Original Research

Sport for Development and Peace (SDP) in ODA-supported higher education: A case study of the Dream Together Master Program (DTM)

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the experiences of alumni from the Dream Together Master (DTM) Global Sport Management Graduate Program, a fully funded master's degree for professionals from low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). As an Official Development Assistance (ODA) supported Sport for Development and Peace (SDP) initiative, DTM offers an alternative to sport participation-focused models of SDP by investing in higher education for adult professionals. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 19 alumni, the research investigates motivations, professional and personal development, and post-program challenges. Findings show that DTM enhances expertise, career advancement, and personal growth; however, these individual gains do not always lead to systemic change, particularly in countries where sport is not a national priority. Some alumni also reported feeling positioned as passive recipients, reflecting power imbalances in donor-driven ODA-SDP structures. The study highlights the need for collaborative program design and strategic partnerships with local sport governing bodies in the LMICs to harness graduates' expertise effectively. These insights offer a nuanced understanding of the relationship between ODA, SDP, and sport management education, and underscore the importance of sustained, context-sensitive approaches for supporting the long-term impact of international SDP initiatives.

INTRODUCTION

Official Development Assistance (ODA) has long been central to international development strategies, evolving over time to help address the changing needs of low- and middle-income countries (LMICs; Zaremba, 2019). LMICs are defined based on the World Bank classification, which categorizes countries according to gross national income (GNI) per capita (World Bank, 2025). While early ODA efforts emphasized economic investment and basic infrastructure development flowing from high-income countries to LMICs, there is growing consensus that sustainable development requires longer-term investments in human resource development and institutional capacity building alongside material support, conditions that economic aid alone cannot fulfill (Moon & Shin, 2016). In this context, higher education has emerged as a strategic instrument within ODA, aiming to support self-reliance by enabling professionals to apply knowledge and expertise to drive development within their own local contexts (Heyneman & Lee, 2016; Kayashima, 2022; Moon & Shin, 2016).

The recognition of sport by the United Nations (UN) as a meaningful tool for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) marked a turning point in how sport was perceived within international development agendas (Chong et al., 2022; Ličen & Jedlicka, 2022; Rofe, 2024). This contributed to the rise of Sport for Development and Peace (SDP) as a recognized field of development policy and practice (Banda et al., 2025; Shin et al., 2020). Within SDP scholarship, initiatives have been broadly conceptualized through two perspectives: 'change through sport,' which uses sport participation as a means to achieve social outcomes, and 'change in sport,' which focuses on strengthening sport structures, governance, and institutional capacity (Ha, 2021; Welty Peachey et al., 2019).

Building on these approaches, most practice and research have focused on the former, particularly youth-centered programs that mobilize sport participation as a primary mechanism for pursuing social development goals (Coalter, 2010; Hasselgård, 2015; Schulenkorf et al., 2016; Svensson & Woods, 2017; Whitley, 2025a). Although SDP is broadly defined to include both youth and adults (Lyras & Welty Peachey, 2011), in practice, programs have largely prioritized youth engagement (Schulenkorf et al., 2016; Svensson & Woods, 2017). This is often informed by positive youth development perspectives that emphasize childhood and adolescence as formative periods when structured sport participation can foster lasting personal and social benefits (Camiré et al., 2023; Holt, 2025; Schulenkorf et al., 2016).

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Within this landscape, many internationally oriented SDP programs funded through ODA have taken the form of youth-focused sport participation initiatives. Prominent examples include programs implemented by international NGOs such as Right to Play, which has received support from Canada's ODA, as well as initiatives supported by national development agencies, including programs funded by Germany's Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development and delivered through the German Agency for International Cooperation. These examples illustrate how sport participation for youth has been widely used as a primary mechanism for positive social change outcomes across diverse contexts.

While such approaches have demonstrated value, comparatively less attention has been given to SDP initiatives that focus on adult professionals and emphasize developing the professional knowledge and capacities needed to design, manage, and sustain sport-related structures and practices in LMICs. From an adult learning perspective, these approaches position participants not merely as beneficiaries, but as reflective practitioners capable of shaping practice within their local contexts (Giulianotti et al., 2019). Expanding on this perspective, ODA-supported higher education initiatives can be conceptualized as a distinct and underexplored model of SDP in which development is pursued through the cultivation of professional expertise and institutional capacity within sport organizations and systems, extending existing sport participation-based interventions.

This approach is important as SDP research has highlighted the key role of adult stakeholders in shaping both participation and the broader environments in which sport initiatives operate (Schulenkorf et al., 2016; Whitley et al., 2019). When SDP is pursued primarily through sport participation of the youth population without parallel investment in the adult professionals who shape sport environments, the potential for long-term and contextually grounded change may be constrained. This challenge is particularly salient in many LMICs where urgent development priorities such as poverty, hunger, and illiteracy often constrain investment in the sport sector, and where opportunities for formal sport management education and institutional support may be unevenly distributed (Riot et al., 2020). Accordingly, capacity building strategies have been identified as a way for supporting local actors in strengthening and sustaining development initiatives within their own contexts (Philip et al., 2023).

