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WiNS - Women In Sports and Science: Student mobility pathways in the journey of an Asian graduate researcher creating new growth & personal- professional development

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Abstract

This viewpoint presents the journey of an Asian (Nepali-Indian) physiotherapist within Women in Sports and Science (WiNS), progressing to a TIAS 2.0 graduate student supported by the Konosuke Matsushita Memorial Foundation (KMMF). It highlights efforts to advance a paramedical career, often underestimated in Nepal and India, through exposure to diverse high-performance (sports) environments. Experiences across multiple sport science centres in India and a Judo training camp in Tsukuba, Japan, informed the author's perspective on rehabilitation and athlete recovery. The article emphasizes the role of international exposure in building professional confidence and identifying gaps in rehabilitation planning, particularly in relation to gender-specific physiological differences. It further underscores the importance of structured planning and goal setting prior to internships, specifically abroad. A conceptual framework is presented to illustrate pathways for sustained professional development. An example of the University of Tsukuba resources is used. Overall, internship experiences are highlighted as key drivers of both technical competence and personal growth in sports science and rehabilitation expertise.

Keywords: Internship, student mobility, physiotherapist, judo, research, return to sport

1. Introduction

Student mobility has emerged as a significant global phenomenon, driven by the increasing need for students to expand their knowledge and competencies in order to advance in their respective fields. It contributes not only to individual academic and professional development but also to broader societal progress by fostering a skilled workforce, enhancing economic productivity, and supporting social mobility. Furthermore, studying abroad enables students to develop a clearer understanding of their academic interests and long-term career trajectories. Academic mobility has been supported by several international frameworks. The 2019 UNESCO Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education defines it as the, and we quote - *“physical or virtual movement of individuals outside their country for the purpose of studying, researching, and teaching”* (Mills, 2022) [12]. Such mobility facilitates international collaboration and provides access to advanced research infrastructure, expert mentorship, and diverse academic environments. Graduate students are often motivated to pursue opportunities abroad to enhance their technical competencies, expand professional networks, and gain institutional affiliation and academic recognition (Kato and Ando, 2017; Khattab and Fenton, 2015; Cantwell, 2011; Mills, 2022) [8, 9, 3, 12]. Another scholarship programme, Erasmus, has been shown to contribute significantly to the European labour market by enhancing student mobility and producing a more skilled workforce. This suggests that even short-term mobility schemes can stimulate further international mobility investments across countries, ultimately achieving similar outcomes (Parey and Waldinger 2011) [14]. Similarly, in Italy, it was found that participation in national student exchange programmes during university increased a graduate's probability of securing employment within the host country after graduation. Both the Erasmus programme and these findings demonstrate that international educational mobility plays a crucial role in shaping graduates' labour market outcomes.

Furthermore, such opportunities are particularly beneficial for students from less privileged backgrounds, enabling them to pursue and achieve their academic and professional aspirations (Pietro, 2012) [15]. Beyond academic and professional benefits, student mobility plays a critical role in personal development. Exposure to diverse cultural contexts and interactions with individuals from different backgrounds foster adaptability, intercultural competence, and independence (Krzaklewska, 2008; Lesjak *et al.*, 2015; Aresi *et al.*, 2018) [10, 11, 2]. Continued engagement in international programs—whether through government or privately funded initiatives—can further strengthen communication skills, confidence, and overall personal growth. These observations are also supported by the experiences of the second author (Rakwal), who has noted transformative changes in students participating in international internships and research

programs, particularly within the Graduate General Education Courses (GGEC) at the University of Tsukuba (GGEC, 2026; University of Tsukuba, 2026) [6, 17]. As individuals develop confidence and social competence, they become better equipped to shape both their present experiences and future aspirations (Tran and Vu, 2018) [16].

The figure 1 presents a conceptual framework of student mobility, illustrating the initial phases of confusion, immobility, and information overload commonly experienced by students. It further highlights how external influences, such as mentorship, environment, and media exposure, shape perceptions and emotional responses. The framework emphasizes the importance of structured guidance and self-awareness in enabling the transition from uncertainty to clarity and purposeful development (Figure 1).

