

Transforming career perspectives through cooperative education: Insights from an international work-integrated learning program in Japan

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This study examines the long-term influence of an international work-integrated learning (WIL) program on Japanese university students' professional development. Four alumni of a national university corporation in Okayama, who participated in a cross-cultural internship with Canadian students, were interviewed 5–9 years after the experience. Data were analyzed using the modified grounded theory approach (M-GTA), resulting in 15 themes and four core categories related to students' motivations, learning outcomes, evolving career perspectives, and retrospective reflections. A process model was developed to illustrate how initial motivations led to direct learning outcomes, career consciousness shifts, and long-term impact, conceptualized as 'maturing learning.' The findings highlight the significance of intercultural interactions as a catalyst for deeper professional reflection. Although the small sample size limits generalizability, the study offers valuable insights into how WIL experiences can shape career trajectories over time and emphasizes the importance of student perspectives in understanding the full impact of international WIL programs.

Keywords: International internship, maturing learning, Japanese students

The purpose of this study is to analyze the significance of work-integrated learning (WIL) in Japan through interviews with former students who experienced WIL alongside Canadian students. The study aims to examine students' expectations and gains from the program, and qualitatively explore how their professional perspectives have evolved over a period of five to nine years. By analyzing these reflections, the study seeks to provide insights into the long-term impact of internships on their current careers and professional outlooks. While the sample size is limited, the high-quality, socially connected learning experienced during their studies, significantly influenced their career perspectives and self-reflection. This paper aims to clarify these effects through qualitative research, contributing to a deeper understanding and improvement of WIL in Japan within a broader educational and policy context. The background context includes the fact that the typical university entry age in Japan is eighteen—one of the youngest in OECD countries—and that undergraduate programs typically last four years (OECD, 2024). Some students pursue graduate studies, and many graduates seek employment across various sectors after completing their education. Despite this pathway, a common perception in Japan has been that academic knowledge gained in university is often disconnected from practical workplace knowledge (Benesse Educational Research and Development Institute, 2011).

WIL is a form of learning that integrates work experience with academic curriculum (Zegwaard et al., 2023). Eady et al. (2025) point out that, unfortunately, many discussions on high-quality WIL do not sufficiently center on the student voice. Although WIL has been expanding globally, research on WIL in Japan remains limited. In fact, the concept of WIL first appeared in official Japanese policy documents in 2013. In this context, WIL was used as an umbrella term encompassing both qualification-based practicums and internships (Yoshimoto, 2021).

Generally, 'internships' in Japan differ from 'co-op education' in other countries in terms of work experience duration and compensation. Japanese internships typically last for two weeks and are often

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unpaid (Tanaka, 2013). In Japan, the definition and scope of internships are ambiguous and vary among stakeholders. Yoshimoto (2021) says that the Japan Society of Internship and Work-Integrated Learning must clarify which practices should be studied and how to define internships and WIL. There are significant differences between Japanese and overseas internships, especially regarding purpose and structure (Yoshimoto, 2021). In Japan, a general internship refers to a system in which students gain actual work experience at companies or other organizations while enrolled in school, deepening their understanding of their own aptitudes, industries, and job types. Qualification-based practicums refer to educational or medical training conducted before candidates take licensing examinations, such as those aiming to obtain teaching or healthcare professional licenses, and tend to have higher educational effectiveness compared to general internships. Additionally, even part-time jobs that a student performs temporarily or on a short-term basis alongside their studies can be considered relevant to WIL research if their educational value is recognized (Yoshimoto, 2021). WIL is an educational method that integrates work experience with academic curriculum for students' learning and career development. According to this, it is still possible to categorize Japanese internships as WIL. However, in Japan, this classification is determined primarily by institutional differences rather than by the educational impact on students. As Eady et al. (2025) notes, "It is evident that the prevailing notions of quality within these models have predominantly been shaped by the perspectives of educational institutions, industry, and community employers. This sidelines students and their insights about quality WIL" (p. 223). Similarly, in Japan, students' perspectives are seldom incorporated into the development or evaluation of WIL programs.

Following this definition, career education in Japan, including short-term unpaid work experience internships lasting about several weeks, can be considered as WIL since it involves work experience for learning and career development.

For this study, interviews were conducted with four former Japanese students who participated in work experience internships during their university years and have since graduated and entered professional life. They participated in an internship program named "International Internship" at Okayama University, together with Canadian students. In this program, Okayama University annually hosts several Canadian students, who undertake practical training with forestry and wood industry companies in northern Okayama Prefecture. Japanese students accompany them, living together in shared accommodation, providing linguistic and cultural support to the Canadian students in both work and daily life, while also engaging in forestry work experience themselves. The aim of this study was to investigate how their internship experiences influenced their professional lives. The participants in this study are former Japanese students. This paper examines the perceived benefits during university years, and the impact resulting from internship participation on professional life.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview of Japanese Education System: Pathways and Enrollment Trends

In Japan, it is common to enter professional life after completing formal education. Compulsory education consists of six years of elementary school and three years of junior high school. The high school enrollment rate for junior high school graduates was 98.7% in 2023 (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2023). After high school graduation, paths become more diverse, with some pursuing higher education and others choosing to enter the workforce. The university enrollment rate of high school graduates is 57.7% (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, 2024b).