Despite these insights, limited research has examined how participants experience ODA-supported SDP initiatives that operate through higher education and focus on adult professionals. Examining this model is important because it broadens understanding of how SDP may operate through professional pathways and longer-term capacity building beyond participation-centered approaches (Giulianotti et al., 2019; Schulenkorf et al., 2016; Svensson & Woods, 2017). Notably, several ODA-supported higher education SDP initiatives have emerged in East Asian donor contexts such as South Korea and Japan over the past decade alongside conventional sport participation-based SDP approaches. Compared to North American and European contexts, these countries have relatively shorter histories of engagement with SDP (Okada, 2018; Park, 2022). As relatively recent actors within SDP, these initiatives provide an opportunity to examine how participant experiences and professional development are understood and negotiated in evolving forms of ODA-supported SDP. This context is also particularly important given that critical SDP scholarship has largely examined concerns such as power imbalances, donor-driven agendas, and the positioning of participants as beneficiaries rather than active agents in participation-centered SDP initiatives (Clarke, 2024; Shin et al., 2020; Whitley, 2025a). Comparatively less attention has been given to how these dynamics may operate in higher education-based, adult-focused SDP initiatives emerging from East Asian ODA donor contexts. Examining participant experiences in these initiatives may therefore provide additional insight into how concerns raised by existing SDP scholarship are experienced and negotiated within alternative forms of ODA-supported SDP.

To address this gap, this study investigates the Dream Together Master (DTM) Program, one of the few ODA-supported SDP initiatives that focus on sport management higher education for adult professionals from LMICs (Ha et al., 2015; Na & Black, 2022). DTM is embedded in South Korea's sport-based ODA portfolio. The program provides fully funded graduate education in sport management to professionals from LMICs, preparing them to apply their knowledge and expertise within their home contexts and to contribute to the development of sport sectors in ways that reflect local needs and conditions. DTM has been recognized for its alignment with global development agendas such as the SDGs (Na & Black, 2022; Park, 2023). Its positioning within the SDP landscape is further reflected through institutional engagement including a formal cooperation agreement with the United Nations Office on Sport for Development and Peace (UNOSDP) in 2015 and public support from former UN Special Adviser on Sport for Development and Peace, Wilfried Lemke, who highlighted the program's role in fostering future sport leaders from LMICs through sport management higher education (UNOSDP, 2015).

These features suggest that DTM adopts a higher education–based approach to development that aligns closely with the 'change in sport' dimension of SDP (e.g., Welty Peachey et al., 2019) by emphasizing institutional and human resource capacity building among adult learners from LMICs rather than outcomes achieved primarily through direct sport participation. Building on this positioning, this study explores

how participants from LMICs experience and make sense of their involvement in an ODA-supported, higher education-based SDP initiative such as the DTM. By examining participant experiences in an adult-focused and capacity-building model of SDP, the study contributes to ongoing discussions regarding how professional development and participant perspectives are understood within evolving forms of ODA-supported SDP beyond conventional participation-centered approaches. The following research questions guide the study:

RQ 1: What motivates students to pursue DTM?
RQ 2: How do students perceive the influences of DTM on their professional development?
RQ 3: What are DTM students' personal perspectives on their roles within the field of sport?

LITERATURE REVIEW

SDP Within ODA: Evolving Beyond Participation-Based Approaches

The integration of sport into ODA reflects evolving global development agendas, particularly following the recognition of sport as a contributor to the UN's SDGs. This recognition has encouraged donor countries and international agencies to support SDP initiatives within ODA frameworks, positioning sport as a tool for addressing diverse challenges in LMICs (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2025; Ha et al., 2015; Na & Black, 2022). Notable examples include the U.S. International Sports Programming Initiative, the UK's International Development Through Excellence and Leadership in Sport program, Norway's Kicking AIDS Out, and Australia's Team Up (Ha, 2021; Ha et al., 2015; sportanddev.org, 2024). Delivered in collaboration with nonprofit organizations and international partners, these ODA-supported SDP initiatives illustrate how sport can be mobilized to promote sustainable development and social change across various contexts. Importantly, these initiatives have largely focused on sport participation as the primary mechanism for achieving development outcomes (Schulenkorf et al., 2016; Svensson & Woods, 2017), reflecting a prevalent 'change through sport' orientation (Welty Peachey et al., 2019) that has shaped many ODA-supported SDP projects.

While widely adopted and often regarded as valuable, this participation-oriented approach has also been questioned in scholarship for its underlying assumptions and long-term effectiveness (Chen, 2022). In particular, scholars have highlighted a persistent tendency to assume that participation in sport inherently produces positive outcomes, often overlooking the complexities of local contexts and the structural barriers that shape program effectiveness (Cohen et al., 2020; Whitley et al., 2019).

These limitations have led scholars to reconsider how sport contributes to the development agenda and to adopt more nuanced ways of understanding SDP interventions. Rather than representing distinct categories, SDP initiatives are often conceptualized along a continuum that reflects varying emphases on sport and development outcomes. For example, the distinction between 'change through sport' and 'change in sport' (Welty Peachey et al., 2019), as well as Ha's (2021) continuum of 'development of sport,' 'sport-plus,' and 'plus-sport,' collectively illustrate how SDP initiatives can serve multiple and overlapping roles within development agendas.

Within this evolving perspective, Whitley (2025b) further critiques the tendency within SDP scholarship to define rigid boundaries around what constitutes SDP, arguing that such labeling can obscure the fluid and interconnected nature of SDP practice. This perspective reinforces the need to adopt a broader conceptualization of SDP that can better capture the dynamic and overlapping roles of sport in development contexts. Consistent with this view, ODA-supported SDP initiatives often intersect with sport development efforts including equipment provision, sport facility development, and exchange or training programs involving athletes, coaches, volunteers, and administrators, reflecting the fluid and intersecting nature of SDP practice (Okada, 2018).

