

WHAT IS THE JET PROGRAMME REALLY FOR? A DISCUSSION OF OFFICIAL DISCOURSE AND POLICY

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INTRODUCTION

Since 1987, the Japanese government has been inviting foreign graduates, mainly young native English-speakers, to work in the country's schools and local government offices under the auspices of the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme. While JET is customarily referred to as a 'Japanese government initiative', the term 'Japanese government' has become virtually synonymous with rule by the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), which has held power for all but four years of the entire post-war period. It was under an LDP Prime Minister, Yasuhiro Nakasone, that the programme was created. A few years prior to JET's launch, Nakasone had declared his intention to transform Japan into an 'international nation' (*kokusai kokka*), initiating, in effect, a policy of 'internationalisation' (*kokusaika*). In embarking on this policy, Nakasone appeared to be acknowledging both that Japanese society had somehow remained excessively insular and that Japan's rising status in the world had brought with it international obligations that needed to be fulfilled.

Significantly, JET's launch, hailed as a key step towards the internationalisation of Japan at the local, 'grassroots' level, occurred at a time when the country was enjoying unprecedented economic power. However, in the United States, Japan had come to be regarded, as Narelle Morris (2011) puts it, as "not only a pernicious economic competitor but also a potent national rival". Accusations of protectionism were levelled at Japan, with some American lawmakers publicly destroying Japanese-made products. In this context, it has been suggested that the creation of the JET Programme, a scheme that would provide jobs for thousands of young Americans, was motivated by a desire to curry favour with US lawmakers. David McConnell (2000), for instance, views the programme's creation as a means of rectifying 'Japan's image problem', while Tomoko Hosaka (2010) has described it as a "government-sponsored charm offensive ... launched to counter anti-Japan sentiment in the United States".

For the first 15 or so years of its existence, JET expanded steadily, posting year-on-year increases in the number of recruits. However, from 2002, when participant numbers reached a peak, it entered a period of relative decline. By this time, the Japanese ‘economic miracle’ had already soured significantly, ushering in a period of stagnation. Following the election in 2009 of a new, reform-minded government, under the leadership of the DPJ (Democratic Party of Japan), many observers began to fear for the programme’s future. Such fears were heightened considerably the following year, when this government decided to place JET under the scrutiny of a budget screening (*jigyō shiwake*) panel, set up to eradicate wasteful public expenditure. Although some of its members voiced concerns about aspects of the programme’s operation, the panel did not recommend its closure. Since the return to power in 2012 of an LDP-led government, the danger of JET’s discontinuation has undoubtedly receded. Indeed, in 2013, this government announced ambitious plans for its further expansion (Mie 2013). Although JET’s future appears secure, some still question whether the government can justify the expense of retaining it, particularly given Japan’s large national debt.

Against the background of the above, this article asks the question “What is the JET Programme really for?” In simple terms, the aim here is to ascertain, to the extent possible, what effects and benefits JET’s policy-makers may be seeking to achieve in continuing to operate the programme. To this end, I shall examine both the ‘official discourse’, i.e. how the JET organisation has explained the rationales for the programme’s existence, and the ‘operational policy’, i.e. the various rules, protocols and guidelines underpinning JET’s operation. With regard to the former, the focus will be limited to discussing certain salient themes found in official statements on the programme’s goals. With regard to the latter, the discussion will focus on three areas that pertain directly to the foreign participants—namely their recruitment, training and utilisation—in an effort to understand what effects and benefits JET’s policy-makers are seeking to generate. On the basis of the above, I shall offer some broad conclusions as to why Japan’s (LDP) government seems committed to retaining the programme. To provide some context for this discussion, I shall begin by presenting a brief outline of the JET Programme organisation.

THE JET PROGRAMME: A BRIEF OUTLINE

The JET Programme organisation encompasses a wide diversity of entities and individuals. At the apex of this organisation are three government ministries (often referred to as “The Three Ministries”): The Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (MIC); The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA); and The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). The specific administrative roles performed these ministries are as follows:

- MIC calculates financial resources; determines acceptance guidelines and acceptance numbers for

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participating countries; helps to compile assignment plans for new JET Programme participants; and allocates local taxes to help cover a portion of Programme expenses.

- MOFA recruits the foreign participants through Japanese Embassies and Consulates. It provides information sessions for interested applicants and successful candidates, and hosts pre-departure orientations. MOFA works closely with local Alumni Associations to maintain links with former JET participants following their return to their home countries.
- MEXT hosts orientations, seminars and teaching guidance for JET participants, as well as training seminars and workshops at JET conferences.

(Source: <http://jetprogramme.org/en/organisations>; accessed 2/2/2017)

In Japan, ministerial bureaucrats play a particularly prominent role in the national policy-making process. This is not to say, however, that the aims and interests of the various ministries always coincide. Indeed, David McConnell—whose book *Importing Diversity: Inside Japan's JET Program* is arguably the seminal work on the programme's creation—describes a scene of “conflicting ministerial goals” and “rivalries between the inward- and outward-looking ministries” in the process of initial policy formulation. According to McConnell, bureaucrats from the Ministry of Home Affairs (*Jichishō*), the predecessor of today's MIC, were the primary driving-force behind JET's creation. Although the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (*Gaimushō*) was an enthusiastic participant in the project, the attitude among officials in the then Ministry of Education (*Mombushō*) was “at best lukewarm” (McConnell 2000: 30-31). There is one further body involved in the programme's national-level administration, namely the Council of Local Authorities for International Relations (CLAIR), an agency established in 1988 by the Ministry of Home Affairs with the aim of promoting ‘local level internationalisation’ (*chiiki reberu no kokusaika*). Within the JET administration, CLAIR performs a wide range of duties, including the placement of participants, promotional activities, and the implementation of conferences.

