adaptive and inclusive approaches in professional practice [5].

Research on the quality of wellness services emphasises the importance of specialised skills and staff preparation, while analyses of educational policy highlight the relationship between education, innovation, and the needs of the recreational industry [6], [7].

In this context, the introduction of the "Wellness and SPA Consultant" specialisation at NSA in the 2023/24 academic year represents a significant stage in the development of specialised higher education in Bulgaria. The specificity of the professional profile lies in its multidisciplinary character: it combines knowledge and skills applicable in sport, health, tourism, and management environments. The importance of contemporary and innovative approaches in physical activity further supports the need for practice-oriented and up-to-date professional education [8]. Precisely this intersection defines the principal research problem –

whether the new specialisation has the potential to become a sustainable link between the academic system and the actual needs of the wellness and SPA industry.

This multidimensional understanding of well-being is particularly relevant to the education of Wellness and SPA Consultants, as effective professional preparation requires an integrated perspective on the physical, psychological, social, and lifestyle factors contributing to healthy development [9].

Aim and Research Questions

The aim of the study is to assess the development and current positioning of the "Wellness and SPA Consultant" specialisation in Bulgaria and to identify the factors that may determine its effectiveness as an educational and professional model. To achieve this aim, seven interrelated questions were formulated: (1) when was the specialisation introduced; (2) is it offered by other higher-education institutions under the same name; (3) what indications of demand can be identified; (4) what are the expected areas of professional realisation; (5) what forms of interaction with employers and external stakeholders are visible; (6) do initiatives exist to connect professionals, employers, and academia; and (7) are there already graduates as of 2026.

Methodology

The study was designed as a qualitative documentary investigation (desk research) with an analytical rather than descriptive purpose. The principal analytical corpus comprises official NSA information materials, prospective-student guides and educational documents, accreditation materials and reports, publicly available information on related programmes at higher-education institutions, materials published by professional organisations, and international reports on the development of the wellness economy. The temporal boundary of the analysis is May 2026, which permits a clear distinction between the established state of the programme and future expectations.

To enhance analytical reliability, source triangulation was applied: the same research questions were examined through different types of documents – institutional, educational, professional, and industry-related. The documents were assessed according to predefined categories: chronology, educational positioning, programme similarity, indicators of demand, professional applicability, interaction with industry, and the presence of employed graduates. The information was subsequently synthesised through thematic coding and comparative interpretation.

From a methodological perspective, it is important to distinguish between an established state of affairs and a projection. For example, the absence of graduates as of 2026 is a direct consequence of the four-year duration of the educational programme, whereas the anticipated realisation in SPA centres, hospitality, tourism complexes, and consultancy constitutes a prospective professional pathway rather than a measured outcome. Consequently, conclusions regarding demand and professional realisation are formulated as indicative where traceable data from graduating cohorts are unavailable. This approach limits the risk of overinterpretation and enables a more accurate assessment of the programme at this early stage of its life cycle.

Results

The findings are presented in accordance with the seven research questions formulated for the study. Table 1 provides a structured synthesis of the key findings identified by 2026, highlighting the principal evidence and the corresponding analytical implications.

Table 1.
Synthesis of the principal findings by research question

Research dimension	Established by 2026	Analytical emphasis
Programme inception	Introduced at NSA in 2023/24 as a bachelor's specialisation in the field of "Sport".	Establishes a new educational profile between sport, health, and tourism.
Related programmes	Under the exact name, the programme is identified at NSA; related master's/postgraduate forms exist.	There is potential for a vertical educational pathway, but the profiles are not identical.
Demand	There has been continuous intake and sustained visibility in prospective-student materials.	An indicator of interest that should be validated through quantitative data on intake and professional realisation.
Professional realisation	As of 2026, there are no graduates; the first cohort is expected in 2027.	Actual professional realisation cannot yet be measured.
Industry links	A sectoral ecosystem and activity by professional organisations exist; specific programme agreements are not publicly detailed.	A more visible and formalised system of partnerships and internships is required.
University–employer relations	Initiatives and professional forums exist at sector level.	The next step is structured employer participation in practice-based education.
Graduates	None as of 2026.	2027 is a key point for the first empirical assessment of outcomes.