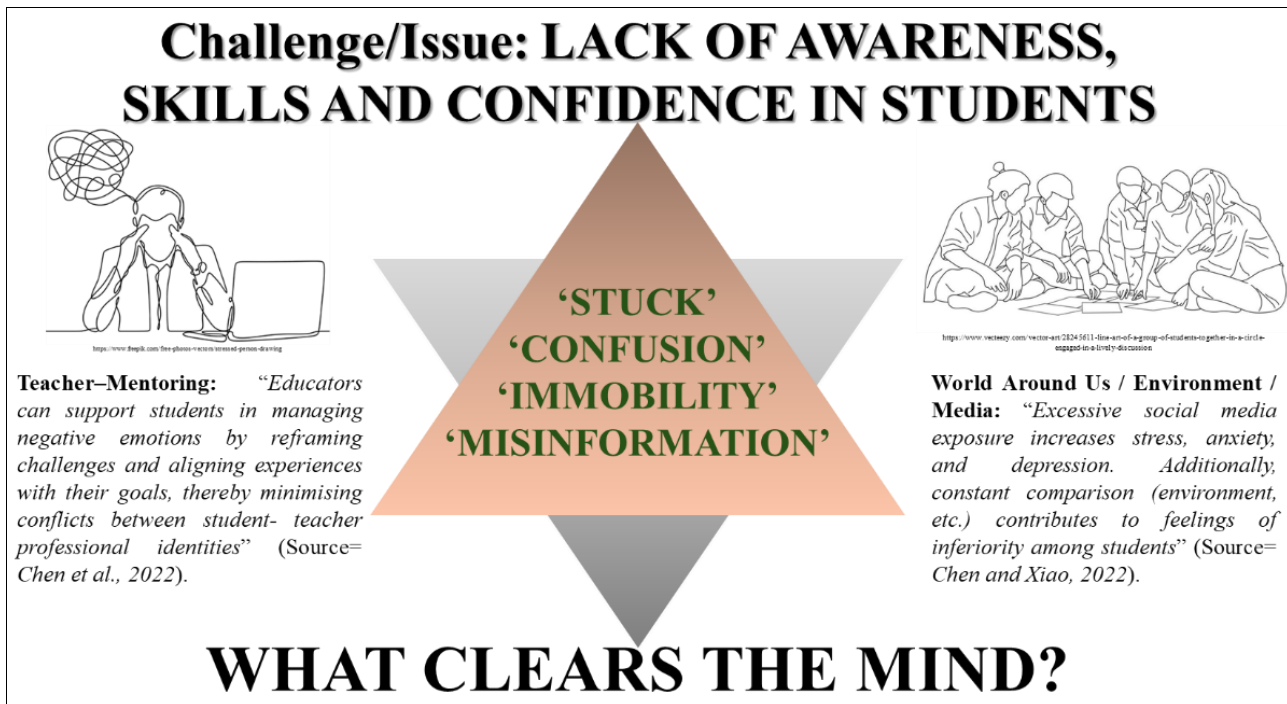


Fig 1: Student Mobility and Graduate School - Looking through the Lens of a Sports Science and Medicine (TIAS2.0) Major Graduate Student. (Source: Chen *et al.*, 2022; Chen and Xiao, 2022) [5, 4]

2. Graduate student and sports science and medicine researcher

2.1 Background: Creating a Journey Map

The lead author’s engagement with international student mobility is rooted in her academic and athletic trajectory. As a physiotherapist and former athlete, she experienced first-hand the limited availability of structured physiotherapeutic support within sports settings in India. In comparison, Nepal faces even greater constraints due to limited infrastructure and access to sports medicine services. These gaps motivated her to explore advancements in physiotherapy within sports science, with the long-term goal of translating this knowledge to benefit athletes in both countries (Agrawal *et al.*, 2025) [11]. Her background as a national-level handball and basketball player, along with her experience as a state-level school athlete competing in nationally recognized tournaments across India, exposed her to the systemic lack of medical support

available to athletes—particularly sportswomen. This gap persists across age groups, from school-level participants to senior amateur and professional athletes. Despite the growing recognition of sport as a tool for education, health promotion, and overall well-being, the absence of structured medical and rehabilitation support remains a critical concern. These experiences played a pivotal role in shaping her decision to pursue physiotherapy, with a focus on the prevention and management of sport-related injuries across different populations and genders. In both Nepal and India, where she completed her higher education, there remains a shortage of integrated systems for the effective treatment and rehabilitation of athletic injuries (Figure 2). This has further strengthened her aspiration to apply both theoretical knowledge and practical skills gained through international exposure, particularly from Japan, to these contexts.