At the local level, the JET Programme is administered by so-called “Contracting Organisations” (COs) (*ninyō dantai*), the vast majority of which are local government organisations, i.e. Japan's 47 prefectural authorities, 15 “designated cities” (*shitei toshi*), and other city, municipal and village authorities. As the General Information Handbook (GIH) explains to the JET participants, the COs are their *de facto* employers:

As a JET participant, you are appointed by your contracting organisation. You are not employed by the Japanese central government, the JET Programme, or CLAIR. The relationship between you and your contracting organisation is the core foundation of the JET Programme. (CLAIR 2017a:177)

The foreign participants themselves fall into three categories, namely: Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs); Coordinators for International Relations (CIRs) and Sports Exchange Advisors (SEAs).

The 'Assistant Language Teacher' (ALT)

More than 90% of participants perform their main duties within schools. Despite their title of 'Assistant Language Teacher (ALT)', the overwhelming majority of these participants are involved with the teaching of English. The original title of 'Assistant English Teacher' (AET) was modified following the incorporation of speakers of languages other than English. As their job title suggests, these *Assistant Language Teachers* are not considered to be 'teachers' in their own right, rather they are expected to 'assist' Japanese schoolteachers ('Japanese Teachers of Language' or 'JTLs') in preparing and delivering their lessons. Since almost all JTLs are concerned with English teaching, they are sometimes referred to as JTEs, i.e. 'Japanese Teachers of English'. According to the GIH, the ALT's main duty is "to engage in team teaching with Japanese teachers of foreign language (JTL) in foreign language classes in Japanese schools" (CLAIR 2017a:81).

The Coordinator for International Relations (CIR)

Under 10% of foreign participants are employed as 'Coordinators for International Relations' (CIRs). On the official JET Programme website, the CIR's role is summarised as "assisting local government offices in international exchange activities at the local level". Since their work necessitates the daily use of Japanese, as well as translating and interpreting for government officials, all CIRs must possess "a functional command of the Japanese language" (equivalent to N2 or higher of the Japanese Language Proficiency Test).

The Sports Exchange Advisor (SEA)

A few participants (just 12 individuals in the 2018-2019 programme year) are employed as Sports Exchange Advisors (SEAs), defined as "sports professionals whose role is to assist with sports training and the planning of sports-related projects" (CLAIR 2017a:93).

OFFICIAL DISCOURSE

Official Discourse on the Goals of the JET Programme

Although official information is disseminated by a diverse range of government-affiliated organisations, both within Japan and overseas, the following three goals have all remained constant features of official JET Programme discourse:

- 1) To promote 'local-level international exchange'
- 2) To improve standards of foreign language education
- 3) To foster 'understanding of Japan' among people in foreign countries.

Aside from relatively minor terminological variations, Goals 1) and 2) have been consistently reiterated since the outset by virtually all official information sources. Of course, these two goals are also foregrounded in the English-language title, the Japan *Exchange and Teaching* Programme. As JET's primary PR-organ, CLAIR is responsible for operating the 'Official Homepage of the Japan Exchange and Teaching Programme' (<http://jetprogramme.org>), the most comprehensive repository of officially-approved information on the programme. In the Japanese section of this website, JET's goals are explained as follows:

Jetto puroguramu wa omo ni kaigai no seinen wo shōchi shi, chihō jichitai, kyōiku iinkai oyobi zenkoku no ko chūgakkō ya kōtōgakkō de, kokusai kōryū no gyōmu to gaikokugo kyōiku ni tazusawaru koto ni yori, chiiki reberu de no kusa no ne no kokusaika wo suishin suru koto wo mokuteki to shite imasu.

(The JET Programme primarily invites young people abroad to engage in international exchange activities and foreign language education at local governments, educational committees and elementary and junior high schools and high schools nationwide, with the purpose of promoting grassroots internationalisation at the regional level).

(Source: The Japan Exchange and Teaching Programme website; accessed 10/11/2017)

The following statement represents a typical example of recent official English-language discourse on the programme's aims:

The Programme was started in 1987 with the purpose of increasing mutual understanding between the people of Japan and the people of other nations. It aims to promote internationalisation in Japan's local communities by helping to improve foreign language education and developing international exchange at the community level.

(CLAIR 2017a: 177)

The above statements suggest that 'grassroots internationalisation' (*kusa no ne no kokusaika*) can be achieved in local communities through a combination of 'international exchange' and foreign language education. This apparently transformative (if somewhat nebulous) concept has been referenced in numerous official statements, yet some have questioned its appropriateness, given the association of the term 'grassroots' with movements that seek change 'from the bottom-up'. Perhaps in jest, McConnell (2000:30) has labelled the JET approach "top-down grassroots internationalization".

By contrast with the above two goals, which are overtly declared across a wide range of official information sources, the goal of fostering 'understanding of Japan' is invariably explained as a happy corollary of the decision to invite foreign participants, rather than as a formal objective *per se*. The goal itself centres on the idea of nurturing participants who will develop a benign attitude towards Japan, and return home to spread a positive message. Ideally, these individuals will rise to positions of influence in their native countries and advocate for Japanese interests, as members of a "pro-Japan group". This goal is routinely emphasised in statements from Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), though rarely by other ministries or by CLAIR. In its 'Diplomatic Bluebook', MOFA identifies JET as one of several 'invitation projects' that aim "to build personal relations and promote the understanding of Japan by foreign nationals who have a great influence on

shaping public opinion and policy making process and who are expected to play a leading role in the future” (MOFA 2016b:286). Unlike Goals 1) and 2), which address perceived systemic deficiencies within Japan itself, Goal 3) is directed at an external constituency. As such, JET may be rationalised as a resource in Japan’s public diplomacy arsenal.