It should be noted that these figures vary slightly by region. In urban areas centered around Tokyo (the capital) and Osaka, higher education enrollment rates are high at around 70%, while they tend to be lower in regional cities with some exceptions such as Aichi, Hiroshima and Fukuoka (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, 2024a).

After completing their education, graduates typically enter professional life, and it is rare for them to return to formal education after they have begun working. It is important to note that adult education within the school system is not common in Japan. Until recently, Japan has been very reluctant to accept adults into school system. Access to post-compulsory education has been hindered by entrance examinations, and for a long time, only full-time students were considered for admission (Mizoue, 1993). However, there are perspectives that point out the potential for mutual reference between academic knowledge and practical knowledge. Practical knowledge, which is tied to specific practices, is characterized by being processed unconsciously during practical activities (Schön, 1983).

Disconnect Between Education and Professional Life in Japan

It is necessary to address the disconnect between education and professional life in Japan. There is a prevailing attitude in Japan that the knowledge required for work should be taught within companies after students join, with little expectation placed on university education content (Tajima, 2016). Professional life in Japan can be likened to a kind of apprenticeship society. Newcomers participate from the periphery, observing and gradually increasing their level of participation towards the center as they develop expertise and take on more significant roles.

Policy Developments and the Evolution of Work-Integrated Learning

Internships in Japan underwent a major transformation in 1997. On May 16, 1997, the Japanese government approved the Action Plan for the Transformation and Creation of the Economic Structure. Subsequently, on September 18 of the same year, the Ministry of Education (now the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology), the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (now Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry), and the Ministry of Labor (now Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare) jointly compiled the Basic Approach to the Promotion of Internships, and established related systems. As a result, six major reforms were implemented which are known as 'Change and Creation.' Alongside administrative, financial system, economic structure, fiscal structure, and social security reforms, educational reform included "human resource development through industry-academia collaboration" and "promotion of internships." (Japan Society of Internship and Work-Integrated Learning, 2011, p. 9). In Japanese primary and secondary education, career education is conducted in accordance with the curriculum guidelines. The first mention of career education in Japanese educational policy was in the Central Council for Education's report *Improving the Connection Between Elementary and Secondary Education and Higher Education* (December 16, 1999). Chapter 6, "Connecting School Education and Professional Life" outlined three specific measures for improving this connection: 1. Implementing career education from elementary school onwards, appropriate to developmental stages; 2. Emphasizing experiential activities, including the promotion of internships; 3. Enhancing guidance and counseling functions, such as placing career advisors from business management (Central Council for Education, 1999). Internships in Japan have been developed based on the fundamental policy known as the Three-Ministry Agreement established in 1997 by the Ministry of Education, Ministry of International Trade and Industry, and Ministry of Labor (all former names). This agreement defined internships as experiences with an expected educational role,

specifically "work experience related to students' majors and future careers while enrolled in school" (Matsutaka, 2024, p. 116)

The Industry-Academic Council on the Future of Recruitment and University Education identified challenges for realizing a "virtuous cycle of work and learning" in 2021 (Industry-Academic Council on the Future of Recruitment and University Education, 2022, p. 4). Moving forward, the business and education sectors aim to collaborate with the government to pursue "education adapted to the new era" (p. 4) and "work styles and employment systems adapted to the new era" (p. 4). By facilitating labor mobility and encouraging many workers to move between work and learning, it is expected that human resource diversity and value will improve. Consequently, this should promote innovation, enhance worker engagement, realize well-being, and contribute to the sustainable growth of Japan's economy and society. In this context, recurrent education is considered crucial not only for individuals seeking career advancement but also for those aiming for career changes to new or growing business fields, making it a key factor in realizing the "virtuous cycle of work and learning" (Industry-Academic Council on the Future of Recruitment and University Education, 2022, p. 4).

Adoption of Internships and Cooperative Education in Japan

Cooperative education is one form of work experience, represented by internships. While internships in Japan are defined as "students gaining work experience related to their major or future career while enrolled," it has been reported that in Western countries, university-led programmed workplace experiences and practices are called cooperative education, which are conceptually distinct from company-led internships (Okayama University, 2016, p. 2).

However, cooperative education has not readily taken hold in Japan. Tanaka (2013), who analyzed the history and current state of cooperative education in Japan and identified its development and challenges, points to the existence of educational and employment environments that do not necessitate cooperative education as a reason for this.

While there is limited prior research on internships in Japan, some studies discuss their educational effects. Tanaka and Carlson (2012) partially verified the hypothesis that WIL contributes to Grade Point Average (GPA) improvement in their analysis of WIL's impact on academic performance in Japan and Hong Kong. Matsutaka (2024) analyzed the educational effects on Japanese students to organize and consider factors that enhance the educational effectiveness of internships, a central program in WIL. The study confirmed the cultivation of vocational and work consciousness, support for transition to professional life, and enhancement and deepening of learning motivation.

