

Establishing the JET Advance Program

— Strengthening external communications by developing influencers —

1. About The Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme

The Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme was started in 1987 with the purpose of increasing mutual understanding between the people of Japan and the people of other nations and promoting grass-root internationalization at local level by helping to improve foreign language education and developing international exchange at the community level. 2014 marks the 28th year of the JET Programme. Over the past 28 years, it has seen significant growth, from its original 848 participants from 4 countries in 1987, to 4,476 participants from 42 countries in 2014.

The Programme is administered through the collaboration of Japan's local government authorities, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (MIC), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), and the Council of Local Authorities for International Relations (CLAIR).

JET Programme participants are employed as one of the following positions: Assistant Language Teacher (ALT), Coordinator for International Relations (CIR), or Sports Exchange Advisor (SEA). ALTs are placed mainly in public schools or local boards of education. ALTs assist with classes taught by Japanese Teachers of English/Language (JTEs/JTLs) and are thus involved in the preparation of teaching materials and in extracurricular activities like English clubs or sports teams. 92% of JET participants are employed as ALTs. Applicants with a functional command of the Japanese language can apply to work as CIRs, assisting local government offices in international exchange activities at the local level. Only 8% of JET participants are CIRs and major duties often include translation/interpretation for government officials, teaching community or school English classes, and international exchange event planning and implementation.

2. Significance of the JET Programme

Japan's external (outward) communications are still weak from the standpoint of international politics and creating public opinion. They are inadequate in contrast with the lobbying activities carried out by other East Asian countries or Asian American interest groups in, for instance, Washington D.C. Moreover, given that we are unlikely to see an increase in the number of Japanese immigrants to the United States or of Japanese nationals sent overseas by their companies, there is a high probability the external communication strategies of China and South Korea will increasingly overshadow those of Japan. The Japanese government is working to strengthen its external communication capabilities. One such strategy is the Japan House project. However, the most effective method for strengthening bilateral relationships is to communicate information at a grass roots and community level, including enlisting the help of foreigners that are the friends of Japan and that know Japan very well – Japan Hands.

Furthermore, foreigners serving as influencers play a key role in the government's Cool Japan strategy. In addition, the creation of quality employment and the attraction of resources and capital to local areas are essential to revitalize regional economies. There is high demand for people that will be willing to plant themselves into a local community to promote the resources and charm of the region by sending out information to foreign countries.

In light of this, the Project Team for Empowerment of Japan Hands is focusing on the JET Programme as a pivotal contributor to this year's activities for the following reasons. (1) JET Programme participants (JET participants) and those who completed the JET Programme (JET alumni) are key potential candidates to be Japan Hands. (2) The majority of JET participants work at elementary, junior high, and senior high schools outside of metropolitan areas, or at local municipalities. The majority of JET participants work at elementary, junior high, and senior high schools outside of metropolitan areas, or at local municipalities. Although teaching English is an underlying role for most of them, they can also contribute to the community in other ways, such as to revitalization of a local economy (3) The obstacles for JET alumni to stay and work in Japan often overlap with the barriers that confront other non-Japanese human resources, including foreign students granted Japanese Government Scholarships. (4) Over the next five years, the government aims to boost the number of participants to 6,400 people, a rise of nearly 1.5-times versus 2014. It will therefore become increasingly crucial to ensure the quality of the participants, and not just secure numbers.

3. Issues and Reform Proposal for “JET 2020”

Many JET alumni go on to work for the US or Canadian embassies in Japan. As this suggests, it is a fact that the JET programme works as a stepping stone for participants, and turns out human resources that make a long-term commitment and are dedicated to the bilateral relationship between their home country and Japan. However, an important question that has to be asked is whether the program generates results that are commensurate with an annual cost of approximately ¥40 billion. The answer is no.

Taking into account the potential capabilities of JET participants, in addition to increasing the number of ALTs invited to Japan by roughly 1.5-times over the next five years, focus should also be placed on securing quality of program participants, not just quantity. Also, it is important to strategically expand the opportunities and other outlets where they will be able to use their capabilities.