While acknowledging that there may be other rationales for JET’s retention, not least given the vested interests that have benefited from its creation, this discussion will focus only on the above three goals. That one should be able to identify three goals is perhaps understandable, given that JET was founded (and is overseen jointly) by three ministries. Arguably, the three goals concur with the founding ministries’ individual spheres of influence, i.e. local/regional development (Ministry of Home Affairs); foreign language education (Ministry of Education); and Japan’s international image (Ministry of Foreign Affairs).

Official Discourse on the Goal of Promoting ‘Local-level International Exchange’

It is worth remembering that, although JET is customarily referred to as an ‘exchange programme’, it would not fit the traditional definition of such, in that no Japanese individuals have ever been dispatched overseas to work under its auspices. Nonetheless, JET’s official website maintains that the title of ‘exchange programme’ is warranted for the following two reasons:

Firstly, each participant in the JET Programme brings their culture to a local community in Japan, helping the country to gain personal contact with peoples of other countries. Secondly, each JET participant will learn a great deal about Japan, its culture and its people. It is expected that JET participants will share what they learned with their family and friends upon returning home. (Source: <http://jetprogramme.org/en>; accessed 11/1/2017)

What the above statement seems to imply is, firstly, that ‘personal contact’ between Japanese people and foreigners is still in need of official encouragement; and, secondly, that ‘international exchange’ is primarily a mutual process of education through which foreigners and Japanese are able to learn about each other and each other’s cultures.

According to JET’s official website, all participants, regardless of their title, are in Japan for the same reason: “to interact with local communities to promote internationalisation at the local level”. This emphasis on engendering person-to-person contact between Japanese people and foreigners has been a consistent feature of official JET discourse, which, for many years, sought to portray Japan as somehow cut off from the outside world. Indeed, as recently as 2006, JET’s official website was still referring to Japan as a “geographically isolated country”. However, in probable recognition of the increase in foreign residents in larger urban areas,

more recent statements identify rural denizens as the primary targets of JET-sponsored international exchange. As one such example, the GIH informs recruits that their CO “may want to offer the local citizens some level of contact with the global community, especially in rural areas in which accessibility to international residents from various countries is limited” (CLAIR 2017a:179). Naturally, official publications present a highly positive image of JET-sponsored international exchange, as exemplified by the slogan “*Nihon zenkoku egao wo tsukuru kokusai kōryū*” (‘international exchange that makes the whole of Japan smile’) (CLAIR 2018). In this context, it is worth noting that the term ‘*kokusai kōryū*’ (international exchange) is commonly associated with a ‘managed’ form of cultural interaction that takes place under the auspices of an organisation, whether official, quasi-governmental or non-governmental. Typically, foreign residents are invited to participate in organised ‘*kokusai kōryū* events’ within their local communities, at which they are expected to demonstrate aspects of their culture, such as songs, dances or cuisine. While such events have been praised for the friendly ambience they generate, this kind of staged interaction has not met with universal approval. For instance, Tomoko Nakamatsu (2002) criticises *kokusai kōryū* events on the grounds that they serve to stereotype foreigners by displaying them as an ‘exotic’ attraction.

Besides offering local citizens the opportunity to meet, talk and become friends with people from other countries, JET materials customarily stress the importance of promoting ‘understanding’ of foreign individuals, countries and cultures. Such materials are replete with references to ‘intercultural understanding’ (*ibunka rikai*) and ‘international understanding’ (*kokusai rikai*), as well as ‘mutual understanding’ (*sōgo rikai*). However, what is conspicuously absent from the discourse, whether in English or Japanese, is any detailed explanation of the desired effects of such ‘understanding’ on the attitudes and behaviour of Japanese people. In this context, some Japanese academics have criticised the superficiality of government initiatives on intercultural/international education. In the 1980s, Tetsuya Kobayashi (1986:65) claimed that internationalisation in education in Japan was “often misunderstood as simply the mastery of foreign language or the acquisition of information of foreign countries”. Similarly, Yuko Okubo (2003) has characterised intercultural education as “reduced to dealing with the cultural aspects of foreigners” rather than acknowledging the needs and rights of Japan’s own foreign resident communities, while Mariko Akuzawa (2005) has referred to a ‘traditional 3Fs approach’. i.e. an emphasis on foreign countries’ food, fashion and festivals. The superficial, essentially cognitive approach to intercultural education described by these and other academics, to the extent that it is an accurate representation of the reality, differs starkly from approaches pursued in countries whose governments espouse a more inclusive, ‘multiculturalist’ ethos. In Australia, for instance, the national curriculum sets specific targets for the ‘intercultural understanding capabilities’ to be fostered in children at different stages of their school education. Elements of the Australian curriculum are designed specifically to enable schoolchildren to “challenge stereotypes and prejudices”, “reflect on intercultural experiences”, “develop respect for cultural diversity” and “empathise with others” (see ACARA n.d.). On this basis, it is apparent that educational policy-

makers in Australia regard ‘education for intercultural understanding’ as a fundamentally affective (rather than solely a cognitive) construct, with potentially transformative implications for society as a whole. By contrast, JET materials routinely reiterate the programme’s goal of promoting ‘grassroots internationalisation’ without evincing any intention, much less a detailed strategy, to use it to help create a more inclusive, interculturally tolerant society.

