

# Learning from the internship: Integrating Japanese corporate needs with the curriculum design of the Japanese Study Program

Akhmad Saifudin\*, Bayu Aryanto, Fira Adelia Putri Febriyawati, Deny Kristiadi, Jeminika Isyamy Esika

<sup>1</sup> Universitas Dian Nuswantoro, Jl. Nakula 1 No.5-11, Semarang, Indonesia

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## Abstract

This study examines how empirical data derived from internship programs in Japan can be systematically utilized to integrate Japanese corporate needs into the curriculum design of Japanese Studies programs in Indonesia. Employing a qualitative descriptive approach with an exploratory orientation, the research involved field monitoring, semi-structured interviews with Japanese host company representatives, Indonesian internship students, and intermediary agencies (*kumiai*), as well as document analysis of internship evaluations and curriculum materials. The findings reveal that Japanese companies prioritize competencies beyond linguistic proficiency, particularly professionalism and work ethics, workplace cultural literacy, strategic communication skills, and psychosocial readiness. The study further identifies a significant mismatch between language-oriented curricula and the multidimensional competencies required in Japanese workplace contexts. Through thematic analysis, four core competency domains were formulated: professionalism and work ethics, workplace cultural literacy, strategic communication, and mental readiness and adaptability. These competencies constitute the empirical basis for an industry-integrated curriculum model that positions internship programs not merely as experiential learning activities but also as continuous feedback mechanisms for curriculum development. The novelty of this study lies in its institutional and curriculum-oriented reconceptualization of internship programs by integrating industry expectations, student experiences, and intermediary agency perspectives into a unified curriculum framework. The findings contribute to studies on work-integrated learning and curriculum internationalization and provide practical implications for Japanese Studies programs seeking to align academic preparation with global workplace demands.

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## Keywords:

internship; industry needs; Japanese Studies curriculum; skills beyond language; work-integrated learning

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## Abstrak

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## Kata Kunci:

internship; kurikulum Sastra Jepang; kebutuhan industri; pembelajaran terintegrasi kerja; skills beyond language

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## Belajar dari magang: Integrasi kebutuhan perusahaan Jepang dengan desain kurikulum Program Studi Jepang

Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis bagaimana data empiris dari program *internship* di Jepang dapat dimanfaatkan secara sistematis untuk mengintegrasikan kebutuhan perusahaan Jepang ke dalam desain kurikulum program studi Sastra Jepang di Indonesia. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif dengan orientasi eksploratif melalui monitoring lapangan, wawancara semi-terstruktur dengan perwakilan perusahaan Jepang, mahasiswa peserta *internship*, serta pihak *kumiai* sebagai agensi pengelola *internship*, dan analisis dokumen evaluasi *internship* serta kurikulum. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa perusahaan Jepang tidak hanya menekankan kemampuan bahasa Jepang, tetapi juga profesionalisme dan etika kerja, literasi budaya kerja, keterampilan komunikasi strategis, serta kesiapan psikososial. Temuan penelitian juga memperlihatkan adanya ketidaksesuaian antara kurikulum yang masih berorientasi pada penguasaan bahasa dengan kebutuhan kompetensi multidimensional di lingkungan kerja Jepang. Melalui analisis tematik, penelitian ini

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\* Corresponding author:  
[Akhmad.saifudin@dsn.dinus.ac.id](mailto:Akhmad.saifudin@dsn.dinus.ac.id)

mengidentifikasi empat domain kompetensi utama, yaitu profesionalisme dan etika kerja, literasi budaya kerja, komunikasi strategis, serta kesiapan mental dan adaptabilitas. Keempat domain tersebut menjadi dasar penyusunan model kurikulum terintegrasi industri yang memosisikan program *internship* bukan sekadar pengalaman belajar mahasiswa, tetapi juga sebagai sumber umpan balik berkelanjutan bagi pengembangan kurikulum. Kebaruan penelitian terletak pada rekonseptualisasi program *internship* berbasis institusi dan kurikulum dengan mengintegrasikan perspektif industri, mahasiswa, dan agensi perantara dalam satu kerangka pengembangan kurikulum. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada kajian work-integrated learning dan internasionalisasi kurikulum serta memberikan implikasi praktis bagi program studi Sastra Jepang dalam menyiapkan lulusan yang sesuai dengan kebutuhan dunia kerja global.