Accordingly, the following outlines issues that require immediate attention as well as reform proposals mainly affecting ALTs. This is based on interviews with JET participants, alumni, and people involved with the program and suggestions from an exchange of opinions by representatives from industry, the government, and academia at the Nagasaki Regional Internationalization Forum, which aims to discover and promote the region's appeal by

employing the viewpoints and insights of outsiders.

(1) Reshape philosophies and goals and review of the managing entity

The JET Programme initially evolved out of a project by the Ministry of Home Affairs (currently the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications: MIC). The objective of the project was to promote international exchanges at the local level. From this there arose a need to enrich foreign language education in Japan. Furthermore, at the time, the Japanese government was looking to reduce its trade surplus with the US, thus needed to invest in an appropriate program that would serve such a purpose. The project has never undergone review in the 28 years since its establishment. However, the global setting, Japan's fiscal health, and the needs of the community for JET are drastically changing. The philosophy and the goal of this program should be reshaped by 2016, which will mark the 30th anniversary of the program.

In addition, to improve the program, including its cost benefits, radical reform (JET 2020) should be carried out reflecting newly set goals.

Moreover, the management of the program by local municipalities (contracting organizations), MIC, MOFA, MEXT, and CLAIR blurs the lines of responsibility as well as the program's results, and delays and hinders reforms. Consequently, to accurately evaluate policy benefits and to achieve better development, a scheme must be put in place whereby an optimal agency or ministry will propose policies and manage the program in line with its goals.

(2) Review compensation scheme and standards

JET participants are given a stipend of ¥3.36 million for the first year. This rises in increments by year and by the fourth and fifth year they receive ¥3.96 million. This poses two problems as it affects the motivation of the participant and employment after the participant completes the program.

i. Skill and ability should be factored into benefits

The compensation scheme for ALTs, which make up more than 90% of JET participants, is based on set figures for the number of years the participant has been in the program. The scheme does not take into account the participant's performance in the previous year or whether they are certified in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL). The situation is the same for Coordinators for International Relations (CIR). The pay standard for CIR has no difference from the one for ALT, despite the fact that CIRs have to meet an additional requirement of Japanese fluency.

According to an English competency survey of third-year high school students conducted by MEXT, the average level of reading and listening skills were approximately

equivalent to the attainment level expected for junior high school graduates and the scores for writing and speaking were even lower. The active learning method is to be introduced to language education in Japan so ALTs will be a huge help, particularly in improving students' communication skills. Consequently, boosting the motivation of ALTs is crucial to achieving better results. We believe the compensation scheme should be reviewed to reflect an ALT's skill and performance.

Also, since the ALT is defined as just an "assistant" to Japanese teachers they are apparently prohibited from evaluating students. A special teaching license system or a similar scheme would be extremely beneficial to both students and JET participants. Actively using a system such as this would encourage ALTs to better fulfill their role in each skillset.

ii. Offering vouchers as a part of compensation

Many JET participants wish to remain in the region where they worked and find jobs at private-sector companies after they complete the program. However, the majority of people participate in the program immediately after graduating college. They therefore have little-to-no work experience, with the exception of teaching a foreign language at a school.

There is demand for JET alumni in regional areas given the ongoing globalization of local economies and the need to strengthen promotions targeting foreign countries. However salary is an issue. There are few small and medium-size enterprises in regional areas that can afford to pay a new employee that is basically fresh out of college a monthly salary of around ¥300,000. Consequently, the problem at hand is that it is difficult to match job candidates with companies.

To this end, consideration should be given to reducing compensation by about 10% taking into account the participant's career choice after they complete the program and from the standpoint of rectifying the cash stipend, in light of the initial average salary of new alumni. The difference should then be allocated to (1) provide subsidies to participants to cover the cost of courses to become certified for TEFL or to improve Japanese language skills. Also, it should be allotted to (2) raise compensation from the second year onward based on the participant's skills and teaching performance (including JET Advance which will be discussed later).