Official Discourse on the Goal of Improving Standards of Foreign Language Education

While JET’s English title gives equal billing to the goals of (international) ‘exchange’ and (language) ‘teaching’, its Japanese title places primary emphasis on the latter. Indeed, to judge purely from the original Japanese title, i.e. *Gogaku Shidō wo Okonau Gaikoku Seinen Shōtai Jigyō Gogaku* (“programme to invite overseas youth for language instruction”), one might be forgiven for assuming that the primary reason for JET’s creation back in 1987 was a concern to enhance standards of foreign language education. Although the programme’s title was subsequently amended slightly (with the addition of the Japanese equivalent of ‘etc.’), official JET materials, perhaps particularly those in Japanese language, have consistently emphasised its role in the improvement of foreign language education.

While foreign language education is a multi-faceted undertaking, official JET discourse primarily emphasises the objective of enhancing students’ communicative ability. As the GIH explains: “MEXT hopes the JET Programme will help to improve the communicative competence of Japanese students in foreign languages” and “that Japanese teachers will embrace their ALT’s enthusiasm for new ideas and, through team-teaching with the ALT, use more communicative teaching methods to further diversify the traditional ways of teaching foreign languages in Japan” (CLAIR 2017a: 183). Given Japan’s long history of pursuing a traditional grammar-translation methodology known as *yakudoku*, MEXT’s preoccupation with communicative ability is entirely understandable. Although MEXT has yet to conduct a comprehensive empirical evaluation of JET’s educational impact, the ‘JET Pamphlet’ (CLAIR 2014) lauds the programme’s contribution to the enhancement of foreign language education (*gaikokugo kyōiku no jūjitsu*) as one of its primary attractions.

Official Discourse on the Goal of Fostering Understanding of Japan among People in Foreign Countries

As mentioned above, it is primarily MOFA that has emphasised JET’s value as a cultural diplomacy asset for Japan, which is understandable given that the programme’s existence is entirely congruent with the Ministry’s long-held and overtly declared objective of increasing the number of persons “who are both knowledgeable

about and sympathetic to Japan” (MOFA 2006:204). In simple terms, the goal of ‘fostering understanding of Japan’ centres on the idea of establishing an international network of ‘pro-Japanese’ JET alumni who, it is hoped, will later rise to positions of influence back in their home countries and advocate for Japanese interests. MOFA materials are replete with sanguine assessments of JET’s contribution to its cultural diplomacy effort, like the following:

JET participants are offered a chance to have a hands-on experience working in close relations with local communities and residents through schools and municipal bodies in Japan. After returning to their home countries, they play active roles in various fields as a pro-Japan group of a new kind, which has a different orientation from formal Japan Studies people. They thereby act as a valuable bridge between Japan and their home countries.

(Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan website; accessed 10/7/2016)

MOFA has been lavish in its praise for JET alumni, labelling them “valuable human/diplomatic assets for Japan” (MOFA 2016b: 287). It has also praised the JET Programme Alumni Association (JETAA), as “a major organization of Japanophiles” (MOFA 2016a). To illustrate JET’s successes in nurturing such assets, CLAIR frequently publishes positive testimonials, like the following, from alumni:

The years I spent in Japan were some of the best years of my life. Thank you, JET!

The person that I am today is a direct result of my year in Japan. Arigato JET! (CLAIR 2016:7)

OPERATIONAL POLICY

Policy on the Recruitment of Foreign Participants

A key feature of JET recruitment policy is its flexibility. Indeed, numerous incremental policy changes have been introduced to address new priorities. Primarily perhaps, the size of the participant cohort has been adjusted on an annual basis. After inviting just 878 young graduates in JET’s first year, the number of participants was increased every year until 2002, reaching a peak of 6,273. However, following the introduction of a reform enabling local Boards of Education to hire their own ‘private ALTs’ rather than rely on JET-sponsored ones (Budmar 2012), participant numbers were allowed to decline, gradually falling to a low of 4,000 by 2013. In this same year, however, a newly-elected LDP-led government revealed ambitious plans to double the number of participants within three years (Mie 2013). Although this target was not met, participant numbers have nonetheless increased significantly, standing at 5,528 as of 2018.

Incremental changes have been made also to the ‘participating countries’ (*shōchi taishōkoku*) list. Given that English is the sole foreign language taught in most Japanese schools, it would seem logical for recruiters

to prioritise participants from the English-speaking world. This was certainly the policy at the time of the launch, when just four Anglophone countries—the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand—were invited to participate. In keeping with this policy, a further two largely English-speaking countries, Canada and Ireland, were added to the list the following year. However, one year later, Germany and France were incorporated into the programme, signalling a shift away from the ‘English-only’ policy, yet still indicative of a long-standing government practice of aligning Japan with ‘Western nations’ (see Befu 1983). In 1992, the policy shifted again with the addition of the first ‘non-Western’ country, China, followed by South Korea the following year. The list has been expanded further to include countries where English functions as an official language despite not being the mother tongue of the inhabitants (e.g. Singapore and the Philippines), as well as Anglophone Caribbean island-nations (e.g. Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago). Several non-English-speaking countries have also been invited to contribute participants, mainly to work as CIRs. As of July 2018, a total of 73 countries had been invited to participate, though relatively few of these contribute participants on an annual basis. In pure numerical terms, non-Western and non-Anglophone participants have played a relatively minor role in the programme. To illustrate: 17 of the 44 participating countries in the 2018-2019 Programme Year each contributed just one participant. Of the approximately 68,000 participants who had worked on the programme as of July 2018, just 2,400 had been recruited from Asian countries, 650 from Africa, and 700 from South and Central America. By contrast, one country, the United States, has accounted for more than half of all the foreign JET participants who have ever worked on the programme.

