



Too Tired to Learn: Exploring the Stress of Inter-role Conflict Among Indonesian Working Students in Nihongo Gakko

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Abstract. International students in Japan have become a key human resource to strengthen the labor force through part-time work. Studies found that international students who excessively dedicate their time to part-time jobs face negative consequences like declining academic performance, mental strain, stress, and exhaustion. This especially happens to privately-financed international students in nihongo gakko (“Japanese language school”). Inter-role conflict, a type of role stress that may arise when expectations of being a student clash with the demands of being a part-time worker. This study aims to explore the inter-role conflict experienced by Indonesian working students in nihongo gakko as they balance their roles as students and part-time workers. Semi-structured interviews with four Indonesian students (aged 19–24) showed that the students’ stressors are mostly originated from time-based conflicts, financial burden, and working conditions that eventually resulted in insufficient rest, fatigue, demotivation, declining academic performance including the insufficient preparation for exams (JLPT).

Keywords: Indonesian students; international students in Japan; part-time jobs; role stress; inter-role conflict

1 Introduction

International students in Japan have become a key human resource to strengthen the labor force and address challenges associated with aging populations. Through international students-related policies, the government actively encourages international students to work in Japan after finishing their study, notably by providing them employment support. Their importance was first highlighted in the 2008’s “300,000 International Students Plan,” under which Japan aimed to accept up to 300,000 international students by 2020 as a part of the “global strategy” to open and expand the flows of people, goods, money, and information, particularly with Asia countries. This policy indicated the students’ importance in Japan’s labor market, as one of the measures in

its framework being “promoting acceptance of international students in society after their graduation or completion of courses” [1].

In 2023, Japan declared its new goal to welcome 400,000 international students by 2033, maintaining the growth rate of the previous 300,000 Plan through its most recent policy called the J-MIRAI (Japan-Mobility and Internationalisation: Re-engaging and Accelerating Initiative for future generations). International students’ significance to the labor market is once again emphasized as Japan stated the goal of increasing post-graduation employment rate of international students from 48% to 60% by 2033 [2]. Foreign workers are indeed a necessity to help overcome Japan’s labor shortages and maintain its economy, despite the continuous efforts to increase the domestic workforce by promoting the participation of women and the elderly [3].

International students, however, have historically played a significant role in the Japanese labor market via part-time work, most of them working in factories, restaurants, supermarkets, convenience stores, and other low-end service sectors to fulfill their financial needs [4]. Their contribution to the labor market began in 1983 when part-time work for international students is first permitted under the “100,000 International Students Plan.” At the time, a range of policy measures was taken to reach the goal of inviting 100,000 international students, ultimately achieved in 2003. One of the significant measures was the relaxation of part-time work restrictions for international students—from a maximum of 20 hours per week to 28 hours during academic terms—in 1998 [5], resulting in a sharp increase in the number of students in the following years (see Fig. 1).

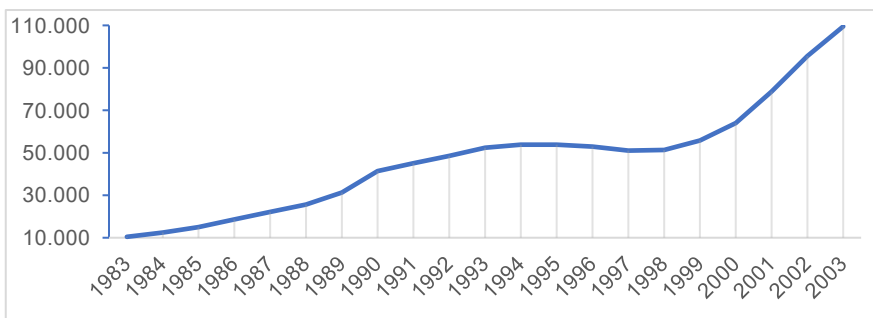


Fig. 1. The number of international students in Japan (1983–2003). *Source:* Japan Student Services Organization, 2024.

Japan’s 28 hours per week limit is possibly a key attraction for international students who have insufficient funds to study abroad, compared to other major destination countries with stricter limits—for example, 20 hours in Australia and the UK and 18.5 hours in France and Germany [6]. The hours per week permitted for international students to work in Japan is indeed the longest among OECD countries [7]. Thus, the Student visa’s provision for off-campus work has functioned as a “side door” for labor recruitment, similar to the Long-Term Resident visa and the Technical Intern Training visa, both of

which have been utilized beyond their original design to accommodate foreign labor entry [4][8].