Building on this expanded understanding, scholars have increasingly called for a broader conceptualization of SDP practice that moves beyond conventional approaches (e.g., participation-oriented) and seeks to more fully realize the wider potential of sport within development contexts (Banda et al., 2025; Whitley, 2025b). Along this line, related work emphasizes the role of SDP in supporting livelihoods through career development and improved access to education (McSweeney et al., 2020). One such pathway lies in capacity-building approaches that focus on developing the professional competencies of participants in sport. Within broader international development literature, higher education has been recognized as a key mechanism in ODA for human resource development where knowledge transfer and professional training are central to long-term capacity building (Heyneman & Lee, 2016; Kayashima, 2022). This perspective aligns with calls in the SDP literature for a more balanced integration of 'change through sport' and 'change in sport' orientations, particularly in LMIC contexts where sport ecosystems and institutional capacities remain limited (Welty Peachey et al., 2019; Ha, 2021).

From this standpoint, capacity-building efforts such as the dissemination of sport-related knowledge, expertise, and institutional practices are increasingly recognized as important components of ODA-supported SDP. In this context, higher education-based approaches including sport-related academic programs targeting adult stakeholders represent a particularly promising avenue for advancing these objectives.

However, despite their growing presence in practice, such approaches remain comparatively underexamined in SDP research even when some programs have been in operation for over a decade (e.g., Ha, 2021; Ha et al., 2015; Na & Black, 2022; Okada, 2018). This gap is particularly significant given that sustainable development in SDP contexts can be achieved not only through sport participation opportunities but also through the development of local expertise and capacity to support sport systems. As Schulenkorf (2017) noted, locally driven change and the capacity of local actors are critical to the sustainability of SDP efforts. Consistent with this perspective, higher education-based SDP initiatives may provide opportunities for participants to build upon existing local knowledge and experience while engaging with additional professional and transnational perspectives that can be adapted to their own contexts. Therefore, such initiatives may play an important role in fostering local capacity and supporting locally driven development of sport sectors in LMICs. Yet, empirical research examining how participants experience these programs, especially those supported by ODA, remains limited.

ODA-supported Higher Education SDP: The Case of the Dream Together Master Program (DTM)

Within the broader landscape of ODA-supported SDP, higher education has emerged as a complementary pathway for linking sport with development goals. In a small number of donor countries, graduate programs in sport management for students from LMICs have been introduced as part of their sport-related ODA portfolios (Kang & Houlihan, 2021; Okada, 2018). These programs aim to enhance knowledge, professional expertise, and transnational networks of current and future sport administrators, particularly in contexts where formal sport management education opportunities are limited. The underlying assumption is that strengthening human resources and institutional capacity in sport, in alignment with the UN SDGs (Park, 2022), will contribute to the long-term development of sport ecosystems in LMICs, creating conditions in which locally driven sport initiatives can be more effectively designed and implemented. Despite this potential, empirical research exploring how participants experience such higher education–based SDP initiatives, especially those supported through ODA, remains limited. In particular, little is known about how these programs influence graduates' professional capacity building and their engagement with sport industries and organizations in their home contexts.

South Korea's engagement with ODA is shaped by its trajectory from a major aid recipient to a donor country and a member of the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. In this context, South Korea has increasingly sought to draw on its development experience and sport expertise in designing its sport-related ODA portfolio (Na & Black, 2022). Historically, these initiatives have emphasized activities such as facility construction, equipment provision, training for athletes and coaches, short-term sport participation opportunities for youth, and Taekwondo-based cultural diplomacy in LMICs (Ha et al., 2015; Na & Dallaire, 2022). While such efforts have contributed to expanding sport participation and performance, they have also been criticized for their relatively short-term and project-based nature as well as for paying limited attention to governance, management, and institutional capacity within LMIC sport systems. In response, scholars and policymakers have increasingly emphasized the need for more sustained, capacity-oriented approaches that enable local sport professionals to define priorities and lead the development of their own sport sectors over the long term.

In this context, the Dream Together Master Program (DTM) represents one of the earliest and most visible examples of an ODA-supported SDP initiative that focuses specifically on sport management higher education for professionals from LMICs. DTM is a two-year master's degree program delivered at Seoul National University (SNU) and supported by the Korean Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism and the Korea Sports Promotion Foundation. The program targets individuals from LMICs with professional or academic backgrounds in sport and combines coursework, team projects, and a master's thesis with selected experiential learning opportunities (Kang, 2018; Park, 2022). Its curriculum covers core areas of sport management, including event management, governance, marketing, finance, sport law, and SDP. It is designed to strengthen participants' capacity to work as sport administrators and future leaders in their home contexts. In addition, the program promotes cohort cohesion and the development of an international alumni network, which is expected to facilitate ongoing professional collaboration beyond the classroom.

Importantly, DTM represents a distinct form of SDP intervention. The program is embedded in a formal higher education structure that emphasizes sustained learning, professional credentialing, and the development of sport management expertise over time. In this sense, DTM differentiates itself from conventional sport participation-based SDP initiatives by targeting the institutional and human resource foundations of sport systems in LMICs. Despite this distinction, the implications of higher education-based SDP initiatives for participants' professional development and broader sport systems remain insufficiently examined.