In the short term, we believe these measures should improve the quality of lectures and other work performed by ALTs. In addition, the opportunity to acquire experience and certification in teaching a foreign language or learning Japanese will be an incentive for young adults in foreign countries to participate in the program. In the medium-to-long term, this should contribute to expanding the horizons of people signing up for the program and to securing talented human resources.

iii. Establishing the JET Advance program

The JET Advance program should be set up. The goal is to bring costs down to a reasonable level, improve participant motivation, attract promising human resources from around the world, and continually develop influencers that will contribute to strengthening Japan's external communications. JET Advance program will annually select around 50 JET participants that have been appointed to the program for their second or subsequent year, regardless of whether they are an ALT, CIR, or SEA. Only those participants which show considerable skill and performance will be chosen. They will be given a stipend that is nearly double the amount of the compensation they received in the first year of the program.

The regional associations of JET participants (AJET block) will represent a unit. The overseeing agencies and ministries, contracting organization (municipality), regional universities, and representative members of local economic circles will participate in the selection process.

(3) Accrue and disclose data; survey alumni

The program has a 28 year history and a total of more than 60,000 people have completed the program. Despite this, we were surprised to find there was little-to-no data on applicants, participants, and alumni. Due to the absence of data, we were unable to track the changes in why people applied for the program or what career paths people took after completing the program. Consequently there is no quantitative data upon which to base a review of the program.

In 1989, the JET Alumni Association (JETAA) was established as a network for JET alumni. There are 52 offices in 15 countries and regions and more than 25,000 registered members. However, only interested alumni participate in the independent organization. The organization is not strategically organized or operated by the Japanese government. For instance, there are 19 chapters of JETAA in the US. The Japan Foundation Center for Global Partnership provides financial support to JETAA in the US so that it can reinforce the base of its operations. However this support will not last forever. The basic financial foundation of the organization is brittle.

Approximately ¥40 billion is said to be invested into the program from government and local government coffers. Given this budget, 5% of related costs should be allocated to follow up on the more than 60,000 program alumni. In addition, the program should immediately implement a survey to track the career paths of JET alumni.

- (4) Comprehensive support via an alliance between an NGO and the public and private sector and academia

As stated earlier, the JET Programme is under the management of the program by multiple ministries, agency, and organizations. In light of this, the program is hindered by the government's sectionalism. Another issue is that, with the exception of some outgoing foreigners, JET participants have minimal contact with Japanese with the exception of those people they meet in local government or schools. They therefore have difficulties in obtaining a broad view of Japan.

These problems can be effectively resolved by outsourcing the JET Programme to a private-sector entity with global experience and knowhow. An entity such as this would be able to handle the selection and training of candidates, provide support for living in regional areas, and operate an alumni association.

Conclusion

Based on the aforementioned awareness, the project team has implemented the following measures as humble contribution private sector can make for the program, that are possible under the constraints of the current scheme. (1) Two exchange events were held between JET participants and corporate executives (once in Tokyo and once in Nagasaki). (2) The University JET Programme Scholarship was introduced at the Showa Women's University. (JET alumni are taken in as research students or graduate students. JET alumni work as teaching assistants in English at universities or assist with office work. In return, admissions fees, facilities fees, tuition, health and educational fees, and fees for experiment and training texts are waived and individual housing is provided.)

In particular, the University JET Programme will likely to prove to be a worthwhile and valuable scheme as it should contribute to the globalization of universities in the region and build a bridge connecting the JET Programme with private-sector companies. In light of this, we plan to increase the number of universities that offer the University JET Programme Scholarship.

Moreover, we believe that the foundation to bilateral relationships is personal interaction. However, in Japan there are a countless number of similar international exchange programs. By suitably reorganizing and integrating these programs, including the JET Programme, we believe this will boost the cost performance of activities being carried out. Consequently, we aim to put this issue up for discussion in and after 2016.

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