Student Voice in Work-Integrated Learning Research

Nevertheless, there are few studies focusing on students' voices. WIL programs such as internships and co-op programs, whether paid or unpaid, are excellent educational opportunities that embody this concept. Researchers and education policymakers rarely focus on the voices of participating students.

Eady et al. (2025) proposed a conceptual model called the "balancing rock formation." This metaphor carries significant meaning in two key aspects: 1. It symbolically represents students at the core of the model; 2. It depicts students' voices as "standing strong with three rocks that are organized by size and concept"(p. 233). This metaphorical representation emphasizes the necessity of carefully listening to students' voices. The model suggests that understanding and valuing student perspectives is crucial for effective work-integrated learning experiences. Furthermore, this concept likely transcends

regional and cultural boundaries, indicating its potential universal applicability in educational contexts. The balancing rock formation model underscores the importance of student-centered approaches in work-integrated learning, aligning with the growing recognition that students' experiences and insights are fundamental to improving educational practices and outcomes.

Yamauchi (2024) suggests the need to reconsider university students' learning from their perspective, rather than from the university's viewpoint. Yamauchi says that university learning does not remain confined to the campus; rather, it deepens and becomes practical only through active engagement with the real world outside the university, such as local communities and workplaces. It is important for students to acquire broader perspectives and practical skills through diverse social experiences, and university education considers such collaboration with society indispensable (Yamauchi, 2024).

Takezawa (2011) conducted a questionnaire survey targeting internship participants at Meio University in Okinawa, Japan. The post-internship survey revealed that, compared to faculty and company supervisors, students showed a significantly higher tendency to identify specialized knowledge and skills as areas they wished they had studied before the internship. Takezawa pointed out the need to examine the differences in recognition (mismatch) between the two groups and emphasized that future consideration of improved pre-internship learning should be based on the respective positions and roles of students, host organizations, and universities.

Tajima et al. (2013) found that through participation in internships, students tended to examine others' opinions from a stakeholder's perspective and engage in responsive negotiations regarding those opinions. Through their internship experiences, students were more likely to develop a flexible negotiation attitude that does not simply reject differing views by asserting one's own arguments as unequivocally correct, but rather acknowledges the valid elements of others' claims while seeking mutually acceptable solutions.

Research Gap and Purpose of This Study

The subject of this paper is to analyze the significance of WIL through interviews with former students who have experienced WIL in Japan, considering that studies focusing on students' voices are scarce. This approach makes it possible to examine what students expected from and gained through the program, as well as qualitatively explore how their professional perspectives have been shaped over the years following participation. By analyzing reflections several years later, it offers insights into the long-term impacts of internships on current work and career development views. Although the study follows only four former students with internship experience during their university days, the high-quality, socially connected learning they underwent contributed strongly to shaping their career perspectives and self-reflection. This paper aims to clarify these effects through qualitative research. Furthermore, while many policy drivers support the advancement of WIL in Japan, research on the voices of students who experienced internships remains limited. This study seeks to understand the overall state of WIL in Japan and contribute to qualitative improvement by reflecting on the experiences of these four individuals. Their stories illuminate the significance of WIL within a broader context and provide direction for future educational improvements. Thus, the purpose of this study is not merely to report individual experiences but to contribute to the qualitative development of WIL in Japan through the perspectives of students.

TARGET PROGRAM OVERVIEW

This study focuses on a cross-cultural internship program offered at a national university corporation in Okayama, Japan, from 2015 to 2019. The course was titled International Internship and was open to students from all departments and all year levels. Students could register for the course according to their own interests. A distinctive feature of this course was its concurrent operation with the "Co-op in Okayama" program of the Faculty of Forestry at a Canadian university. In this program, Canadian students receive scholarship money instead of salaries while Japanese students receive academic credits for university courses instead of salaries.

This Canadian university has been implementing cooperative education for over 30 years. Work placements are not limited to Canada; employment in other countries is also encouraged. The Co-op in Okayama program annually hosted 2-3 Canadian students. They stay in Japan for three months and gain work experience at multiple companies. The period of work experience at each company is about two weeks, and a different Japanese student participates as a buddy at each company. For Canadian students, working in Japan, even in forestry or wood industry companies within their field of specialization, was by no means easy due to significant differences in language, lifestyle, and work culture. While it presented an excellent opportunity to experience learning in a different culture (in this case, Japan), language and lifestyle issues made it challenging for both Canadian students and host companies to implement practical training (Okayama University, 2016).

The International Internship program had 5-16 Japanese students participating each year. While Japanese students had studied English as a compulsory subject in junior and senior high school and achieved a certain score in English tests for university admission, they had no knowledge of forestry. Participants were required to attend pre-employment training. This training was conducted separately for Canadian and Japanese students due to differences in their basic understanding of forestry and forest products industry, as well as the language of instruction.