Student Experiences and Professional Development in Sport Management Higher Education

In recent decades, sport management in higher education has expanded rapidly with hundreds of programs offered worldwide (Giel et al., 2022). This growth has been

accompanied by a trend toward internationalization, most commonly realized through study abroad and service-learning opportunities (Tingle, 2022). Research on sport management education with an SDP focus has largely explored short-term study abroad or service/experiential learning programs in which students from high-income countries travel to LMICs, often emphasizing outcomes of awareness-raising about underrepresented communities or social issues through volunteer or service-learning activities (Clarke & Norman, 2021; LeCrom et al., 2022). While these studies highlight gains in students' critical awareness, intercultural competence, and sense of social responsibility, they rarely examine long-term professional outcomes, employability, or sustained engagement with sport industries. In contrast, the experiences of students from countries where sport management as an academic discipline and industry is less established, particularly those pursuing full degrees abroad, have not been explored. Although Danylchuk et al. (2015) examined advisors' perspectives on international sport management graduate students in the United States, few studies investigate the experiences and professional trajectories of students from LMICs in international academic settings.

Beyond the SDP field, research on higher education and employability has shown the significance of specialized degree programs and embedded employability activities enhancing graduates' career prospects by providing advanced domain knowledge, industry-relevant skills, and access to professional networks (Scandurra et al., 2024). In sport management, studies have demonstrated the substantial role of experiential learning, internships, and industry partnerships in shaping students' preparedness for employment and their transitions into sport-related careers (Gardner & Love, 2024; López-Carril et al., 2022). However, this line of research has focused primarily on students from high-income countries and on programs located in established sport markets, offering limited insight into how students from LMICs leverage international sport management degrees within structurally constrained sport systems. This gap is particularly salient for ODA-supported initiatives where higher education programs are positioned as a strategic approach for building human resources and, in the long run, enabling graduates to potentially contribute to the development and strengthening of sport sectors in their LMIC home contexts.

A particularly salient case is the DTM program, a fully funded, ODA-supported SDP initiative in higher education for professionals from LMICs or regions with less established sport sectors. The program requires relocation of students to the donor country. This context may present both opportunities and challenges as students navigate rigorous academic demands alongside personal, professional, and cultural adaptation. Despite these program features, empirical research exploring how participants experience this academic setting and how they translate their learning into post-graduation roles within sport sectors remains scarce. An understanding of such programs is therefore critical for assessing how higher education-based SDP initiatives contribute to graduates' livelihoods, career trajectories, and potential role in shaping sport systems in LMIC contexts.

METHOD

This study employed an interpretive qualitative research approach guided by Merriam and Tisdell (2016) to explore the experiences of DTM alumni. It was possible to gain in-depth insights from the lived experiences of research participants, which is critical in understanding their professional and personal development. Thus, conducting semi-structured interviews with former program participants allowed a detailed exploration of their motivations to apply for the program, professional career influences during the program or after graduation, and personal impacts aligning with the study's purpose.

Data Collection

Authors utilized an alumni list to email potential research participants from each yearly cohort. Each email consisted of an explanation of the purpose of the study and procedures that selected research participants would follow if they chose to participate (Newhart & Pattern, 2023). These procedures included scheduling interviews and reviewing an institutional review board-approved consent form prior to the initial interview. Only participants who voluntarily agreed to participate in the study were recruited. The consent form informed participants that interviews would be audio-recorded and explained the measures that would be taken to protect their confidentiality, including the use of pseudonyms and the removal or de-identification of any personal information during the transcription process. After potential participants reviewed the consent form, responses were sent via email to schedule an interview. During the scheduled meeting and before each initial interview, the researchers also verbally reviewed the consent form with each potential participant. After confirming their willingness to participate, consent forms were signed and returned through a secure email before the interview was conducted.

As all research participants are alumni of DTM, thus, recruited participants represented diverse continents and professional backgrounds within the field of sport. Participants were purposefully selected to ensure the wide range of experiences and perspectives relevant to the research questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As a result, 19 alumni (Male: 47%, Female: 53%) who were currently working as administrators or professionals within the field of sport, either internationally or nationally participated in the in-depth semi-structured interviews (see Table 1). Interviews were conducted via Zoom accommodating the participants' diverse geographical locations. An interview guide was developed

prior to the initial interviews through an extensive review of relevant literature to effectively elicit participants' lived experiences. Questions included motivations for applying to the program, influences on their career development, and broader aspects of personal and professional growth through experiences gained from DTM as graduate students. Each interview lasted approximately 40 to 60 minutes and was recorded using an audio recorder. The recordings were transcribed verbatim by a professional transcription service to ensure the accuracy of the data. The researchers then verified the transcripts by comparing them with the audio recordings to confirm the completeness and synchronization.

Table 1. Participant information.

No.	Pseudonym	Home Continent
1	Carlos	South America
2	Sara	South America
3	Sarama	Africa
4	Alejandro	South America
5	Abeba	Africa
6	Pedro	South America
7	Hamza	Asia
8	Celina	Asia
9	Ricardo	South America
10	Julio	South America
11	Antonio	Asia
12	Mateo	South America
13	Imani	Africa
14	Farah	Asia
15	Amelia	South America
16	Annisa	Asia
17	Farid	Asia
18	Adhi	Asia
19	Zara	Asia

Note: To protect participant confidentiality, only limited demographic information is reported. Although pseudonyms are used, more detailed data (such as nationality or specific professional roles) could enable identification of individuals, as alumni information is publicly available on the DTM website. This approach follows best practices for minimizing the risk of re-identification in qualitative research.