The chronology of the specialisation reveals clearly distinguishable stages: its introduction in 2023, consolidation of the academic profile and intake in the following years, development of practice-based preparation, and the expected graduation of the first cohort in 2027. Figure 1 visualises this sequence and demonstrates why, as of 2026, the absence of graduates should not be interpreted as a failure of the programme, but rather as a characteristic of its early stage of development.



Figure 1. Key stages in the development of the "Wellness and SPA Consultant" specialisation at NSA

The second substantive finding concerns the uniqueness of the professional profile. As of 2026, "Wellness and SPA Consultant" is offered at NSA under this exact name, whereas related educational forms have been identified at other higher-education institutions, including programmes focused on rehabilitation, thalassotherapy, wellness, and SPA. This distinction is important because it demonstrates that the new specialisation does not simply reproduce an existing model, but occupies its own position within the educational ecosystem.

With regard to demand, the available data allow, rather, for a discussion of sustained interest and institutional visibility than of a quantitatively demonstrated market deficit. Continuous intake during 2023–2026 and the presence of the programme among the prospective-student materials are positive indicators. They fit within the broader international trend towards the growth and expansion of the wellness economy [3] and the understanding of wellness tourism as a segment requiring comprehensive management of the experience and having direct relevance to tourism and hospitality provision [1], [2], [10].

Discussion

The principal finding of the analysis is that the significance of the specialisation should not be assessed solely through the number of students or graduates. More important is its potential to create a new type of professional competence that responds to the intersection of wellness culture, physical activity, tourism, service quality, and management. This rationale corresponds to the understanding of wellness as a multidimensional phenomenon and to the need for specialised personnel capable of operating in diverse organisational contexts [6], [11].

From the perspective of academic positioning, the strength of the programme lies precisely in its multidisciplinary character. In the contemporary wellness environment, the customer experience increasingly encompasses a combination of movement, recovery, nutrition, relaxation, natural factors, and personalised services. Bulgarian studies of apitherapeutic and rose-based products demonstrate the potential of national heritage to be transformed into contemporary wellness innovations [12], [13]. In parallel, the development of specialised products for specific consumer categories and the integration of movement and recreational components broaden the scope of professional consultancy [14], [15].

In this regard, the next strategic challenge is the transition from academic provision to a demonstrable relationship with employers. The data as of 2026 do not permit the claim that the programme itself has an extensively formalised network of agreements with specific hotel chains and SPA operators. This, however, outlines a clear development opportunity: employer participation in updating competencies, practice-based education in authentic settings, mentoring, internships, case-based learning, and subsequent tracking of graduates' career paths.

Particularly important is the future transition towards an outcome-monitoring system. Following the graduation of the first cohort in 2027, at minimum, the proportion employed in the field, time to first employment, sector of professional realisation, occupational level, employer satisfaction, applicability of

acquired competencies, and participation of graduates in continuing education should be measured. Such monitoring would transform the programme from an educational initiative into a measurable quality system and would enable periodic updating of the curriculum in accordance with developments in the industry.

Conclusion

As of 2026, "Wellness and SPA Consultant" represents a new yet strategically significant educational profile in Bulgaria. Its introduction at NSA responds to the trend towards the professionalisation of wellness services and creates a potential link between sport-related, health-related, and tourism-related knowledge. The analysis demonstrates sustained institutional visibility of the programme, uniqueness of its designation within the national educational context, and realistic avenues for future professional realisation, while simultaneously highlighting a deficit of empirical data on career outcomes and the need for more visible, structured partnerships with industry.

The critical next step is 2027, when the first cohort is expected to graduate. It is precisely then that a substantive assessment of professional realisation and the alignment between acquired competencies and employer requirements will become possible. If practice-based preparation, internships, industry cases, and graduate tracking are systematically integrated into the training, the specialisation has the potential to become a sustainable mechanism for enhancing the quality and competitiveness of the Bulgarian wellness and SPA sector.

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