1.1 Japanese Language Institutes (Nihongo Gakko)

In 2023, JASSO reported that approximately 65% of privately funded international students in Japan are engaged in some form of part-time work, the majority being students enrolling at Japanese language institutes [9]. Japanese language institutes—commonly known as nihongo gakko (‘Japanese language school’)—are institutions offering Japanese language courses for non-native speakers of Japanese, established by incorporated educational foundation, public interest incorporated foundation, private company, and other sponsors [10]. They provide a key entry point to Japan for international students who are not proficient enough in Japanese to pursue higher education in Japan [6].

As of May 2023, the number of students enrolled in nihongo gakko reached 90,719 [11], making them the largest group of international students across all institution types (see Fig. 2). However, despite nihongo gakko students have been officially classified as “international students” as defined in the Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act since 2011, the institutions do not belong to higher or tertiary education and are not qualified to confer academic degrees to the students [12]. They also do not align with the typical structure of higher education in Japan for several reasons: they lie beyond the regulatory scope of the formal education system; they receive little attention from international education policymakers despite enrolling a large number of international students; they play a key role in Japanese language education yet lack the common curriculum standards or adequate support for teachers and teaching quality [6].

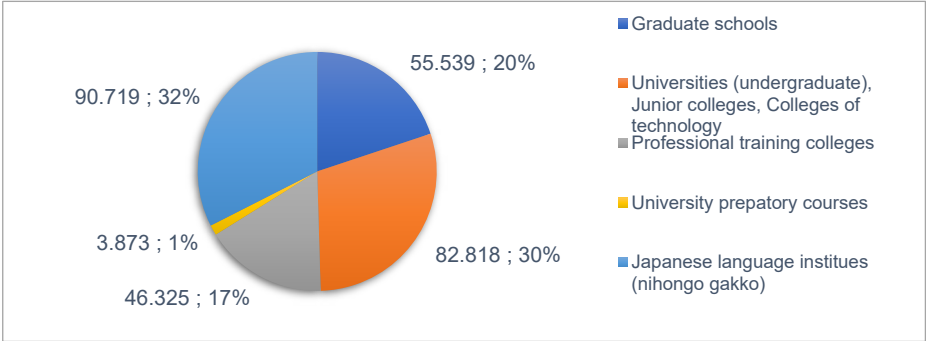


Fig. 2. The number of international students in Japan by institutional type (as of May 2023). *Source:* Japan Student Services Organization, 2024.

Studies revealed that students in nihongo gakko often spend longer time on part-time jobs than in the classroom, hardly having time to study due to the tight part-time job schedules [4][13][14]. This high rate of part-time work participation among these students can be attributed to the high tuition fees (reaching up to 2 million yen for a 2-year language course [15]) and the limited educational support. Nihongo gakko students are, notably, excluded from eligibility for the Japanese Government (MEXT) Scholarship

which is designated solely for international students at undergraduate and graduate levels [16]. The combination of elevated tuition cost and scarce financial aid thus forces nihongo gakko students to rely on low-paying jobs, perpetuating their participation in Japan's part-time labor market.

While previously dominated by students from Kanji-zone countries, the demographic shifted post-2011, the majority now coming from countries like Vietnam and Nepal where many young people tend to seek career opportunities abroad [6]. The 2011 Tohoku Earthquake led to a decline in the number of students originated from China, prompting nihongo gakko to shift their recruitment focus on developing countries such as Nepal for their market expansion strategy [17]. In addition to that, among the ten countries with the highest number of nihongo gakko students, nearly all are recipients of Official Development Assistance (ODA) and are classified as either lower middle-income countries or least developed countries (see Table 1).

Table 1. Number of Nihongo Gakko Students by Nationality

No.	Country/ Region	Number of Nihongo Gakko Students	DAC List of ODA Recipients*
1	Tiongkok	27,704	Upper-Middle Income Countries
2	Nepal	23,441	Least Developed Countries
3	Vietnam	13,986	Lower-Middle Income Countries
4	Sri Lanka	4,287	Lower-Middle Income Countries
5	Myanmar	4,173	Least Developed Countries
6	Bangladesh	2,419	Least Developed Countries
7	Mongolia	1,755	Lower-Middle Income Countries
8	Indonesia	1,660	Lower-Middle Income Countries
9	Taiwan	1,523	-
10	Uzbekistan	1,294	Lower-Middle Income Countries

*The OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) List of ODA Recipients refers to World Bank's income classification, based on the GDP per capita in US dollars. *Source:* JASSO [11], MOFA [18].