Policy has shifted also with regard to the eligibility age of candidates. At the outset, the JET organisation established an upper age limit of 35, which was raised to ‘under 40’ in 2002, before being abandoned completely in 2017. By means of an explanation, the official JET Programme website now states that “as long as applicants meet all other eligibility criteria, there is no age requirement limit”...“applicants will be judged on maturity, professionalism, and ability to adjust to other cultures”. As yet, the implications of this potentially highly significant policy shift are unclear. It is unclear, for instance, whether the change will mean that recruiters begin actively de-prioritising younger candidates in favour of ones with greater life experience and professional expertise; whether it is designed to allow for the recruitment of a limited number of exceptional ‘older candidates’; or whether it is simply a means of fending off criticism of an ageist recruitment policy. Of course, in practical terms, even a formal abolition of the age-limit policy does not prevent recruiters from discriminating against older candidates. Moreover, despite the abolition of the upper age-limit, JET’s Japanese title still defines it as a ‘youth invitation programme’ (*seinen shōtai jigyō*).

One aspect of recruitment policy that has remained constant is the demand for JET participants to hold a Bachelor’s degree, though this may be a degree in *any* subject. Although the ALT’s role centres on the teaching of foreign languages, JET recruitment policy has never insisted on applicants with teaching qualifications,

teaching experience, nor even a degree in a language subject. According to the 2018-2019 eligibility criteria listed on JET's official JET website, applicants for the position of ALT need to "be interested in the Japanese educational system and particularly in the Japanese way of teaching foreign languages", "be interested in working with children" and "be qualified as a language teacher or be strongly motivated to take part in the teaching of foreign languages". Although the website claims that "additional evaluation" will be given to candidates with "language teaching experience or qualification" or simply "teaching experience or qualification", pedagogical neophytes are still encouraged to apply. In this connection, the official JET website states (as of mid-2018) that: "a teaching certificate, diploma, or TESOL/TEFL certification is not a requirement for participation on the JET Programme, but such certifications will be an asset during the selection process". In similar vein, JET's UK website claims that "although beneficial, having a TEFL qualification is not a requirement as long as you have an interest in teaching and working with young people." (Source: Japan Exchange and Teaching Programme UK; accessed 2/8/2018). Clearly, such ambiguity allows recruiters considerable leeway to hire ALTs without teaching experience or a teaching qualification.

A similar ambiguity is evident with regard to Japanese language ability. Although JET's official website claims that "additional evaluation" will be given to applicants with "a high level of Japanese ability", there is no formal Japanese language requirement for ALT candidates. Given the limited number of people who study Japanese at tertiary level in most participating countries, it is likely that many, if not most, ALT recruits will arrive in Japan with a limited grasp of the local language. Naturally, this is not the case for CIR applicants, all of whom are required to "have a functional command of the Japanese language (Japanese Language Proficiency Test N1 or N2 is desirable)". In all other respects, the eligibility criteria for CIRs are identical to those for their ALT counterparts.

A further defining feature of JET recruitment policy is the imposition of a term-limit on a participant's tenure, though, again, this policy has been subject to numerous amendments. JET participants are contracted for just a single year, though "two reappointments are permissible, provided both the contracting organisation and JET participant agree". Participants whose work is considered to be "of an exceptionally high standard" may be allowed to remain on the programme for a maximum of five years (CLAIR 2017b).

Policy on the Training of Foreign Participants

Although the JET administration is cognizant of the fact that many ALT recruits lack pedagogical experience, it has never sought to offer anything other than rudimentary pre-service and in-service training. According to JET's official website, all recruits attend a two-day training conference upon arrival in Tokyo, and most then receive "a more specialised orientation" in their host prefectures. Most ALTs also attend annual 'Skill

Development Conferences' (SDCs) in their host prefecture. The content of these conferences, which last between one and five days, is decided at the prefectural level based on MEXT guidelines. Two of the main goals are "to facilitate communication between ALT and JTEs" and "to improve the quality of team teaching". For CIRs, the level of training is arguably even more basic. CIRs attend one annual three-day conference, aimed at "providing practical work-related skills and information that will help CIRs in their everyday jobs". Workshops and seminars are conducted by "business professionals" and "veteran CIRs" (Source: <http://jetprogramme.org/en/acs-con/>). Although the JET administration now obtains training assistance from educational agencies like the British Council and offers work-related support to ALTs (e.g. grants for TEFL certification and free online Japanese language courses), its preparatory training regime has been widely criticized for its inadequacies.

Policy on the Utilisation of Foreign Participants

The first thing to acknowledge about the workplace utilisation of foreign participants is the absence of a consistent policy. Put simply, a participant's day-to-day work duties will depend entirely on where they happen to be posted. This stark reality is encapsulated in the ubiquitous catchphrase 'Every Situation is Different' (known also by its acronym 'ESID'). Although the catchphrase itself no longer appears prominently in official information sources, an 'ESID Principle' is still acknowledged in a *de facto* sense. The General Information Handbook (CLAIR 2017a:85) informs participants that "it is impossible to list, or even anticipate" all the activities they might be asked to perform "as each job varies so greatly". As the GIH explains, this situation occurs because the participant's job description is tailored to the demands of their Contracting Organisation:

Your duties are listed as a JET participant, and these will vary between contracting organisations. The Terms and Conditions usually include in your duties a phrase like "any other duties specified by the Supervisor".