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## 1 Introduction

Internship programs in Japan have become one of the primary strategies for strengthening the competencies of students in Japanese Studies programs in Indonesia, particularly in enhancing Japanese language proficiency, understanding Japanese workplace culture, and developing professional readiness in a global context (Saifudin et al., 2025b, 2025a). Along with the growing demand for skilled foreign workers in Japan and the increasing emphasis on the internationalisation of higher education, cross-border internship programs can no longer be viewed merely as experiential learning activities. Instead, they must be recognised as an integral component of the educational system and curriculum design of Japanese Studies programs.

In this context, higher education institutions are required to prepare students comprehensively, not only in terms of linguistic competence but also in their understanding of Japanese workplace culture, professional ethics, intercultural communication skills, and psychosocial adaptability. Failure to integrate actual industry needs into the curriculum may result in a competency gap between graduates and host companies' expectations, ultimately undermining the effectiveness of internship programs.

In response to these challenges, the Japanese Studies Program at our institution has undertaken a series of strategic initiatives to integrate Japanese industry needs into curriculum design and the learning ecosystem. These initiatives include field monitoring at Japanese host companies, interviews with host company representatives, students currently participating in internship programs, and *kumiai* or intermediary internship agencies. Through these processes, empirical mapping of the competencies expected by Japanese companies was conducted, covering dominant workplace cultural values and patterns of professional interaction in Japanese work environments.

In addition, interviews with internship students provided concrete insights into cultural adaptation dynamics, challenges in Japanese workplace communication, work-related pressures, stress management, and strategies for adjusting to Japanese social and cultural environments. These empirical data reveal a gap between the competencies acquired in academic settings and the demands of real workplace contexts, particularly in terms of functional language use, implicit cultural understanding, and mental and social readiness. These findings underscore the strategic role of Japanese Studies programs in designing curricula that are more contextualized, adaptive, and responsive to the needs of Japanese industry.

To date, studies that systematically map the concrete needs of Japanese companies and translate them into Japanese Studies curriculum design remain relatively limited. Moreover, research that integrates industry perspectives, student internship experiences, and institutional strategies within a single analytical framework is still scarce. Consequently, a research gap exists at the institutional

level, particularly in addressing how Japanese industry needs can be internalised into curriculum structures, course content, and learning systems in Japanese Studies programs.

Previous research on internships in Japan has largely focused on internship motivation (Muthiarawaty & Setiana, 2022) and students' adaptation experiences, including culture shock, especially in relation to intercultural communication and Japanese work ethics (Amril et al., 2022; Haryanti, 2020; Nowlan, 2020). Other studies have examined the use of honorific Japanese (*keigo*) and workplace communication challenges faced by Indonesian interns (Fauzah et al., 2025). While these studies make important contributions to understanding students' learning processes and personal challenges during cross-cultural internships, most of them position internships primarily as individual learning experiences rather than as strategic data sources for curriculum development.

Meanwhile, research on curriculum development and *link and match* between higher education and industry has largely remained conceptual and has not explicitly engaged with empirical data from cross-cultural internship programs, particularly within the context of Japanese companies (Galloway et al., 2014; Gault et al., 2000; Hung, 2025; Kattiyapornpong & Almeida, 2022; Knouse et al., 1999; Maertz Jr et al., 2014; Rousu & Manning, 2021; Sweitzer & King, 2013; Tan & Umemoto, 2021; Urquía-Grande & Pérez Estébanez, 2020; Wijk et al., 2008). Therefore, this study occupies a *state-of-the-art* position by integrating Japanese industry needs, student internship experiences, and institutional strategies in the design of Japanese Studies curricula.

Based on this research gap, this article aims to analyse the needs of Japanese host companies using empirical data from internship programs and to formulate strategies for integrating these needs into the curriculum design of Japanese Studies programs. This study is expected to contribute theoretically to the development of industry-based, cross-cultural curriculum studies and practically to assist higher education institutions in designing internationalisation programs aligned with the realities of the global workforce. This article proposes a preparatory model for Japanese Studies programs grounded in field data from Japanese companies, students, and intermediary agencies, resulting in a curriculum framework and developmental strategies responsive to industry needs. The study focuses on *skills beyond language*, including professionalism, workplace culture, mental readiness, and communication strategies.