Data Analysis

To understand the experiences of research participants, a thematic analysis is applied to extract emerging themes from the transcripts (Braun & Clarke, 2013). This involved a two-step inductive coding procedure to identify and refine themes from research participant interviews (Saldaña, 2021). The interview transcripts were independently reviewed and inductively coded by the researchers, following the guidance of Miles et al. (2020). In the first-cycle coding stage, each researcher assigned codes to initially collected data chunks to capture key ideas expressed by participants (e.g., career aspirations, academic prestige, transnational network, limitations as beneficiaries, etc.). This process allows for a detailed examination of participant narratives. In the second-cycle coding stage, initial codes were refined to categorize identified patterns and concepts, which ultimately led to the derivation of higher-order themes that captured the essence of participant experiences. To ensure consistency and reliability, researchers regularly discussed interpretations of data throughout the coding process. The following table shows the final themes and subthemes extracted from the collected data.

Table 2. Main Themes and Sub-Themes

Main Themes	Sub-Themes
Motivations for Pursuing ODA-supported Sport Management Graduate Studies	- Host Nation's image and institutional prestige - Career Aspirations
Perceptions of Degree Program on Professional Development	- Career Advancement and Transitional Networks - Personal growth and Intercultural Learning
Personal Gratitude and Frustration	- Limitations as Beneficiaries - Sport as a Low or Non-Priority - Pioneering Sport Management Education for the Future

To heighten the trustworthiness of these findings, publicly available documents were used for triangulation purposes such as newsletters, annual program brochures, and textual content from DTM's official website and social media platforms (Ahmed, 2024; Patton, 2015). This allowed cross-validation between collected data and presented information through public sources. During each interview, researchers verified their understanding of participants' statements by repeating or restating key points to seek immediate feedback. This process minimizes potential misunderstandings and ensures the intended meanings are accurately captured. Additionally, this gives attention to the consistency between participants' spoken responses and nuanced non-verbal behaviors providing an additional indication of authenticity and meaning (Gupta, 2024). Last, peer debriefing was conducted to enhance the credibility of the findings. Thus, by inviting scholars with expertise in the subject area, it minimizes potential biases and provides external perspectives on the analysis (Smith, 2018).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Motivations for Pursuing ODA-supported Sport Management Graduate Studies

Host Nation's Image and Institutional Prestige

A common pattern among research participants was that the perceived image of South Korea as a developed nation with a strong cultural and institutional emphasis on education and academic excellence influenced their decision to apply to the program. This motivation was reinforced by the prestige of the host university – SNU, a globally renowned institution. In addition, offering a fully funded scholarship package including tuition waivers, airfare, on-campus housing expenses, stipends, and health insurance was viewed as an appealing opportunity for students to pursue a higher education degree abroad without financial burden. Celina emphasizes the host nation's reputation for academic excellence: "It was a master's degree and it's Korea which is known for its high-level education." Sarama further states the institutional prestige of the host university:

I knew a lot about SNU. I knew that it was one of the best universities in the world and the best in South Korea... And all the prominent figures were SNU alumni. Ban Ki-moon [Former UN Secretary-General], so yeah. I mean who doesn't want to be an SNU alumni?

In addition, full financial support was a critical motivator for participants. Julio explains that the comprehensive scholarship package offered by DTM made pursuing graduate education abroad a feasible option:

Because DTM is exactly what the name says, it's a dream program…I mean, for underdeveloped people here… When I got to know the program, it was a full scholarship… For me it was amazing to go for two years to learn in South Korea with a scholarship in sports management.

Similar to previous studies, host country reputation, institutional prestige, and financial support as key pull factors influencing students' decisions to study abroad (Ahmad & Buchanan, 2016; Gatfield & Chen, 2006). Participants discussed distinctive aspects of DTM such as its multicultural educational environment with classmates from diverse backgrounds and internationally renowned faculty offering varied expertise and perspectives, which are critical for developing the cultural intelligence needed to succeed in this context (Doh et al., 2025). Hamza reflected on the globalized nature of the program by mentioning, "The fact that it's a multicultural program was something very difficult for other programs to compete with." Hamza also valued learning from high-profile faculty: "When you read about the professors who were teaching us, they are high-profile people." Resonating with Weese (2020), this underscores the need to internationalize sport management programs to prepare and meet the needs of graduates for a globalized industry. Thus, participants were driven by the opportunity to acquire advanced knowledge from a highly reputed university that offered a full scholarship with world-renowned professors.

Career Aspirations

The pursuit of career advancement and/or a transition into the sport sector is found to be another key motivation for participants to seek higher education abroad. Participants state the desire to gain specialized knowledge, earn recognized credentials, and access new opportunities within the sport industry—needs frequently unmet in their home countries due to a lack of targeted academic programs (Hailat et al., 2022). Celina's experience exemplifies this idea:

I wanted to do sports management but in my country, we don't have a specialized master's in sports management. It's very general what we have here. So, it was perfect for what I wanted…I really wanted to work in the NOC [National Olympics Committee]... So, I say it was an opportunity that helped me work where I wanted.

Similarly, Antonio highlights the importance of obtaining formal credentials to facilitate his career transition, given his limited prior involvement or professional network in the sport sector:

The first thing was to get a degree, especially in sport management, because I wanted to change my focus. I wanted that credential to say that, "Hey, I want to do sports work. This is what I study. This is what I know, so give me the opportunity."

This reflects the 'push-pull' framework widely discussed in international education literature where limited access to specialized academic programs at home countries (push factors) and the promise of advanced training and career development abroad (pull factors) drive students to seek opportunities elsewhere (Hailat et al., 2022; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). The scarcity of sport management programs in LMICs leads participants to view DTM as pivotal for building expertise and opening new career pathways.