(CLAIR 2017a: 45)

Among ALTs, the job description may vary not only in terms of the duties they are required to perform within any given school, but in terms of the number of schools they are required to visit during their working week. Some ALTs spend each day at their 'base school', others are required to visit multiple schools within any one given week, while a third group, the so-called 'one-shot ALTs', are based at a Board of Education, from which they are required to visit several schools. Furthermore, ALTs operate in a variety of schools from 'non-academic' schools to so-called 'Super English Language High Schools' (SELHi), and, since 2002, also in elementary schools. As their job title indicates, the ALT's role centres, ostensibly at least, on the provision of assistance to the JTL. In this regard, one of JET's defining characteristics is the joint-deployment of ALTs and JTLs in a collaborative pedagogical approach known as 'team-teaching', explained thus in the 2017 General Information Handbook:

The goal of team teaching is to create a foreign language classroom in which the students, the JTLs, and the native speaker (ALT) engage in communicative activities. Team teaching provides opportunities for active interaction in a foreign language in the classroom, enhances the students' motivation towards learning a foreign language, and deepens the students' understanding of foreign cultures. ALTs work in cooperation with the JTLs to plan lessons, team teach, and evaluate the effectiveness of the lessons (CLAIR 2017a: 81).

While the expression '*team-teaching*' itself might conjure up images of a collaborative partnership of equals, this is, emphatically, not the case. Rather, the role envisaged for the ALT is purely an auxiliary one, as clarified in the following passage from the GIH:

Please bear in mind that the ALT is an assistant to the Japanese teacher in the classroom. The ALT should not, therefore, be expected to conduct classes alone, not be the 'main' teacher. As an assistant, the ALT must respect the lesson plan and wishes of the Japanese teacher...However, ALTs can be a valuable resource for Japanese teachers, suggesting activities or creative and effective ways to use the textbook. (CLAIR: 2017a: 80)

Outside of the classroom, ALTs are required to perform a range of other unspecified duties that relate both to language teaching and international exchange. As explained on JET's official website, "common ALT duties" include: "assisting in the preparation of materials for teaching a foreign language", "assisting in the language training of teachers of a foreign language", "assisting in extracurricular activities and club activities", "providing information on language and other related subjects for people such as teachers' consultants and foreign language teachers", "assisting in foreign language speech contests", "engaging in local international exchange activities", as well "other duties as specified by the contracting organisation". Elementary school-based ALTs are required to perform a range of different duties like: "teaching simple greetings, basic conversation, playing games, singing songs, or doing skits, short plays or other oral/aural activities", as well as "culture-based activities" like "playing games from the ALT's home country". As the ALT Handbook makes clear, however, "the ALT's involvement and activities will vary according to the wishes of the school and the frequency of visits there" (CLAIR 2012:11).

Naturally, the 'ESID Principle' applies also to working conditions for CIRs. Hence, the Official JET website is able to provide only a list of 'typical duties', which include "receiving guests from abroad, editing and producing pamphlets in English or Japanese, advising and planning international exchange programmes, teaching English (or other languages) to government employees and local residents".

IMPLICATIONS OF OPERATIONAL POLICY FOR THE THREE ‘OFFICIAL’ JET PROGRAMME GOALS

To judge from the operational policy they have established, what effects and benefits are JET’s policy-makers seeking to achieve? I shall attempt to answer this question by discussing the implications of the programme’s operational policy as they pertain to the three ‘official goals’ discussed above.

Implications of JET Operational Policy for the Goal of Fostering Local-level International Exchange

While the decision to place thousands of young foreigners in communities all across Japan in the name of ‘grassroots internationalisation’ may appear revolutionary, JET operational policy is hardly indicative of a desire to challenge public perceptions vis-à-vis the role of foreigners in Japanese society. It is not just that participant numbers have been kept too small to generate any transformational impact, but also that the ‘internationalising role’ of these participants is so poorly defined. In its ostensible quest to promote intercultural/international understanding among local residents (*jūmin no ibunka rikai, kokusai rikai no sokushin*), the programme has always relied on young ALTs, perhaps predicated on a belief that they will easily develop a rapport with Japanese schoolchildren due to their relative proximity in age. However, given that few ALTs are likely to have received formal training as intercultural/cross-cultural educators and relatively few are completely fluent Japanese speakers, their role in intercultural education is perhaps best described as that of ‘cultural informant’ (Browne and Evans 1994); in other words, ALTs are perceived as ‘cultural resources’ to be utilised in classrooms or at staged *kokusai kōryū* events. While, in their role as ‘cultural informants’, ALTs are undoubtedly well equipped to provide insightful information about their home country, its customs and lifestyle, some critics believe that the presence of young, temporary, non-Japanese-speaking ALTs only serves to reinforce the stereotypical image of the foreigner as a marginal presence in Japanese society. In this regard, Lisa Gay (2010) has accused the programme of promoting “a shallow form of diversity that reinforces the stereotype of the clueless foreigner who must be patiently taught about Japanese language and culture” (Gay 2010).

Against this, it should be remembered that JET also employs individuals who would certainly not conform to any stereotypical image of the ‘clueless foreigner’. The CIRs, with their ability to communicate with Japanese people in their own language without mediation, constitute a potentially valuable resource for the enhancement of Japanese people’s understanding of other countries and cultures. Unlike most of their ALT counterparts, CIRs would be capable of making presentations and preparing educational materials in Japanese, and of interacting, unassisted, with local citizens and community groups. Moreover, whereas all but a small

minority of ALTs are native-speakers of English, the CIR cohort also includes speakers of other languages (notably Chinese, Korean and Portuguese), which provides opportunities for local citizens to learn about non-Anglophone countries and cultures. Despite what CIRs offer in these respects, however, the JET organisation has chosen to limit their number to less than 10% of the total participant cohort, thereby restricting their potential impact.