## 2 Methods

### 2.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design with an exploratory orientation to capture the needs of Japanese host companies empirically and to translate them into a curriculum design framework for Japanese Studies programs. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study aims to understand complex, context-bound phenomena, including workplace culture, professional expectations, communication practices, and adaptive competencies required of internship participants in Japanese companies.

The research was positioned within a needs analysis and curriculum-oriented framework, in which internship experiences were treated not merely as student learning outcomes but as strategic data sources for institutional curriculum development.

### 2.2 Research Sites and Participants

The research was conducted between January and August 2025 in collaboration with Japanese companies hosting Indonesian internship students in several regions of Japan, including Osaka, Mie, Shizuoka, and Sapporo. The participating companies operated in sectors commonly employing Indonesian internship students, particularly restaurant, food processing, and hospitality.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on their direct involvement in the implementation, supervision, and evaluation of internship programs. A total of 15 participants were involved in this study, consisting of three participant groups:

1. Four representatives of Japanese host companies (CR), who provided information regarding expected competencies, workplace culture, communication practices, and professional standards required from internship students.
2. Nine Indonesian internship students (SP), consisting of students currently participating in internship programs and recent internship alumni from Japanese Studies programs. These participants shared experiences related to language use, workplace communication, cultural adaptation, psychological challenges, and strategies for coping with workplace pressures in Japan.
3. Two representatives from intermediary agencies or *Kumiai* (CR), who acted as coordinators between Japanese companies and Indonesian institutions. These participants provided information regarding recruitment criteria, common internship challenges, evaluation systems, and industry expectations toward Indonesian interns.

The inclusion of participants from multiple stakeholder groups enabled the study to capture internship phenomena from industrial, institutional, and experiential perspectives simultaneously. This multi-perspective approach strengthened data triangulation and facilitated a more comprehensive understanding of competency gaps between higher education curricula and Japanese workplace demands.

Most student participants had Japanese language proficiency levels ranging from JLPT N4 to N3 and had participated in internship programs for periods ranging from six months to one year. Meanwhile, company representatives generally had more than five years of experience supervising foreign interns, particularly Indonesian students. These participant characteristics were considered important because they provided rich empirical insights into the competencies required in Japanese workplace contexts and the challenges encountered during internship implementation.

### 2.3 Data Collection Procedures

Data collection was conducted over multiple phases to enhance analytical robustness:

#### 2.3.1 Field Monitoring and Workplace Observation

Structured field monitoring was undertaken at selected host companies. Observational protocols focused on communicative practices, workplace hierarchy, task execution, and behavioural norms involving internship students. Observations were documented using standardised field notes.

#### 2.3.2 Semi-Structured Interviews

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with all participant groups. Interview guides were developed based on a preliminary literature review and program objectives and included domains such as:

- expected professional and communicative competencies,
- perceived gaps between academic preparation and workplace performance,
- recurrent challenges during internship,
- adaptive strategies employed by students.

Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and anonymised before analysis.

### 2.3.3 Document-Based Evidence

Documentary data included internship evaluation forms, company feedback reports, agency guidelines, and internal curriculum documents. These materials were used to triangulate interview and observational findings.

## 2.4 Data Analysis Strategy

Data analysis followed a systematic thematic analysis procedure:

1. Open Coding: Transcripts and documents were coded inductively to capture recurrent competency-related units of meaning.
2. Axial Coding: Codes were clustered into higher-order categories reflecting core competency domains.
3. Selective Coding: Categories were integrated into overarching themes corresponding to *skills beyond language*, including:
  - professional conduct and work ethics,
  - workplace cultural literacy,
  - communication strategies,
  - mental resilience and adaptability.
4. Curriculum Alignment Analysis: Identified themes were mapped onto existing curriculum learning outcomes to detect misalignments and inform curriculum redesign.

This analytic process resulted in a competency framework directly linked to curriculum components. Then, to ensure methodological rigour, the study employed triangulation of data sources (companies, students, agencies), methodological triangulation (interviews, observations, document analysis), and Peer validation, involving academic staff engaged in curriculum development.

## 3 Findings

### 3.1 Competency Expectations of Japanese Host Companies

Company representatives frequently noted that even interns with adequate Japanese language skills still experienced difficulties when lacking familiarity with Japanese workplace norms and professional etiquette.

