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A study of learning by overseas students during internships

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## Background

In recent years the number of university students in Japan who undertake internships at enterprises before graduation has increased significantly. Internships have gained substantial interest because they may well function as opportunities for college students to be offered employment earlier than usual. In contrast, Japan's internship program, which was launched in 1997, seeks to facilitate students' search for "self" in their pursuit of a job that perfectly matches their personality and talents, superseding the provision of on-the-job training. On-going studies have revealed that learning through internships is, in fact, quite limited, particularly for overseas students with less knowledge about enterprises and businesses in Japan than their native counterparts.

## Aims

This thesis has three objectives. First is, to examine the reasons behind overseas students' intention to learn from their internships at Japanese enterprises. Second is, to explore how these students learn through immersion in business practice and experience, which is further divided into two aims: (1) to investigate the mediating tools that overseas students use for practice, and (2) to determine the kind of people they interact with inside or outside the work domain and how these people influence their growth. Third is, to examine what the students have learned through their internships.

## Method

The empirical study used data triangulation to capture different learning dimensions. The main data consisted of semi-structured interviews based on the daily journals of 11 undergraduate overseas students (nine from China and two from Korea) who are all affiliated with a private university in Tokyo. Other data resources were also used, including conversational data between the students and company CEOs. Ethnography and an interpretive phenomenology approach were adopted to analyze the data and investigate the students' learning processes in the context of real-world challenges.

## Results

The results suggested that overseas students undergo internships to find out whether they can personally realize their "selves" by successfully competing and even thriving in the Japanese workplace through real-life work situations. Practitioners begin to "unlearn" the classroom-taught predicated knowledge and decontextualized information in discrete packages. They systematically realize that real-life learning is

dilemma-driven and requires autonomous work. Consequently, interns formulate their own knowledge from raw experience using various tools embedded in their unique situations. They interpret, reflect, evaluate and form deep meanings by combining two or more tools with their own bodily sensations and emotional arousal. Learning also occurs through their social interactions with different people. Engaging with others in dialogue and discussion in unintended contextual situations creates diverse perspectives on issues. Students, previously dependent, become more active and autonomous preparatory workers by learning how to behave appropriately in social communities and contexts. Learning through internships is a social process where students participate in complex, realistic, and problem-centered settings that encompass ways of thinking, perceiving, and negotiating and involve identity change besides procedural knowledge.

### Conclusion

This study's findings provide particular insight into how students facing language and cultural borders are motivated to pursue better lives. Research implications include the need for university education to employ innovative learning techniques and improve instructional methodologies. Now is the opportune time to do so, as many universities in Japan must search for dramatic changes to wrestle with its shrinking 18-year-old population and address the need to diversify sources of education and tools of learning.