The JET Programme is, and has always been, oriented towards ‘the West’, and America in particular, which is consistent with a policy of employing Western educators that stretches back to the Meiji period (Jansen 1995). Although new ‘participating countries’ have gradually been incorporated into the programme, JET recruitment policy has not been adjusted to reflect the shifts that have occurred in the geopolitical power structure since 1987, perhaps most notably the growing global influence of China.

In terms of intercultural education, three decades of the JET Programme do not appear to have engendered any fundamental changes in approach, except that the presence of ALTs has introduced a tangible, ‘living’ foreign element into Japanese classrooms. Given the entirely flexible policy on the utilisation of participants, one can assume that JET’s internationalising effect will vary according to the work location. Some ALTs might encounter only supportive staff and motivated students; others might be met with indifference. Of course, there will also be variations in attitude and aptitude among ALTs themselves. Ultimately, JET’s promotion of ‘grassroots internationalisation’ is uneven and inconsistent. In the absence of clearly defined objectives and a coherent plan for achieving them, it would appear that JET policy-makers believe that Japanese communities become more ‘international’ simply by virtue of having local citizens engage in regular interaction with specially invited foreigners.

That said, the fact that policy-makers have continued operating the programme for more than thirty years has, to a certain extent, enabled them to attain their goal of fostering person-to-person contact between local citizens and foreigners, i.e. local-level international exchange. Since 1987, more than 68,000 participants have lived and worked alongside locals in hundreds of communities across Japan. Although they represent only a small part of Japan’s foreign resident community, these participants have become a fixture in schools, where they come into regular contact with children in their formative years. They have also become fixtures in their local communities, perhaps particularly in rural areas. Some believe that the continuous presence of JET participants in local communities represents, in and of itself, a tangible and important benefit, in that it has helped ‘ordinary Japanese people’ to overcome any apprehensions they may have had about interacting with foreigners. As one former ALT turned local-level lawmaker in Japan, Anthony Bianchi, puts it: “There has been a benefit from the program that you can’t measure” ... “People used to freak out when they’d see a foreigner. Just the fact that that doesn’t happen anymore is a big benefit” (Cited in Hosaka 2010).

Implications of JET Operational Policy for the Goal of Improving Standards of Foreign Language Education

While, on the face of it, the classroom deployment of well-educated native-speakers has the potential to deliver improvements in foreign language education, certain elements of JET operational policy militate against the achievement of this goal. Perhaps the most serious shortcoming in this regard is the unsystematic manner in which ALTs are deployed, whether by their COs or within individual schools. While students in certain schools have daily opportunities for interaction with their ‘base-school ALT’, others get to meet their ‘one-shot ALT’ only very infrequently. Within the school, the JTL has complete freedom to decide how (or indeed whether) to deploy their ALTs, which means that the latter could find themselves being ‘underutilised’. Indeed, given the imperative to help students pass important examinations (which require no communicative competence), it would be natural if some JTLs perceived their collaboration with ALTs to be largely irrelevant to their wider priorities. There is evidence that this is actually the case: according to MEXT’s own statistics from 2016, junior high schools used their ALTs in only 22.1% of total English class time, and just 9.7% of the time at the high school level (McCrostie 2017).

Although official materials (like the GIH) declare JET’s commitment to enhancing students’ communicative competence, the programme has failed either to guarantee the recruitment of appropriately-trained teachers or to provide adequate compensatory training for the implementation of a programme of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). Given that research studies (e.g. Darling-Hammond 1999) show a correlation between teacher inexperience and unsatisfactory student outcomes, the decision to prioritise relative pedagogical neophytes over trained teachers hardly seems prudent. Besides, as Peter Medgyes (1986) has explained, CLT places greater demands on teachers compared with more traditional teacher-centred approaches, since it necessitates a wider range of classroom management skills. While many experienced JTLs will surely have learnt to adapt their teaching style to accommodate the presence of ALTs, team-teaching represents only a small (and, arguably, relatively unimportant) part of their daily work. Researchers (e.g. Miller & Aldred 2000) have discovered that if a teacher has failed to understand the principles of CLT or appreciate its value, it may be difficult for them to develop communicative practices appropriate to their own teaching contexts. Although a lack of teaching experience and training does not necessarily mean that ALTs and JTLs will be incapable of forming a productive collaboration, team-teaching success seems likely to depend as much as anything on the intangible of interpersonal chemistry.

Implications of JET Operational Policy for the Goal of Fostering ‘Understanding of Japan’ Among People in Foreign Countries

Since JET policy-makers are seeking to nurture individuals who will later rise to positions of influence in their native countries and advocate for Japanese interests, it is entirely natural that they should prioritise younger individuals who have yet to embark on their careers rather than, say, older professional English teachers who have already decided their career trajectory. To attract such individuals, policy-makers have created an appealing (albeit short-term) employment opportunity, combining valuable overseas vocational experience with opportunities for other personal development (e.g. to learn a new language), and a reasonably competitive salary (for a younger individual, at any rate). To judge from the high percentage of participants who opt to extend their contracts for a second year, JET appears to have engendered a high degree of satisfaction. Moreover, of the 68,000 participants that have worked on the JET Programme as of 2018, some 26,000 have chosen to join the programme’s alumni organisation.

Although, in terms of nationality, the JET organisation has gradually diversified its participant cohort, the emphasis on ‘Westerners’ is unmistakable. In this respect, JET recruitment policy jibes perfectly with the expectations of academics like Harumi Befu (1983) and Mayumi Itoh (2000), who view the Japanese government’s internationalisation (*kokusaika*) campaign, of which JET’s creation was a key component, as a means of affirming Japan’s self-identification with ‘Western’ liberal democracies. The extent to which the programme has targeted recruits from the United States, however, suggests that policy-makers regard the nurturing of a ‘pro-Japan group’ in that country as the number one priority. This is understandable given America’s status as the world’s foremost economic and military power, not to mention Japan’s key ally.