Beyond credentialing, participants show a desire for professional growth and an awareness of the limitations in their existing capacity. Alejandro, formerly employed in the sport sector before enrolling in DTM, explains that the early academic training had not adequately prepared him for the professional demands of a role at a government sport organization: "My first degree was physical education. I don't think it was helping me a lot… I worked in a government sport organization and didn't have a lot of information on how to implement a lot of things." Ho et al. (2023) mention that advanced expertise and preparation for evolving professional demands enhance employee competitiveness, demonstrating the value of career development learning in higher education. For research participants, DTM serves as a bridge, enabling them to acquire specialized training, overcome professional challenges and strengthen their capacity to contribute effectively to their field.

This raises the importance of designing sport management graduate programs that address academic and experiential needs of international students. Theoretically, findings build on the service quality framework that participants value both technical quality (the "what": specialized knowledge and recognized degrees) and functional quality (the "how": interactive, globalized learning environments and strong faculty support; Danylchuk et al., 2015). Practically, these insights suggest programs recruiting international students, particularly from LMICs, should align offerings with core motivations. Providing relevant content, credentials, engaging classroom experiences and networking opportunities can strengthen the appeal and effectiveness of sport management programs for career advancement, particularly in regions with limited opportunities.

Perceptions of Degree Program on Professional Development

Career Advancement and Transnational Networks

For many, the program provided their first exposure to sport management as a legitimate field, fundamentally reinforcing their ambitions of paving their sport career paths. As Carlos reflects:

I didn't see sports as a professional field before. I didn't even know you could study sport or have a career in sport management. It wasn't until I graduated that I started to realize the potential of sports as a professional field.

This echoes broader challenges in LMICs where sport is often undervalued as a sector (Acquah-Sam, 2021). By offering formal education and exposure to global best practices, DTM enables participants to reframe sport as a credible and dynamic industry, encouraging them to advocate for the advancement of the sport sector within their home contexts. Upon returning home, several participants describe that their enhanced expertise and new perspectives led to increased responsibilities and recognition in their organizations. Zara shares: "Because I studied in Korea, the expectation is really high. My boss and colleagues look up to me, and they ask me to take on challenging roles. Whatever challenge they give me, I just accept and do." Similarly, Abeba recounts: "Things have been a lot different… When I came back… I was selected as the chairperson for accommodations in the youth games… And this year, I got selected as chairperson for transportation preparing for the National Games..." These experiences illustrate that sport management higher education ODA can support professional advancement and leadership, especially in emerging contexts. This aligns with the program's overarching goal: empowering participants by providing advanced knowledge and skills in sport management, rather than relying on traditional ODA and/or SDP approaches such as equipment donations or short-term play-based projects (Lindsey, 2017; Okada, 2018).

Furthermore, participants give considerable value to the significant global networks fostered during the participation of the program. These connections extend beyond their immediate cohort, creating a web of professional relationships across continents. Hamza observes: "I was surprised during the World Cup to see DTM alumni in action… Mateo as team officer for [a country], Pedro working at [International Sport Federation], and Aida involved as an administrator at the [International Games]." Adhi shares the practical benefits of networks: "With my classmates… 25 people from 23 countries. For example, Muhammed, a friend from Africa, connected me with colleagues, and their sports app is now being used by my football team." Additionally, Ricardo emphasizes the enduring value of these connections:

One of the best things about the program is the network. You connect with people not only from your batch (cohort) but also from previous ones. At the end of the day, it's all about connections, you never know when you'll need them. That's very valuable and makes the entire experience worthwhile.

These accounts support Moon and Shin's (2016) assertion that transnational social capital developed through higher education ODA programs surpasses individual capacity building. DTM operates as a catalyst advancing participants' professional trajectories and fostering networks that empower alumni to influence change and address structural vulnerabilities in their national sport sectors. Recently, sport management and international education have emphasized transnational social capital as a crucial component for building resilient sport systems and supporting sustainable development (Acquah-Sam, 2021; Moon & Shin, 2016). While direct impact on a broader sport sector remains difficult to assess, findings contribute to theoretical understandings by suggesting higher education ODA programs in sport management have the potential to support individual advancement and, indirectly, the development of sport sectors in participants' home countries through enhanced transnational social capital.

Personal Growth and Intercultural Learning

Participants describe DTM as a catalyst for personal transformation and intercultural learning. The significant gains they perceive were not simply academic and career building, but deeply personal, ranging from newfound confidence and assertiveness to an expanded openness to diverse cultures and perspectives. Annisa shares:

DTM taught me about sport, but even more, it brought people together. Spending so much time with classmates from all over the world really helped me grow over those 18 months. I learned a lot about myself being open to new cultures, discovering, accepting, and adapting to different ways of life.

Others, like Abeba, speak of returning home with a stronger sense of self: "Before I went, I didn't trust myself. But since coming back, I'm much more assertive." This personal growth expresses a visible commitment to contribute to their home countries, while for others, it roots from a deeply personal and internal drive. As Farid explains, "Coming back from DTM gave me a new drive and hunger to contribute to my country. I really wanted to make a difference." Despite persistent structural challenges in the sport sector of some countries, Farid's words illustrate a genuine, self-motivated desire to effect positive change by participating in DTM.

In addition, participants elaborate on the profound impact of intercultural learning. At times initially challenging, working closely with peers from diverse backgrounds became one of

the most rewarding aspects of the program. Mateo notes: "It helped me learn how to work with all kinds of people. We were all pretty different, and that was the trickiest part. But it really taught me how to deal with different personalities, characters, and attitudes." Annisa echoes this by noting: "That is the most realistic part of the program—in real life, you have to work with a lot of people with different personalities." Adhi further emphasizes the personal growth that came from diversity:

One of the toughest things at first was working in such a multicultural, multinational program. It was challenging to figure out how to collaborate smoothly, but that turned out to be one of the best experiences in DTM. Through our weekly group projects, I quickly learned from people of different nationalities and perspectives. Honestly, it really improved my mentality and communication skills.