Analysis of interview, observational, and documentary data revealed that Japanese host companies prioritize competencies extending beyond Japanese language proficiency. Although basic communication ability is regarded as an essential prerequisite, company representatives consistently emphasized professionalism, workplace discipline, responsibility, and adaptive attitudes as more decisive indicators of internship success.

Several company representatives explained that students with relatively adequate Japanese language proficiency often still encountered difficulties in workplace integration due to limited understanding of Japanese professional culture and behavioral expectations. One supervisor from a manufacturing company in Osaka stated:

*“Some interns can speak Japanese quite well, but they still struggle because they do not fully understand workplace discipline, reporting culture, and how to respond appropriately to instructions.” (CR3)*

Similarly, another participant emphasized that attitude and willingness to learn were often considered more important than grammatical accuracy:

*“In our company, communication mistakes can still be tolerated, but lack of responsibility and discipline become serious problems.” (CR2)*

Observational data also indicated that Japanese companies highly valued punctuality, consistency in task execution, attentiveness to instructions, and the ability to learn through observation (*minarai*). Interns who demonstrated proactive behavior and responsiveness were generally evaluated more positively, even when their language proficiency remained limited.

These findings indicate that Japanese host companies conceptualize internship competence multidimensionally, integrating linguistic, behavioral, cultural, and professional dimensions simultaneously

### 3.2 Workplace Cultural Literacy and Professional Conduct

A dominant theme emerging from the data was the importance of workplace cultural literacy in supporting students' adaptation to Japanese professional environments. Participants repeatedly emphasized that successful workplace integration depended not only on language skills but also on students' ability to understand implicit workplace norms, hierarchical relations, and collective responsibility.

Both company representatives and students identified difficulties in interpreting indirect communication and non-verbal expectations as recurring challenges. One student participant explained:

*"At campus, we learned formal Japanese, but in the workplace many things were implied indirectly. Sometimes supervisors did not say things explicitly, so I became confused about what was actually expected."* (SP7)

Another student described difficulties related to hierarchical communication:

*"I was afraid of making mistakes when speaking to senior staff because workplace communication in Japan feels very hierarchical."* (SP2)

Field observations further revealed that many students were unfamiliar with workplace communication practices such as *hou-ren-sou* (report–contact–consult), which Japanese supervisors considered fundamental in maintaining workflow coordination and professional accountability.

These findings suggest that workplace cultural literacy functions not merely as supplementary cultural knowledge but as a core professional competency influencing students' workplace performance and social acceptance within Japanese companies.

### 3.3 Communication Strategies in the Workplace

Despite prior academic exposure to Japanese language learning, many students reported significant difficulties when applying linguistic knowledge in authentic workplace situations. The findings revealed a substantial gap between formal classroom instruction and contextual workplace communication demands.

Three major communication challenges were consistently identified:

- difficulty interpreting pragmatic meaning beyond literal expressions,
- limited ability to use *keigo* appropriately in real-time interactions,
- hesitation to initiate communication due to fear of making mistakes.

One student participant stated:

*"I understood the grammar during class, but when speaking with Japanese staff in real situations, especially using keigo, I often became nervous and forgot what to say."* (SP6)

Another participant highlighted the importance of communication strategies rather than grammatical perfection:

*“What helped me most was not grammar, but learning how to confirm instructions politely and ask questions without interrupting workflow.” (SP9)*

Students who developed adaptive communication strategies—such as paraphrasing, confirmation techniques, selective use of non-verbal communication, and careful observation of workplace interaction patterns—reported smoother workplace adaptation and greater confidence during internship.

These findings indicate that workplace communication competence encompasses pragmatic and strategic dimensions that are not sufficiently accommodated within conventional language-oriented curricula.

### 3.4 Mental Readiness and Psychosocial Adaptation

Mental readiness emerged as one of the most critical yet under-addressed competencies in internship preparation. Many students reported experiencing psychological pressure related to workload, communication anxiety, homesickness, and adjustment to strict workplace routines.