Canadian students specializing in forestry were taught by experts in various fields about Japan's industrial structure, challenges facing the forestry industry, and the role of wood in Japanese culture. They also learned basic Japanese conversation skills useful for workplace greetings and simple communication. In contrast, Japanese students, lacking knowledge in forestry, received about 30 hours of basic-level classes on forest ecology, forestry, forest products, and forest management from experts in each field. Learning these things in a short period is extremely challenging for students who have no prior knowledge of forestry, but it is necessary in order to function appropriately in the internship setting. Japanese students must possess background knowledge of forestry, as they serve as interpreters between company employees and Canadian students; without such knowledge, they cannot fulfill this role. Furthermore, in order to make reflection by applying their own academic interests at the internship site, it is effective for them to have prior knowledge of the industry's management situation, safety measures, processes, and work-related innovations. Regardless of their initial motivation for participation, the program providers intend for students to learn, through their work experience in the internship, how academic curiosity can be realized and have an impact within social activities. Both groups were assigned to write reflections after each class, aiming to engage in the course material called "reflection before action" to clarify their purpose for participation. These assignments were reviewed and feedback was provided by instructors. The program coordinator attended all classes to ensure students' understanding of the program content.

Subsequently, on designated dates, they proceeded to their work placements. Canadian students engaged in about three months of practical training in Japanese forestry and wood industry companies. Japanese students participated in assigned two-to-four-week work placements. During this period, Canadian students were placed individually at various locations, paired with Japanese students for the internship. As all work locations were far from university dormitories, making daily commuting impossible, students stayed near their work sites. This arrangement required Canadian and Japanese students to live together, including daily meal preparation. They also wrote daily activity reports for reflection. The program coordinator visited each work site every Friday to support students' physical and mental well-being and facilitate communication with the companies.

Conducting this course concurrently with Co-op in Okayama was beneficial for students from both universities and the host companies. Japanese students could simultaneously experience work and cross-cultural exchange. Canadian students could experience working in Japan while receiving language and lifestyle support from peers. For companies, the burden was reduced as Japanese students assisted Canadian students with language and lifestyle aspects.

While these advantages are not limited to forestry and wood industries, this course was implemented in these sectors due to an agreement between the two universities. Host companies established a voluntary organization called the Forestry Education Consortium to collaboratively receive students.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study conducted interviews with four former students who participated in the International Internship program while attending Okayama University and have since graduated. Among the program's alumni, four individuals who could be contacted and agreed to participate in this study were individually interviewed between February and March 2025. Of these four, three were interviewed at their current workplaces, while one participated online from home. Each interview lasted approximately one hour and was conducted by the author.

Prior to conducting the interviews, approval was obtained from the Okayama University Research Ethics Committee (Approval No. SHA-2024-34). An interview guide listing the interview topics was created, and semi-structured interviews were conducted.

The interview results were transcribed and analyzed using the modified grounded theory approach (M-GTA) which had been developed by Yasuhito Kinoshita, a Japanese researcher. The original grounded theory approach (GTA), which is the foundation of M-GTA, was introduced by Glaser and Strauss in *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967). From this original version, Glaser and Strauss each developed their own versions, leading to the Glaser version (Glaser, 1978), Strauss version (Strauss, 1987), and the Charmaz version (Charmaz, 2006). Additionally, inspired by the original version and through trial and error focusing on the relationship between research and practice, Kinoshita proposed M-GTA. M-GTA aims to generate explanatory models of human behavior. This approach was adopted for the present study (Kinoshita, 2020).

Concepts were extracted from the transcribed interview audio through label work. After a process of trial and error in visualization, the author successfully extracted 15 categories and four core categories.

PARTICIPANTS

Table 1 shows the program participation period, year and program of study at the time of participation, internship company and current job for the four participants in this study. Year of participation ranges from 2015 to 2017, meaning the former students were interviewed five to nine years after their internship participation.

TABLE 1: Participants.

Student	Year of Participation	Year of study	Program of study	Internship Company	Current Job (previous jobs)
Student A	2015	2	Philosophy	Wood Industry A	Secretary at Wood Industry B
Student B	2016	2	Economics	Wood Industry B	Sales representative at wood wholesale company
Student C	2016	1	Economics	Forestry Company C	CEO of education company
Student D	2017	4	Education	Forestry Company D	Graduate student (banker, elementary school teacher)

Note: Three of the four participants (excluding Student A) were being interviewed about this experience for the first time since their participation in the program.

INTERVIEW TOPICS

For each participant, an approximately one-hour interview was conducted. Prior to the interview, the purpose of the study was explained, and appointments were made with the participants' consent. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with three of the four participants (Students A, C, and D) in a face-to-face format, while the remaining participant (Student B) was interviewed online using a video conferencing system. All interviews were conducted in Japanese.

An experienced interviewer conducted the interviews following this guide:

1. Current position and situation (fact-checking)
2. Position and situation at the time of participation (fact-checking)
3. Motivation for participating in the internship
4. What aspects motivated you to apply for the International Internship?
5. Did you have any concerns when applying? If so, what were they?
6. Did you achieve the outcomes you expected from participating? Why do you feel this way?
7. Among your collaborative experiences with Canadian students, what activities or experiences related to work stand out in your memory?
8. Among your collaborative experiences with Canadian students, what activities or experiences related to daily life stand out in your memory?
9. Throughout the entire work experience, what activities or experiences particularly stand out in your memory? Please consider experiences at the workplace and university, in addition to collaborating with Canadian students.
10. What skills do you think you acquired?