Although number of Indonesian students enrolled in nihongo gakko is smaller compared to those from Nepal or Vietnam, data from JASSO indicates a general upward trend in Indonesian student admissions over the past decade—excluding the temporary decline caused by the COVID-19 pandemic [11]. In 2023, the number of Indonesian students enrolled in nihongo gakko reached 1,660, surpassing pre-pandemic levels recorded in 2019. This reflects a growing interest among Indonesians in nihongo gakko, both as pathway to higher education in Japan and to employment opportunities.

International students from South Asia and Southeast Asia (such as Vietnam, Myanmar, Indonesia) that have become key groups within Japan's international student population and are increasingly integrated into Japan's labor market [19]. This integration is largely driven by students from less economically developed regions of Asia who rely heavily on part-time employment to cover tuition fees and living expenses, but also other financial needs like loan repayments and savings. However, the growing

trend of migrating to Japan under study-and-work arrangements introduces new dynamics and challenges in the daily lives of international students, particularly in managing academic obligations and part-time work responsibilities.

1.2 Inter-role conflict experienced by working students

Students are often required to navigate multiple roles simultaneously in order to meet financial, educational, and personal needs. Psychological stress may emerge when individuals experience conflicting demands across multiple roles, even more so when expectations associated with one role interfere with the fulfillment of another [20]. International students bearing the responsibilities of being a student and a part-time worker too may experience this type of conflict between roles called “inter-role conflict”, in which role pressures associated with membership in one group conflict with pressures stemming from membership in other groups [20]. Stress may occur, for example, when students become too exhausted to study due to their work demands, ultimately hindering their academic progress.

Previous studies have found that students who dedicate their time to part-time work with long working hours, particularly those who work more than 20 hours per week, experience negative outcomes such as declining academic performance, mental strain, psychological and psychosomatic stress, and fatigue [21]. Working hours are indeed a contributing factor to conflict between academic and employment responsibilities, as time is a finite resource. Conflict arises when time allocated to one role diminishes the capacity to meet responsibilities in another [22]. In this context, attention should be given to the policies that govern part-time employment among international students. Japan maintains one of the most lenient part-time work policies among OECD countries, permitting international students to work up to 28 hours per week, compared to a 20-hour limit in several other OECD nations [7]. While this flexibility may offer financial relief, it also increases the vulnerability of international students to psychological stress and fatigue, especially to those attempting to maximize their work hours while managing academic commitments.

In addition to work schedules, job characteristics and working conditions also contribute to various health risks including psychological stress. International students are particularly vulnerable to labor exploitation compared to domestic workers, as they often face significant financial pressures that compel them to seek additional income [23] [24]. In some cases, this may lead to students exceeding the legally permitted working hours, violating the condition of their visa status. One study found that Vietnamese students in Japan are often compelled to engage in part-time work to repay the loans they incurred to fund their migration. There are cases of employers exploiting regulatory loopholes to encourage students to keep working after exceeding legal limits, such as factories or supermarkets offering cash payments to avoid documentation and thus enabling students to work beyond the visa permit without leaving a formal record [13].

Studies also revealed that international students' working experiences are typical of migrant workers, often located in unstable employment with long working hours for low wages [23]. The prolonged condition may result in burnout syndrome, as evidenced in Iskandar's study where former care worker trainees returning to Indonesia exhibit

signs of burnout syndrome which is fatigue because of prolonged, intensive workloads [25]. The trainees underwent 3–4 years of training (including Japanese language learning) and endured extreme exhaustion and stress as the demanding practices in nursing homes resembled full-time work, despite them being trainees entitled to receive education and training instead of full-time workload.

Building on this, it is crucial to explore and understand the experiences of Indonesian working students enrolled in nihongo gakko, as existing studies revealed how working international students often face challenges like declining academic performance, exhaustion, and stress. This issue has received limited attention, as most studies on international students' stress levels tend to focus on stress related to acculturation and language skills, often employing a quantitative approach. Therefore, this study aims to explore the stress experienced by Indonesian students attending Japanese language institutes or nihongo gakko while simultaneously working part-time, with particular attention to using Kahn et al.'s inter-role conflict from the role stress theory as the students balance their roles as students and part-time workers.

2 Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach. Qualitative approach is designed to explore and understand the meanings assigned by individuals or groups to social and human problems [26] and acknowledges that the meanings of an action, event, or social expression are deeply embedded in its surrounding social context [27]. Thus, it is well-suited to explore the stress experienced by Indonesian students attending Japanese language institutes (nihongo gakko) while working part-time. Although prior studies on stress experienced by international students have predominantly employed quantitative methods, a qualitative approach offers greater potential to uncover the nuanced, context-dependent nature of these experiences, allowing a deeper understanding of the social and situational factors that shaped the students' perceptions and lived realities.