Taken together, DTM's impact expands beyond the typical discourse of capacity building to transformative experience theory, where learners move from acquiring knowledge to meaningfully integrating it into their daily lives (Pugh, 2011). This demonstrates that well-structured international exchange or degree programs in higher education can enhance lasting changes in self-perception, confidence, intercultural competence, and critical reflection (Jones & Miles, 2017; Nada et al., 2018). Research participants emphasize their increased assertiveness, intercultural competence, and renewed motivation to help their communities. According to LeCrom et al. (2022), international programs foster personal growth and a sense of agency. Similarly, participants viewed DTM not only as academic or career advancement but as an impetus for shaping their perspectives and personal development.

Personal Gratitude and Frustration

Limitations as Beneficiaries

Aside from building networks, acquiring knowledge, and personal growth, some participants found their status as beneficiaries frustrating. They sense a lack of influence, leaving them in a passive role within the program. This dynamic diminishes both their expectations and their sense of ownership. Ricardo describes this dilemma, noting that as a recipient of inbound sport ODA scholarships for graduate education, there was little leverage to demand more from the program:

It made sense to me—SNU isn't going to bring in international students and then fail them. We could do whatever and still pass; there was no point in failing us. I felt they weren't really interested in our education, partly because we weren't paying for it. If you pay, you can demand more, but we weren't in a position to ask for anything since everything was given to us.

Ricardo further reflects on the underlying purpose of the program, suggesting that his educational experience felt more like a public relations effort than a genuine investment in academic growth:

Everyone will pass. I feel like when something is free, it's just not as good. Our education felt more like a PR program—they brought in foreigners from underdeveloped countries, gave us free education, showed us off, but didn't really care about giving us rigorous learning.

Zara echoes this sentiment, perceiving different expectations for international beneficiaries and those of Korean students:

Our learning experience was very different from the Korean program. We just had to meet a minimum standard; it wasn't as demanding. Sometimes it felt unfair seeing how hard Korean students worked compared to us, but that's just how it was.

In line with other East Asian donors, South Korea's ODA initiatives including DTM employ a state-led approach shaped by political objectives, partly aimed at strengthening national standing within the "Club of the Global North," dominated by Western nations (Na & Black, 2022; Sato, 2013). This strategy provides substantial resources and international exposure; however, it can position participants as passive recipients or symbols of donor achievement rather than active co-creators of their educational journey. According to Ricardo's perception of the program as a public relations exercise and Zara's accounts of a two-tiered educational experience where international ODA students felt less challenged and less empowered than their local counterparts, it emphasizes the idea that donor-driven program structures often reinforce power imbalances and limit meaningful engagement for beneficiaries (Lindsey, 2017). While such initiatives are designed to empower participants, findings suggest that they can unintentionally perpetuate hierarchical relationships between donors and recipients, often described as rooted in 'post-colonial residue' that continues to shape power dynamics and inequality within international SDP programs (Clarke, 2024; Kang & Svensson, 2023). These findings suggest that higher education-based SDP initiatives may simultaneously create opportunities for participants while also reproducing donor-recipient power dynamics (Chen, 2022; Giulianotti et al., 2016).

Distinct from most resource-constrained SDP programs (Shin et al., 2020; Svensson et al., 2023), DTM stands out for its substantial material support offering a comprehensive scholarship. The support removes barriers to access and enables students from LMICs to pursue advanced sport management education abroad. Though comprehensive support is a significant strength, it can reinforce passivity and reduce participants' sense of agency, leaving them feeling

less empowered to shape their educational experience or advocate for higher standards. Thus, the findings suggest that resource provision alone does not necessarily foster meaningful participant agency or engagement in ODA-supported higher education SDP initiatives. These findings underscore the need to move beyond the ' more resources are better' logic and consider the interaction between program design and participant involvement.

Sport as a Low or Non-Priority

Though a majority of participants highlight career opportunities and play pioneering roles in advancing professionalization of the sport sector in their home countries, several experience a disconnect between the program's ideals and the realities they face upon returning home. These experiences are not in opposition, rather reflect the diverse local contexts and structural realities that shape the extent to which graduates can apply their training. Some graduates encounter significant obstacles when pursuing careers in sport or implementing what they learned from the program, despite acquiring valuable knowledge and interpersonal skills. These challenges often stem from local contexts where sport is not prioritized, professional pathways are limited, and structural barriers persist. Mateo expresses:

The ideal is to go back to your country and do something in your country. I also agree with that, but the reality is not the same for all of the countries. Some countries don't prioritize sport as much as we expect.

This suggests that deep-rooted structural and/or cultural barriers make meaningful change in the local sport sector more difficult. Even those who return with motivation and optimism face discouraging realities. As Sarama says, the initial excitement and motivation often fade when confronted with local challenges:

You get the DTM scholarship; everything is nice, dandy, and rosy. Then you're all motivated, and you are going to take everything that you learned from the DTM, and you want to apply it to your work. But when you get there [the home country], you realize that it's not easy… It's a good program, but when you're in it, you sort of forget the realities of where you come from.

These difficulties were compounded by economic realities and limited professional opportunities, leading to tough decisions about whether to stay, return home, or seek opportunities elsewhere. Alejandro explains:

Honestly, part of me wanted to fulfill the DTM's mission, but another part didn't want to return home with a master's degree from a good university. I think about half of us from the program are no longer in our countries because after experiencing such a nice country, program, and education abroad, there's often little opportunity to use it back home.