11. After participating in the International Internship, do you think your perspective on work has changed?
12. If you hadn't participated in the International Internship, how do you think your career choice process would have been different?

RESULTS

The following presents details of the four core categories and their 15 subordinate themes. For each theme, representative student voices expressing the extracted concepts are presented. The proponent of M-GTA, Kinoshita, uses the term category instead of theme; however, to avoid confusion with core categories, this paper adopts the term theme. It should be noted that as the interviews were conducted in Japanese, the student voices have been translated into English by the author.

Core Category 1: Reasons for Participation

Theme 1: Participated due to interest in the program itself

"I wanted to try as many different things as possible while in university. When my professor introduced this program, I immediately thought it sounded interesting and applied."

Theme 2: Participated as an alternative opportunity for studying abroad

"I wanted to speak English. I wanted to study abroad, but I was worried that if I went to a foreign country and felt it was a mistake, I couldn't turn back. Yet this program takes place not too far from the university, and there are professors nearby who can help if I have trouble, so I felt reassured."

Theme 3: Participated as an opportunity to break out of the current situation

"I wanted to escape from boring, unstimulating daily life. I wanted to do something interesting."

Theme 4: Anxiety and expectations about participation

"I'm not fluent in English, and I heard that the Canadian students don't understand Japanese. I thought it was going to be a pretty big challenge for me to do everything in English."

Core Category 2: Gaining a Sense of Achievement and Self-Affirmation

Theme 5: Gaining a sense of achievement

"I gained a lot of confidence by participating. It was quite good that I decided to go just by seeing the poster. I strongly feel that I gained a lot."

"As a student, I was very stubborn and withdrawn. Through participating in the internship, I think I was able to break out of my shell well. I wanted to overcome my weaknesses."

Theme 6: Language challenges

"I remember trying hard to interpret. I vividly remember feeling that I couldn't do it well. It's challenging to work and live using English."

"I wish I had better English skills to convey subtle nuances."

Theme 7: Overcoming personal weaknesses

"I was not good at presentations. Thanks to strict guidance, I was able to overcome my aversion to them."

Theme 8: Understanding and familiarity with forestry and wood industry

"I used to think cutting trees was bad for the environment. I learned for the first time that this was incorrect."

"I was surprised to learn about biomass power generation for the first time. I had no idea that they could contribute to the region in this way, not just through lumber production."

"Even when watching anime with children, I notice proper logging procedures being depicted."

Theme 9: Challenging new opportunities

"I became interested in Canada and traveled to Vancouver, although I didn't visit the Canadian students themselves."

"The following year, I participated in a different internship (agricultural work experience)."

"Although not an internship, I participated in a residential forestry experience program."

"I started a business."

All students showed no hesitation in participating in new experiences and looked forward to challenging new opportunities.

Theme 10: Learning from the mindset and attitude of foreign peers

This theme was completely unexpected before participation, and all participants mentioned it as an unforeseen outcome.

"I never thought of Canadian students in the same young generation as university students or peers; I initially thought they were amazing people."

"Because they are actually studying forestry, they can prepare for potential dangers."

"Listening to their questions to the company representatives, I realized I couldn't ask similar questions without the same knowledge."

"It was very impressive to see their high level of awareness of issues, such as taking a break from university to come to Okayama from Canada to learn how to conduct forestry more safely, and how they asked many questions."

Core Category 3: Career Choice and Post-Employment

Theme 11: Desire to support colleagues using internship experiences

This theme yielded concepts related to actions after obtaining employment in companies post-graduation.

"I'm interested in interviewing new hires to understand their concerns and anxieties, and in providing follow-up support until they get on track after joining the company."

"I'm studying to become a career advisor for junior employees."

Theme 12: Changes in career awareness

This theme revealed concepts related to post-graduation career decisions.

"Because I had the internship experience, I got a job in the wood wholesale company. During the internship, I strongly felt the problems faced by the forestry industry and its social contribution, so I thought it suited me."

Core Category 4: Significance Felt in Retrospect

Themes 13-15 represent concepts that were neither anticipated at the time of the internship nor felt immediately after participation, but emerged upon reflecting on the experience during this interview. The experiences of interacting with Canadian students and linguistically interpreting for them when they interacted with company employees are still vividly remembered years later. Furthermore, voices expressing current feelings as working professionals were gathered.

Theme 13: Understanding the job

"The craftsmen said it was the first time they explained the reasons for what they had been doing for generations."

"I think I interacted with clients as a banker while recalling various conversations with the craftsmen."

"I feel there are things you can't understand just by being on the consumer side."

Theme 14: Shift in sense of professionalism: students facing themselves

"The basics of working are to cherish one's initial mindset."

"Working is about contributing to society as an adult."

"I became a manager. I'm trying to bridge the gap between management and frontline employees."