In collecting the data, this study conducted semi-structured interviews with four Indonesian students who had previously enrolled in nihongo gakko across various regions in Japan within the past five years. At the time of their enrollment, the research participants were approximately 19 to 24 years old. The chosen individuals were selected using snowball sampling method, which led to a sample predominantly enrolled in nihongo gakko within the same geographic area.

Table 2. Informant data

Pseudo-nym	Current Status in Japan	Age at Enrollment	Period of Study	Nihongo Gakko Location
A	Student (Professional training college)	19	2020-2023	Nagano
B	Student (Professional training college)	20	2022-2023	Nagano

C	Student (Undergraduate)	20	2021-2022	Shizuoka
D	Employed (Engineering visa)	18	2020-2022	Nagano

3 Results and Discussion

3.1 Time-based conflicts

Working international students in Japan often face significant time-based conflicts that affect their academic performance and overall well-being.

Irregular or extended work hours frequently lead to insufficient rest and disrupted sleep schedules, which in turn compromise students’ preparedness for school. This finding aligns with Markel and Frone’s research regarding work-school conflict [22]. Students reported having difficulty in concentrating, falling asleep during class, and increased absenteeism due to exhaustion and demotivation.

Limited time for study further impairs their ability to prepare for high-stakes examinations such as the Examination for Japanese University Admission (EJU) and the Japanese-Language Proficiency Test (JLPT), both critical for academic progression to higher-education and even future work opportunities. These results aligned with Liu-Farrer’s study [4], in which many Chinese students hardly have time to study amidst their tight part-time job schedules, impairing their academic competitiveness when applying for higher education programs and resulting in the students choosing to attend less prestigious private universities, junior colleges, or vocational schools instead.

Additionally, the lack of time for recreation and mental rejuvenation also contributes to chronic fatigue, reduced motivation, and heightened stress—creating a cycle that undermines both educational and personal development. These overlapping pressures highlight the need for more supportive structures that address the temporal strain experienced by student workers.

3.2 Tendency to work on night shifts

Nighttime jobs often offer higher hourly wages compared to the other, making them an attractive option for students struggling to cover not only tuition fees and daily living expenses but also pre-existing loans from their home countries. This economic pressure frequently outweighs concerns about rest or academic performance. Some of the participants also exceed the legal maximum allowed for working international students (28 hours per week) as they juggle between multiple part-time jobs to fulfill their financial needs. This is consistent with Nyland et al.’s [24] study of international student-workers in Australia, in which international students are more susceptible to exploitation than local workers because they are often in need of additional income to support the financial burden of studying overseas.

One student (D) revealed that he tended to night shift work due to a combination of financial necessity and workplace dynamics. In D’s case, he faced a limited scheduling flexibility due to the expectation of filling in for late-night shifts because their Japanese colleagues (high school students) are legally or practically unable to take it. This structural imbalance reinforces a pattern where international students disproportionately

shoulder the burden of night work, intensifying their fatigue (resulting in difficulty to focus during class the following morning), further complicating his ability to maintain a healthy school-work-life balance.

3.3 Suggested measures or changes

To better support international students navigating part-time employment in Japan, several measures can be implemented to reduce stress and improve compliance with labor regulations.

First, establishing more consistent work schedules through improved coordination between language schools and employers would help students balance academic and job responsibilities more effectively. Second, offering preparatory guidance—such as classes on Japanese workplace culture, job-specific language skills, and time management—can equip students with the tools needed to adapt and thrive in unfamiliar work environments. Third, workplaces should provide manuals and task instructions in languages other than Japanese to ensure students understand their responsibilities clearly. One student (B) reported that unclear expectations and limited comprehension of standard operating procedures often contribute to workplace stress and inefficiency.

4 Conclusion

International students compelled to juggle multiple jobs to meet tuition and living expenses. They experienced heightened stress and burnout, and in some cases, forces students to return to their home countries. Such outcomes not only hurt individual students' education but also threaten Japan's broader policy objective of keeping international talent to support its economy. If Japan intends to sustain its strategy of recruiting international graduates for its workforce, they must address these unstable conditions faced by nihongo gakko students—many of whom enroll with plans to work in Japan—by providing sufficient financial and academic support.

Furthermore, ensuring students receive the quality of education for which they are paying for is a matter of fundamental educational rights. Although students may sometimes choose to take on many working shifts themselves and end up working long hours, these choices are driven by the circumstances that force them to do so. Given the similarities observed among many international students in Japan, particularly those from Asian countries, it is apparent that working students are vulnerable to exploitation. Therefore, urgent policy reforms are essential to protect their well-being and to ensure the long-term benefits of international talent for Japan.

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