One participant described the emotional challenges experienced during the early phase of the internship:

*“During the first months, I often felt stressed because the work rhythm was very different from Indonesia, and I was afraid of making mistakes every day.” (SP5)*

Another participant emphasized the importance of psychological preparedness before departure:

*“Language preparation alone was not enough. What shocked me most was the mental pressure and workplace expectations.” (SP8)*

Representatives from intermediary agencies (*kumiai*) also noted that emotional resilience strongly influenced internship sustainability and workplace performance:

*“Students who are mentally prepared usually adapt faster, even if their Japanese ability is not the highest.” (KR2)*

These findings demonstrate that psychosocial adaptability and emotional resilience constitute essential competencies for successful internship participation and should therefore be integrated systematically into internship preparation and curriculum design.

### 3.5 Identified Competency Gaps between Curriculum and Industry Needs

Cross-analysis of interview findings, workplace observations, and curriculum documents revealed several significant gaps between competencies expected by Japanese host companies and those currently emphasized in the Japanese Studies curriculum. Although the curriculum adequately supports foundational Japanese language acquisition, many industry-relevant competencies remain insufficiently integrated into learning outcomes and classroom practices.

One major gap identified concerns the limited curricular emphasis on professionalism and workplace ethics. Company representatives repeatedly emphasized that punctuality, responsibility, discipline, and task accountability were essential workplace competencies. However, these competencies were often treated implicitly rather than systematically embedded within academic courses or internship preparation programs. One company supervisor explained:

*“Students usually have enough basic Japanese ability, but many are still not fully prepared for Japanese workplace discipline and responsibility.” (CR4)*

Similarly, observational data indicated that students frequently struggled with workplace routines requiring consistency, reporting discipline, and proactive communication.

Another significant gap relates to workplace communication training. Although students had studied formal Japanese language structures, many reported difficulties applying linguistic knowledge pragmatically in authentic workplace interactions. Communication training in the curriculum remained predominantly grammar-oriented and lacked contextualized exposure to workplace communication practices, particularly regarding *keigo*, indirect communication, and situational interaction strategies. One student participant stated:

*“At university we learned grammar and reading, but we rarely practiced how to communicate in real workplace situations.” (SP6)*

Representatives from intermediary agencies (*kumiai*) also noted that students often experienced communication anxiety because classroom instruction differed considerably from actual workplace communication patterns in Japan.

Furthermore, the findings revealed an absence of structured preparation related to mental readiness and psychosocial adaptation. Students frequently reported emotional stress, communication pressure, homesickness, and fatigue during the early stages of internship. Despite these recurring issues, psychological preparation and resilience training were rarely included as explicit curriculum components or pre-departure programs. One participant reflected:

*“The biggest challenge was not only language, but mental pressure and adapting to the strict work environment.” (SP9)*

These findings demonstrate that existing curricula continue to prioritize linguistic knowledge over the development of integrated professional competence. As a result, students may possess adequate language proficiency while remaining insufficiently prepared for the multidimensional realities of Japanese workplace environments.

### **3.6 Curriculum-Relevant Competency Domains Derived from Field Data**

Based on thematic synthesis of interview, observational, and documentary data, the study identified four core competency domains considered essential for integration into the Japanese Studies curriculum. These competency domains emerged consistently across stakeholder perspectives and represent competencies categorized as *skills beyond language*.

#### **3.6.1 Professionalism and Work Ethics**

This competency domain includes punctuality, responsibility, workplace discipline, consistency in task execution, and accountability in reporting. Japanese host companies consistently emphasized that professional behavior strongly influenced intern evaluation and workplace acceptance. Supervisors particularly valued students who demonstrated initiative, responsiveness, and commitment to workplace responsibilities.

Field observations further indicated that students who adapted successfully were not necessarily those with the highest linguistic proficiency, but rather those who could maintain professional attitudes and behavioral consistency in demanding workplace contexts.

### 3.6.2 Workplace Cultural Literacy

The second competency domain concerns understanding Japanese workplace culture and organizational behavior. This includes awareness of hierarchical relationships, sensitivity toward implicit communication, collective responsibility, and workplace norms such as *hou-ren-sou* (report–contact–consult).

Students frequently reported difficulties interpreting indirect instructions and understanding unspoken expectations within Japanese workplace interactions. One participant explained:

*“Sometimes supervisors did not explain things directly, so understanding the atmosphere and context became very important.” (SP3)*

These findings suggest that workplace cultural literacy should be conceptualized as a practical professional competency rather than merely supplementary cultural knowledge.