Theme 15: Shift in sense of professionalism: supervisors working with students

"When I see students coming for internships at my workplace, I'm reminded of the broadmindedness of the companies that accepted me back then."

"I want to create a workplace where students can thrive freely."

ANALYSIS

All interviews were transcribed from audio to text, and concept extraction was first performed. Concept extraction involves the analyst interpreting and generating meanings from the data (Kinoshita, 2020). As a result, a total of 32 concepts were extracted. These were categorized, resulting in the extraction of 15 themes. Furthermore, by classifying these 15 themes, four core categories were identified. The extracted concepts, themes, and core categories are schematically presented below in Figure 1.

Before examining the voices of students in each theme in detail in the next section, the core categories are explained here.

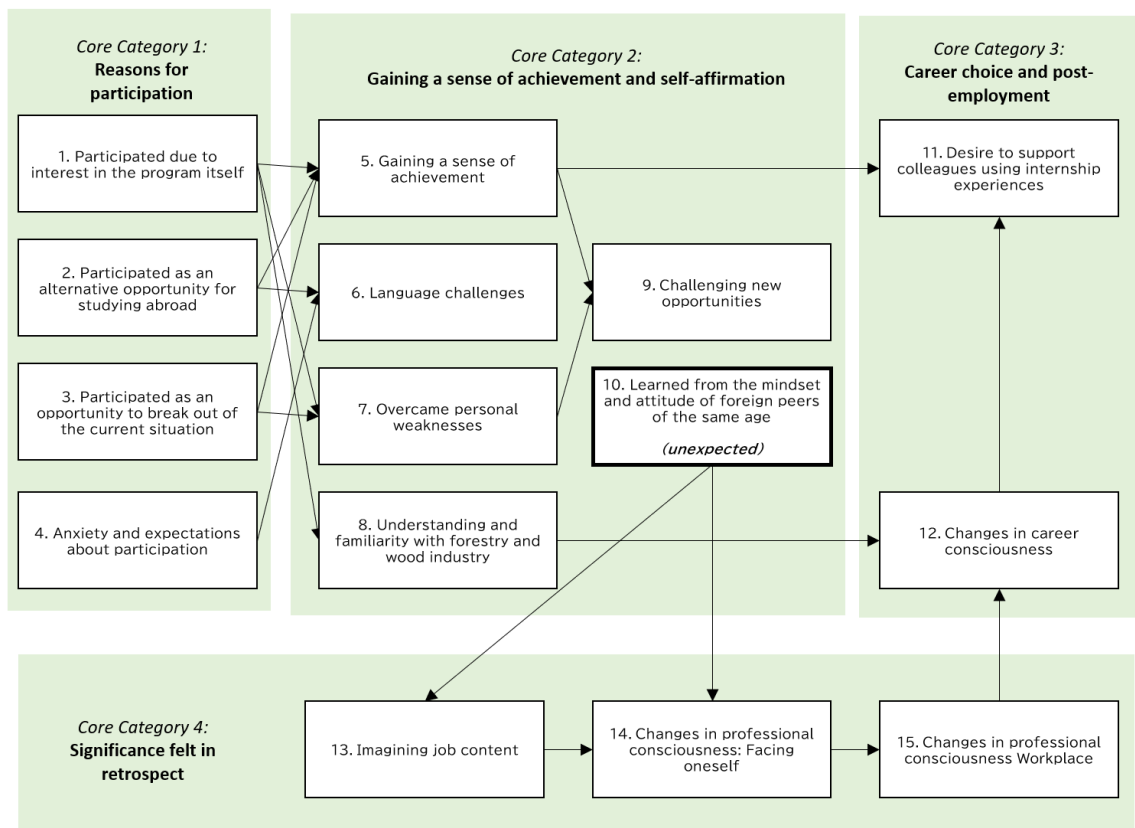
Core category 1 is the reason for participation. It pertains to the reasons for participating in internships, while Core category 2, which is gaining a sense of achievement and self-affirmation, concerns the outcomes obtained from internships. Students participate in internships for various reasons and achieve the expected outcomes through this experience. Some use this experience to open doors to further challenges. Moreover, the internship experience influences students even after they graduate

from school and secure jobs. The perspective towards students who participate in internships with similar anxieties as in the past is gentle, and support is provided when needed.

Theme 10, which appears under Core category 2, is particularly noteworthy. It shows that students learned from the mindset and attitude of foreign peers of the same age, which is unexpected for Japanese students. This theme differs from Core category 1 and other categories under Core category 2, as it emerges here for the first time. During interviews reflecting on internship experiences, the strong impression left by living with Canadian students stands out.

Two scenes are memorable. First, there is the scene where Canadian students ask craftsmen at work questions related to their professional field,, utilizing the knowledge they learned in Canada. The clarity and precise accuracy of the questions posed by the Canadian students were remarkable, even to the workplace personnel, demonstrating high-quality inquiries. The thoughtfulness of the Japanese students who interpreted those questions was also impressive. Another scene is during evenings or holidays after work, where the diligent effort to learn as many Japanese words as possible and discussions about learning and future work perspectives are impressive. These impressions led to the formation of Core category 4. Core category 4 is “Significance felt in retrospect.” Even several years after their WIL experience, these memorable scenes remained clearly and commonly in the memories of the former students. This is where the significance of reflecting on this experience can be found. In addition, Core category 3 (career choice and post-employment) is mainly influenced by Core category 2 but it is also affected by Core category 4. The author considered that those students formed their professional perspectives through their WIL experiences.