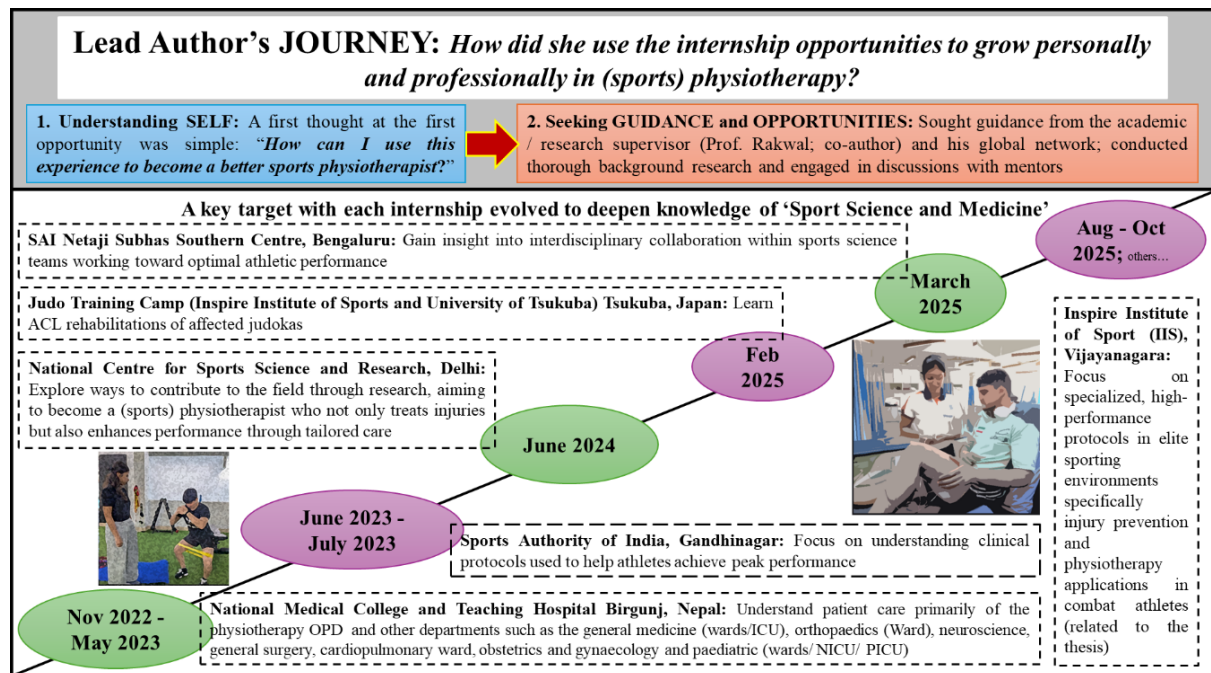


Fig 2: Student Mobility and Graduate School - The International Internship Journey under the TIAS2.0 Degree Program.

Her ambition to study at an institution with advanced sports science and medical facilities led to sustained academic planning and the refinement of her research direction. Since April 2023, she has actively engaged with her recommender and a Japanese sports medicine expert to develop her research focus. Given her sporting background in handball, she developed a specific interest in lower limb injuries, particularly anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) injuries. These injuries are highly prevalent in sport and demonstrate higher incidence rates among female athletes due to a combination of anatomical, hormonal, and biomechanical factors (Agrawal *et al.*, 2025) ^[1].

2.2 Practical: The Study Abroad Experience

The primary objective of the internships (as part of the TIAS2.0 program, as a compulsory subject) undertaken by the lead author was to enhance her knowledge and practical competencies in sports science and sports medicine. As illustrated in (Figure 2), these experiences followed a progressive trajectory, evolving from foundational clinical exposure to advanced interdisciplinary and high-performance environments. Each stage contributed to the development of clinical reasoning, research orientation, and collaborative skills. This structured progression demonstrates how targeted internship experiences can systematically strengthen both technical competence and professional identity in sports physiotherapy. In addition to these structured internships, the author engaged in collaborative research activities, including a case study on an Indian judoka recovering from an ACL injury, documenting her return-to-sport (RTS) process. This experience paralleled her thesis research on an elite collegiate Japanese judoka, thereby reinforcing her research focus on ACL rehabilitation and injury prevention. These parallel experiences also facilitated the development of future research directions, particularly in designing targeted injury prevention protocols for ACL injuries. ACL injuries remain highly prevalent globally, with a greater incidence observed among female athletes due to a combination of anatomical, hormonal, and biomechanical factors. This highlights the importance of developing gender-specific rehabilitation and

prevention strategies within sports medicine. Collectively, these experiences illustrate how a strategically planned sequence of internships, combined with research engagement, can support continuous skill development and specialization within a defined domain of interest.

3. Closing Remarks

The experiences presented in this viewpoint highlight that learning within sports science and physiotherapy is a continuous and evolving process. Engagement in diverse academic and clinical environments has enhanced technical expertise while fostering adaptability, critical thinking, and confidence in clinical decision-making (Chen and Xiao, 2022) ^[4]. Although challenges are inherent to both research and practice, early exposure to high-performance settings plays an important role in preparing emerging practitioners to navigate complex professional environments. The internship experiences outlined in this paper have been instrumental in shaping the author's development as a sports physiotherapist, influencing both clinical perspective and research direction. In particular, they reinforce the importance of an evidence-based approach to injury prevention and rehabilitation, as well as the value of interdisciplinary collaboration in optimizing athlete care. Furthermore, these experiences demonstrate how international exposure can facilitate the identification of systemic gaps and support the adaptation of best practices across diverse sporting and cultural contexts. To note, the role of a mentor, informed in international mobility pathways, and personal-professional networks, remain a critical part of a graduate student's growth and development.