### 3.6.3 Strategic Communication Skills

Strategic communication competence emerged as another major competency domain required in Japanese workplace contexts. This competency includes pragmatic language use, workplace *keigo*, confirmation techniques, paraphrasing strategies, and communication repair skills during interaction breakdowns.

The findings indicate that students’ communication difficulties were not caused solely by insufficient grammatical mastery but also by limited strategic communication skills in high-pressure professional situations. Students who successfully adapted tended to employ communication strategies such as clarification requests, non-verbal cues, and observational learning to sustain workplace interaction.

These findings demonstrate the importance of shifting Japanese language instruction from predominantly grammar-oriented learning toward more contextualized and task-based workplace communication training.

### 3.6.4 Mental Readiness and Adaptability

The final competency domain concerns psychosocial resilience, emotional regulation, stress management, and intercultural adaptability. Many students experienced psychological pressure related to workplace expectations, communication anxiety, workload, and social isolation during the internship.

Representatives from intermediary agencies explained that mental preparedness significantly influenced students’ capacity to adapt and sustain workplace performance throughout the internship period. One *kumiai* representative stated:

*“Students who are mentally prepared usually recover faster from workplace difficulties and communication stress.” (KRI)*

These findings indicate that mental readiness should be integrated systematically into internship preparation and curriculum design rather than treated as an individual issue outside academic responsibility.

Collectively, these four competency domains represent the empirical foundation for curriculum redesign and demonstrate that Japanese workplace preparedness requires multidimensional competencies extending beyond language proficiency alone.

### 3.7 Toward an Industry-Integrated Curriculum Model

The findings support the formulation of an industry-integrated curriculum model in which internship programs function not only as experiential learning activities but also as continuous institutional feedback mechanisms for curriculum development. In this model, Japanese host companies, internship agencies (*kumiai*), students, and higher education institutions collectively contribute to the development of a responsive and adaptive curriculum ecosystem.

The proposed model emphasizes the systematic alignment between curriculum learning outcomes and competencies identified through internship field data. Rather than positioning industry involvement solely at the implementation stage of internship programs, the model encourages continuous collaboration between universities and industrial stakeholders in curriculum evaluation and redesign processes.

Three major principles underpin the proposed curriculum model.

First, the model emphasizes alignment between learning outcomes and industry-derived competencies. The four competency domains identified in this study—professionalism and work ethics, workplace cultural literacy, strategic communication skills, and mental readiness—should be explicitly integrated into curriculum structures, course outcomes, and internship preparation modules.

Second, the model promotes the integration of experiential insights into course design and learning activities. Internship experiences and workplace challenges reported by students can be transformed into contextualized learning materials, simulation activities, reflective assignments, and workplace communication practices within classroom instruction.

Third, the model supports continuous curriculum refinement through internship feedback loops. Evaluation reports, company feedback, student reflections, and intermediary agency assessments should function as recurring data sources for curriculum review and competency adjustment. One curriculum development participant explained:

*“Internship should not only benefit students individually, but also become institutional learning for improving the curriculum itself.” (CR2)*

Through this approach, internship programs become strategically positioned as engines of curriculum innovation and internationalization. The proposed model therefore advances a more evidence-based and industry-responsive approach to Japanese Studies curriculum development, particularly within the context of global workforce preparation and MBKM-oriented higher education reform.

## 4 Discussion

### 4.1 Reframing Internship as a Curriculum Data Source

The findings of this study support a conceptual shift in understanding internship programs in Japanese contexts. Rather than positioning internship solely as an experiential learning opportunity for students, the results demonstrate that internship functions as a strategic institutional data source for curriculum development. This aligns with work-integrated learning literature that emphasises the reciprocal relationship between education and industry (Gault et al., 2000), yet extends it by situating internship feedback as a systematic input for curriculum redesign.

Unlike prior studies that focus primarily on individual student outcomes, this research foregrounds institutional responsiveness, highlighting how host company expectations and internship experiences can inform curriculum structure and learning outcomes in Japanese Studies programs.

## 4.2 Skills Beyond Language as Core Employability Competencies

Consistent with earlier research emphasising the importance of soft skills and intercultural competence (Sweitzer & King, 2013; Urquía-Grande & Pérez Estébanez, 2020), the present findings reveal that Japanese host companies prioritise professionalism, workplace discipline, and adaptive attitudes over advanced linguistic accuracy alone. This confirms that language proficiency, while necessary, is insufficient without accompanying behavioural and cultural competencies.