FIGURE 1: Schematic diagram by M-GTA.



DISCUSSION

The author focuses on the fact that Theme 10 (i.e., learning from the mindset and attitude of foreign peers) appeared in all interview results as an unexpected learning outcome. All participants reported being stimulated by the Canadian students' enthusiastic work and study attitudes, leading to self-reflection. Additionally, some participants mentioned unexpected learning outcomes from conversation shared by craftsmen and Canadian students while interpreting for them. Theme 10 can be seen as influencing Theme 13 (i.e., understanding the job) and Theme 14 (i.e., shift in sense of professionalism), with interactions with Canadian students acting as a catalyst for new insights into professional perspectives.

WIL participants cannot imagine even direct learning outcomes when deciding to participate. They are preoccupied with the excitement of participating and immediate concerns about their language abilities. After the experience, they realize the direct outcomes, which are easily verbalized and remembered due to daily reflections in activity reports. This suggests that internship participants experience different realizations immediately after the experience and when reflecting years after employment, with the latter being deeper and from a higher perspective.

Participants were interviewed after a 5–9-year gap, but they seemed to recall the latter experiences without much difficulty. This indicates that the internship experience left a strong impression. Participants express themselves in words they have digested over the years. WIL has both direct learning outcomes and learning outcomes that influence later life (maturing learning). Core categories 1 (i.e., reasons for participation) and 2 (i.e., gaining a sense of achievement and self-affirmation) are directly linked to the internship experience, while Core categories 3 (i.e., career choice and post-employment) and 4 (i.e., significance felt in retrospect) are realizations verbalized through reflection. Core category 4 could be considered new reflections made during this interview.

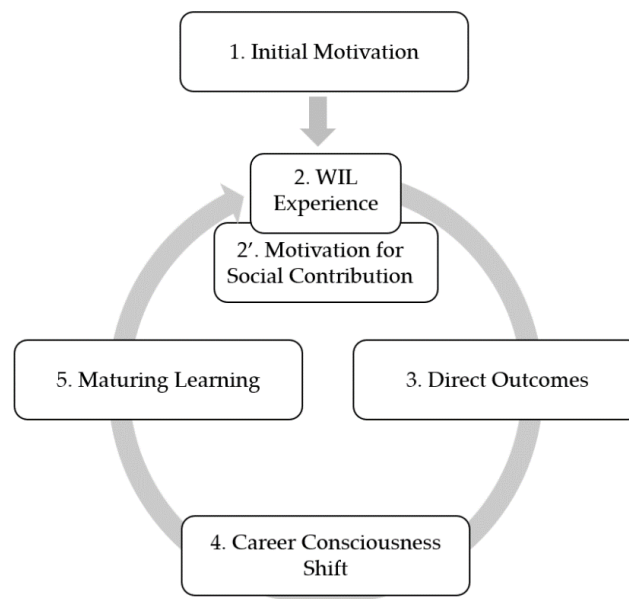
Notably, participants unanimously expressed admiration for Canadian students' enthusiastic learning attitudes and subsequent self-reflection. Quotes recorded in Theme 10 reveal that participants had few opportunities for such realizations in their pre-internship learning environments and were surprised by things they had never considered. This may relate to the limited spread of cooperative education in Japan.

Interactions with Canadian students influenced Japanese students' views on work and learning beyond just providing English communication opportunities. Due to personal relationships formed, Japanese students view Canadian students as individuals rather than a group of foreign students. They consider Canadian students' comments and learning attitudes as personal characteristics.

The analysis reveals a process model wherein students' initial motivations led them into a unique international WIL environment, which generated direct learning outcomes (e.g., self-efficacy, domain knowledge). Over time, these experiences catalyzed more profound professional insights and value shifts, which the author conceptualizes as 'maturing learning.' This model illustrates a recursive, time-sensitive pathway in which intercultural engagement and reflective interpretation play central roles.

When the Core categories obtained in Figure 1 are organized into an experiential learning process model for students (Figure 2), first there is a motivation to participate (1), which leads to participation in WIL (2). The experiences gained here (3) foster career consciousness shift (4) and become maturing learning (5). This maturing learning then becomes a new motivation to participate, leading to further new experiences (2').

FIGURE 2: Experiential learning process model for students.



While the sample size is limited to four participants, the consistency in narrative patterns allowed the construction of a tentative model describing transformative learning through international WIL. This model is not intended for statistical generalization but rather to serve as a conceptual lens that may guide future studies.

CONCLUSION

The international internship discussed in this study is a unique initiative rarely seen in Japanese universities. However, we believe that the goal of qualitative analysis as WIL has been achieved. While opportunities for WIL based on shared living with Canadian students are unfortunately not common, this study's findings confirm through interviews that shared living provided more than just cohabitation, offering opportunities for intense interaction and discussion, leading to unexpected outcomes.