As illustrated in (Figure 3), an integrated model of personal, academic, and professional development emerges from this journey. This model highlights the synergistic role of self-reflection, mentorship, structured academic programs (e.g., GGEC, 2026; University of Tsukuba, 2026) ^[6, 17], and complementary practices such as yoga in promoting emotional regulation, skill acquisition, and holistic development. It provides a practical framework for students seeking to align personal aspirations with long-term professional goals (Figure 3).

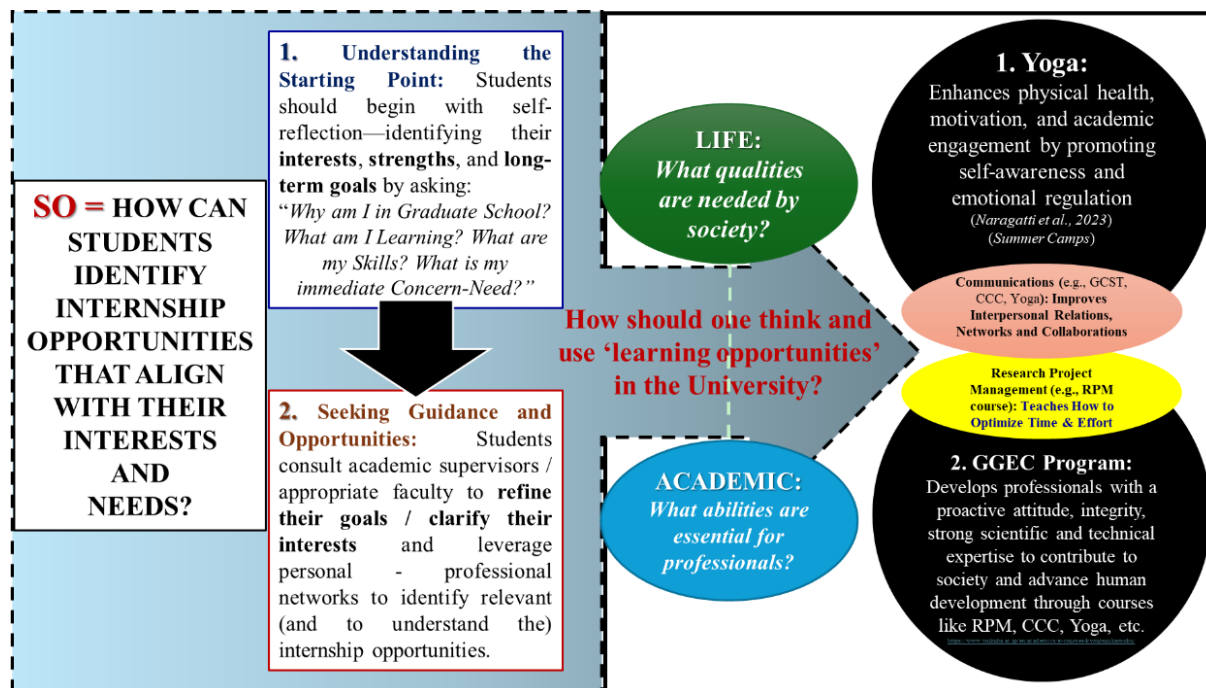


Fig 3: Student Mobility and Graduate School - Identifying Self and Needs, Developing Skills (Source: GGEC, 2026; University of Tsukuba, 2026)^[6, 17]

From a broader perspective, this viewpoint emphasizes the importance of structured planning and active engagement in internships for graduate students pursuing careers in sports science, medicine, and related fields. Approaching such opportunities with clearly defined goals, intellectual curiosity, and a proactive learning attitude can significantly enhance both professional competence and personal development. In addition, continuous reflection and systematic documentation of experiences serve as essential tools for sustained growth and future contributions to the field.

Importantly, this viewpoint contributes to the existing literature by presenting a structured, experience-based framework that integrates student mobility, mentorship, and internship-driven learning. It further highlights the relevance of incorporating gender-sensitive perspectives, particularly in the context of injury prevention and rehabilitation among female athletes. This integrated approach offers a replicable pathway for professional development in sports science and physiotherapy. Overall, this journey reinforces the importance of lifelong learning and continuous self-improvement in becoming an effective practitioner and researcher. Sustained engagement in international exposure and interdisciplinary collaboration has the potential to improve rehabilitation outcomes, while contributing to the development of more inclusive, evidence-based, and context-specific sports medicine systems.

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