This finding refines previous studies on Japanese internship programs that focused on language improvement and culture shock (Amril et al., 2022; Haryanti, 2020) by empirically demonstrating that skills beyond language are not peripheral but central to workplace performance. In the Japanese context, where implicit norms and collective responsibility dominate professional interaction, such competencies become decisive factors in intern evaluation.

## 4.3 Workplace Cultural Literacy and Implicit Communication

The prominence of workplace cultural literacy underscores the enduring relevance of Japanese organisational norms, such as hierarchical sensitivity and indirect communication. Difficulties in interpreting implicit feedback and navigating hierarchical relations echo findings in intercultural communication research (Nowlan, 2020), yet this study adds nuance by linking these challenges directly to curricular preparation gaps.

The data suggest that conventional classroom instruction, which often emphasises explicit linguistic forms, does not sufficiently prepare students for context-dependent pragmatic interpretation. Consequently, workplace cultural literacy should be operationalised as a learnable competence embedded across multiple courses rather than treated as supplementary cultural knowledge.

## 4.4 Communication Strategies and the Limits of Formal Language Instruction

The challenges related to keigo use and workplace communication strategies reveal a misalignment between formal language instruction and real-world communicative demands. While prior research has documented keigo difficulties among learners (Fauzah et al., 2025), this study demonstrates that the core issue lies not merely in grammatical mastery but in situational deployment under pressure.

Students who successfully adapted employed strategic communication behaviours—confirmation, paraphrasing, and selective non-verbal cues—suggesting that communication strategy training may be more impactful than additional grammatical instruction alone. This supports arguments in applied linguistics advocating for pragmatics-oriented and task-based instruction in professional language education.

## 4.5 Mental Readiness as an Overlooked Curriculum Component

One of the most significant contributions of this study is the identification of mental readiness and psychosocial resilience as critical competencies for internship success. While previous research has addressed stress and culture shock descriptively, mental readiness has rarely been conceptualised as a curricular outcome.

The findings indicate that psychological preparedness influences students' ability to sustain performance, engage in communication, and adapt to workplace expectations. This suggests that curriculum design must extend beyond cognitive and linguistic domains to include affective and adaptive dimensions, aligning with holistic competency frameworks in higher education.

#### 4.6 Implications for Curriculum Integration in Japanese Studies Programs

By mapping industry-derived competencies onto existing curriculum structures, this study demonstrates concrete areas of misalignment between academic preparation and workplace demands. The four competency domains identified—professionalism, workplace cultural literacy, strategic communication, and mental readiness—offer a curriculum-relevant framework grounded in empirical data.

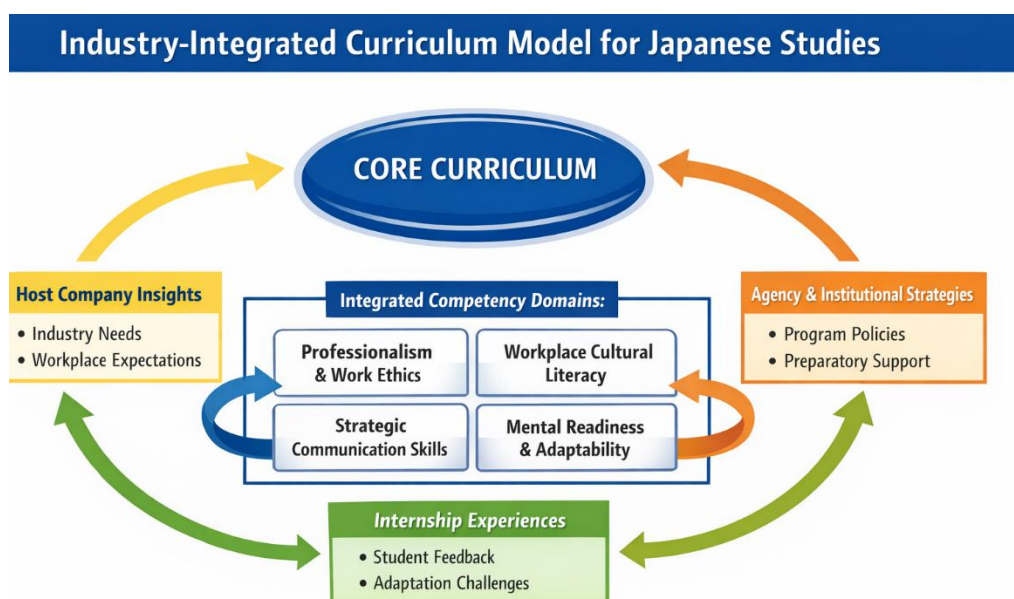
This integrative approach advances curriculum studies by moving beyond abstract notions of link and match toward an evidence-based, internship-informed curriculum model. The findings support the argument that curriculum internationalisation should be iterative and responsive, incorporating continuous feedback from industry partners and internship stakeholders.