Furthermore, it was revealed that deep reflections arising from these realizations continue to positively influence participants' views on work (Theme 13) and shift in sense of professionalism (Theme 14 and Theme 15).

This study proposes classifying these outcomes as 'maturing learning,' distinct from 'direct learning outcomes.' University students' learning is not confined to the university environment. It is the mission of university students to acquire academic knowledge at university and apply it in consideration of the realities of society outside the university. While previous studies by Tanaka (2013) and Eady et al. (2025) have shown that WIL provides valuable opportunities for students, this study further demonstrates its contribution to the formation and enrichment of professional perspectives.

However, this study has limitations. While the results show that the Japanese interviewees of this research gained significant insights through joint work experiences with Canadian university students, we did not compare control and target groups, which would be difficult to do. Although Student A,

who had relatively less contact with Canadian students, made fewer mentions of this aspect, it is unclear whether this is due to differences in the quality of experience or individual variation.

Moreover, this may be viewed in the context of Japanese students' unrealistic perceptions of employment, as they typically do not enter professional life until after completing their education. While the interaction with Canadian students was considered highly beneficial for Japanese students, we could not verify how it was for the Canadian students in this study. Further research on the voices of students is eagerly anticipated.

This study involved only four participants, and the small sample size presents a clear limitation. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted with caution and not generalized prematurely. Furthermore, the absence of a control group—such as students who did not participate in the program—limits the ability to draw strong causal conclusions. This is one of the key limitations of the present study. In addition, we were unable to interview the Canadian students who participated in the program alongside the Japanese students. As a result, this study does not include the perspectives of the Canadian participants, and thus cannot fully address the reciprocal nature of the cross-cultural interactions. This is another important limitation. To better understand the value of international WIL programs, future research should explore and compare the learning experiences and mutual influences of both participating groups.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The driving force behind the implementation of this course was the cooperation from member companies of the Forestry Education Consortium, consisting of volunteers from forestry businesses, forest product companies, and local governments within the Okayama Prefecture. This program could not have been realized without their dedicated support.

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About the Journal

The International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning (IJWIL) publishes double-blind peer-reviewed original research and topical issues related to Work-Integrated Learning (WIL). IJWIL first published in 2000 under the name of Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education (APJCE).

In this Journal, WIL is defined as:

An educational approach involving three parties – the student, educational institution, and an external stakeholder – consisting of authentic work-focused experiences as an intentional component of the curriculum. Students learn through active engagement in purposeful work tasks, which enable the integration of theory with meaningful practice that is relevant to the students' discipline of study and/or professional development (Zegwaard et al., 2023, p. 38).*

Examples of practice include off-campus workplace immersion activities such as work placements, internships, practicum, service learning, and cooperative education (co-op), and on-campus activities such as work-related projects/competitions, entrepreneurship, student-led enterprise, student consultancies, etc. WIL is related to, and overlaps with, the fields of experiential learning, work-based learning, and vocational education and training.

The Journal's aim is to enable specialists working in WIL to disseminate research findings and share knowledge to the benefit of institutions, students, WIL practitioners, curricular designers, and researchers. The Journal encourages quality research and explorative critical discussion that leads to the advancement of quality practices, development of further understanding of WIL, and promote further research.

The Journal is financially supported by the [WILNZ](#), [WACE](#), [WIL Australia](#), and the [University of Waikato](#).

Types of Manuscripts Sought by the Journal

Types of manuscripts sought by IJWIL are primarily in two forms: 1) *research publications* describing research into aspects of WIL and, 2) *topical discussion and conceptual* articles that review relevant literature and provide critical explorative discussion around a topical issue. The journal will, on occasions, consider good practice submissions.

Research publications should contain; an introduction that describes relevant literature and sets the context of the inquiry. A detailed description and justification for the methodology employed. A description of the research findings - tabulated as appropriate, a discussion of the importance of the findings including their significance to current established literature, implications for practitioners and researchers, whilst remaining mindful of the limitations of the data, and a conclusion including recommendations.

Topical discussion and conceptual articles should contain a clear statement of the topic or issue under discussion, reference to relevant literature, critical and scholarly discussion on the importance of the issues, critical insights into how to advance the issue further, and implications for other researchers and practitioners.

Good practice and program description papers. On occasions, IJWIL seeks manuscripts describing an example of good practice, however, only if it presents a particularly unique or innovative practice or it was situated in an unusual context. There must be a clear contribution of new knowledge to the established literature. Manuscripts describing what is essentially 'typical', 'common' or 'known' practices will be encouraged to rewrite the focus of the manuscript to a significant educational issue or will be encouraged to publish their work via another avenue that seeks such content.

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Zegwaard, K. E., Pretti, T. J., Rowe, A. D., & Ferns, S. J. (2023). Defining work-integrated learning. In K. E. Zegwaard & T. J. Pretti (Eds.), *The Routledge international handbook of work-integrated learning* (3rd ed., pp. 29-48). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003156420-4>

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ISSN: 2538-1032

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