DTM builds individual capacity (micro-level development); however, broader transformation of LMIC in the sport sectors (macro-level development), which the program seeks to facilitate through enhanced individual capacity, remains limited in some countries. These findings caution against assuming that individual-level professional development alone will automatically translate into broader structural transformation in LMIC sport systems (Darnell, 2014; Kang & Svensson, 2023; Millington, 2015). Although higher education-based SDP initiatives aim to support professional and institutional capacity building as a pathway to long-term development, structural barriers and economic realities continue to constrain broader sport sector development and discourage some graduates from returning home, contributing to brain drain as skilled individuals seek better opportunities abroad (Docquier & Rapoport, 2012). In this regard, the findings reflect broader SDP critiques suggesting that individual or micro-level interventions alone may have limited capacity to address deeper structural constraints without parallel institutional and systemic support (Coalter, 2010, 2015; Kang & Svensson, 2023; Slater & Moustakas, 2025). While change through sport and change in sport have distinct purposes, they are often most effective when they complement one another (Shilbury et al., 2008).

Consistent with recent scholarship emphasizing the fluid and interconnected nature of SDP practice (Whitley, 2025b), these findings suggest that sustainable development outcomes may require more integrated approaches that move beyond focusing primarily on a single dimension of SDP. Accordingly, individual capacity building may be most impactful when supported by stronger local sport ecosystems and institutional collaboration among SDP initiatives, governments, and national sport organizations in LMIC contexts.

Pioneering Sport Management Education for the Future

Despite the lack of resources and paths into the sport sector whether public or private within their home countries, participants play the role of pioneers of sport management education in their home countries. Antonio describes DTM as a model for developing a sport management curriculum:

I wanted to start a sport management program here [my country] because there's really no serious sport management. Now that I'm teaching sport management, I rely heavily on the materials and outputs from the DTM program. How I construct syllabi and understand sport management education is always based on DTM as my template.

Further, Julio shares experiences of leading the creation of a

new sport management academic degree program:

I am the dean of the sport faculty at my university and developed the first online master's degree in sport management in [continent]. This program fulfills the mission statement of the DTM… this is exactly what I have been doing. Come back to your countries and really make a change in sport.

Though DTM is not specifically designed for participants to create new degree programs in their home countries, some graduates take on pioneering roles in academia, in addition to their contributions as industry practitioners. Returning graduates can leverage their education in various ways — strengthening the sport sector through professional practice and advancing sport management education to improve local educational structures and build capacity for future professionals. This contrasts with Clarke and Norman's (2021) concern about international SDP initiatives often reinforcing one-way flows of knowledge from the Global North, positioning LMICs participants as passive recipients.

CONCLUSION

Higher education has long been recognized for its potential to promote societal progress, reduce poverty, and foster shared prosperity through the development of an educated and innovative workforce (World Bank, 2017). While many ODA-supported SDP initiatives have primarily focused on youth sport participation as a strategy for change, DTM represents a complementary higher education-based approach that seeks to strengthen human resources and professional capacity among adult professionals working in sport sectors across LMICs. The findings extend contemporary understandings of SDP by illustrating how SDP objectives may also be pursued through professional capacity building and knowledge exchange among adult stakeholders who play important roles in shaping sport systems and organizations in their local contexts. Together, these findings suggest that higher education-based and adult-focused approaches may complement sport participation-centered SDP initiatives by contributing to longer-term capacity building and sport sector development in LMICs. In doing so, the findings echo recent SDP scholarship calling for broader and more flexible understandings of SDP beyond conventional sport participation-centered approaches (Ha, 2021; Welty Peachey et al., 2019; Whitley, 2025b).

While participants reported meaningful professional development opportunities through DTM, the findings also revealed important challenges regarding the translation of individual-level capacity building into broader sport sector development upon their return to their home contexts. In particular, participants described challenges associated with limited institutional support in their home contexts and, at times, frustration with being positioned primarily as beneficiaries rather than active contributors to the program. These findings reflect broader concerns raised in critical SDP scholarship regarding donor-recipient power dynamics, participant agency, and the limitations of assuming that individual capacity building alone will lead to structural transformation (Coalter, 2010; Millington, 2015; Shin et al., 2020).

More broadly, the findings highlight the potential contribution of higher education-based and adult-focused initiatives to the SDP landscape. The study extends beyond the dominant focus on short-term SDP-themed international volunteering programs led by higher education institutions in high-income countries that often center on volunteer experiences (Clarke & Norman, 2021; Raw & Sherry, 2022). At the same time, the findings suggest that the effectiveness of higher education-based SDP initiatives may depend not only on individual learning outcomes but also on the broader institutional and organizational environments to which participants return (Nam et al., 2022). In this regard, sustainable sport sector development may require greater alignment among SDP initiatives, higher education institutions, government agencies, and local sport organizations to ensure that individual capacity-building efforts can be translated into meaningful and contextually grounded change in LMICs.

Given the qualitative and case-specific nature of this study, the findings should be interpreted with caution. The experiences presented reflect a purposive sample of DTM alumni and may not fully represent other ODA-supported SDP initiatives. Future research may further explore how organizational and institutional environments shape the extent to which individual capacity building outcomes can be translated into broader contributions to local sport sectors in LMICs. Future research may also benefit from including additional stakeholders such as program administrators, policymakers, and local sport organizations, as well as comparative studies across different higher education-based SDP initiatives and donor contexts.

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