#### 4.7 Contribution to State of the Art

Positioned within the existing literature, this study contributes to the state of the art in three ways:

- It shifts the analytical focus from individual internship experiences to institutional curriculum design.
- It empirically substantiates the centrality of skills beyond language in Japanese workplace contexts.
- It proposes a data-driven integration model that connects industry needs, student experiences, and program-level strategies.

Through this integrative perspective, the study bridges gaps between applied linguistics, intercultural communication, and curriculum development in Japanese Studies.



## 5 Conclusion

This study set out to analyse the needs of Japanese host companies based on internship field data and to formulate strategies for integrating these needs into the curriculum design of Japanese Studies programs. The findings demonstrate that internship programs in Japan generate rich empirical data that extend beyond student language development and can be systematically leveraged for institutional curriculum development.

The novelty of this study lies in its institutional and curriculum-oriented reconceptualisation of internship programs. Unlike previous studies that predominantly position internship as an individual learning experience or focus on linguistic improvement and cultural adaptation at the student level, this research advances the field by:

1. Reframing internship as a strategic curriculum data source, rather than a peripheral experiential activity.
2. Empirically identifying “skills beyond language”—professionalism, workplace cultural literacy, strategic communication, and mental readiness—as core competencies demanded by Japanese host companies.
3. Integrating multi-stakeholder perspectives (industry, students, and intermediary agencies) into a unified analytical and curricular framework.
4. Proposing an industry-integrated curriculum model grounded in field-based evidence rather than abstract policy discourse.

Through this integrative approach, the study bridges gaps between applied linguistics, intercultural communication, and curriculum studies in the context of Japanese Studies.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the literature on work-integrated learning and curriculum internationalisation by demonstrating that employability in cross-cultural professional contexts cannot be adequately explained by linguistic competence alone. The findings support a multidimensional view of competence that incorporates behavioural, cultural, communicative, and psychological domains.

Furthermore, the study extends existing theories of *link and match* by operationalising them through empirical internship data, thus moving beyond normative frameworks toward an evidence-based curriculum alignment model.

Practically, the findings suggest that Japanese Studies programs should adopt a more holistic curriculum design that embeds industry-derived competencies across coursework, pre-departure training, and internship preparation modules. Specific implications include: the integration of professional ethics and workplace behaviour into core courses, explicit instruction in workplace communication strategies and pragmatic language use, structured preparation for mental readiness and psychosocial resilience, and continuous curriculum evaluation informed by internship feedback loops.

At the institutional level, the proposed model underscores the importance of sustained collaboration between universities, Japanese host companies, and intermediary agencies to ensure curriculum relevance and graduate employability. In the broader context of higher education internationalisation and MBKM-oriented curriculum reform, this study provides a data-driven framework for aligning academic programs with global industry needs. The model presented can serve as a reference for policymakers and curriculum developers seeking to strengthen international internship programs while maintaining academic rigour.

This study is limited to qualitative data derived from specific internship contexts in Japan and may not capture sectoral variations across industries. Future research may expand the scope by incorporating longitudinal data, comparative analyses across countries, or quantitative validation of the proposed competency framework.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that meaningful integration between Japanese industry needs and Japanese Studies curriculum design is both feasible and necessary. By positioning internship programs as engines of curriculum innovation, Japanese Studies programs can better

prepare students for the complex realities of global professional environments and contribute more effectively to international workforce development.

### Disclosure Statement

The authors claim there is no conflict of interest.

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