While cultural diplomacy, as a form of public diplomacy, is primarily aimed at influencing “the peoples of foreign societies” (Taylor 1997), there are indications that policy-makers have sought to use JET also to influence certain foreign governments. Indeed, according to McConnell (2000), JET was created for the very purpose of influencing the American government during a trade dispute. As one indication that it has continued to be used in the same manner, it is interesting to note JET’s recent recruitment drive in the Caribbean, a region in which, according to Andrew Lumsden (2017), Japan’s government has been seeking to expand its influence. In a 2014 visit, prime minister Shinzo Abe pledged to “dramatically expand” cultural and educational exchanges with Caribbean countries. The following year, JET nearly doubled the number of slots open to Caribbean applicants (Lumsden 2017). Two of the region’s most populous countries, Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago, have been the main beneficiaries. In view of its timing, it is tempting to see this policy change, at least in part, as an attempt to gain leverage with the governments of both countries. Given its entirely flexible policy with regard to ‘participating countries’, it is likely that JET will continue to be used in this manner.

CONCLUSION: What is the JET Programme Really For?

As a crisis plan to assuage the anger of disgruntled US lawmakers at a time of trade friction, JET's creation in 1987 is easy to rationalise. Given the myriad changes that have occurred over the past three decades, both within Japan and internationally, the rationale for its continued existence is somewhat less obvious. The 1980s concept of *kokusaika* (internationalisation)—with its focus, ostensibly at least, on engendering change within Japan itself—has been superseded by *gurobaruka* (globalisation), a seemingly inexorable trend of transnational labour mobility and borderless communication. While, to judge from official JET discourse, the programme's goals have remained unchanged, its operational policy has been in a perpetual state of flux. In certain cases, reforms have signalled important shifts of emphasis, for instance in terms of the countries from which participants are drawn, the size of the participant cohort, and the length of time that participants may serve on the programme. Most recently, the upper age-limit for applicants was abolished, a reform with the potential to alter radically the programme's orientation. David McConnell (2008:24) has observed that policy changes have almost invariably been a reaction to pressure from the JET participants themselves rather than “a product of endogenous evolution”. This would suggest that policy-makers have always lacked a coherent vision for the programme, and have formulated policy on an *ad hoc* basis.

In 1987, the government's desire to encourage ‘international exchange’ must have seemed entirely rational, given that most Japanese citizens probably had relatively little opportunity to interact with non-Japanese in the course of their daily lives. This is hardly still the case in 2018. Indeed, over the course of the programme's existence, Japan's foreign population has increased steadily (reaching more than 2.5 million in 2017), and the country has experienced an exponential rise in short-term visitors. In this context, it is perhaps natural that some should question whether JET, an orchestrated exchange programme, remains an appropriate means of attaining the overarching aim of ‘grassroots internationalisation’. Kumiko Torikai, for instance, argues that “bringing thousands of JETs to Japan is not a good investment for the country's taxpayers in this day and age of an already globalized world” (cited in Hosaka 2010).

It would seem axiomatic to many, perhaps particularly to Japanese people, that JET is primarily about improving foreign language education. After all, its Japanese title defines it as a “programme to invite overseas youth for language instruction, etc.”. Moreover, the deployment of native English-speaking ALTs in school classrooms dovetails perfectly with national language-in-education policy, the primary objective of which, for almost three decades, has been the raising of standards of communicative ability in English. This objective has been manifested in a long list of language-in-education initiatives, beginning with MEXT's 1989 New Revised Course of Study: Emphasis on Oral Communication (NCROS), which, for the first time, specified ‘communicative competence’ as the central goal of English language education. However, to judge from

the policy underpinning its operation, JET has always been confined to a peripheral role in school language education. Even staunch supporters of the programme (e.g. Metzgar 2017) have acknowledged its struggles to engender tangible improvements in language education. JET's lack of impact in this regard is perhaps not merely a question of the paucity of appropriately-skilled human resources, but of systemic practices which militate against the introduction of learner-centred, communicative teaching approaches. Most fundamentally, crucial high-school and university examinations still attach no importance to a student's communicative ability. The continued prevalence of such examinations is itself a major disincentive to the espousal of communicative teaching practices among JTLs and, by extension, a key reason for JET's marginalisation within the education system.

While the official PR machine pays lip-service to JET's contribution to school language education (perhaps as a means of justifying its financing to the Japanese public?), there is little to suggest that Japan's all-important education ministry has ever supported the programme's existence. As McConnell (2000:41-46) has explained, the then Ministry of Education (*Mombushō*) was unenthusiastic about JET's creation, in part out of fear of resistance from Japanese English teachers, anxious that their authority would be undermined by an influx of foreign educators. There is little evidence that the Ministry's ambivalent attitude has ever changed. JET has barely rated a mention in any of MEXT's foreign language-in-education policy initiatives. Crucially, no suggestion has been made in any policy document that JET may ever be allowed to supply permanent, fully-accredited language teachers. The lack of importance attached to JET in the context of school foreign language education is further underlined by the fact that many COs, the end-users of the JET-sponsored ALTs, have chosen to end their involvement with the programme.

While many question JET's contribution to foreign language education, its contribution to Japanese 'soft power' has been widely lauded. A key prime ministerial advisor once labelled JET "the single most shining crown jewel of Japan's diplomacy" (Cited in Metzgar 2017:5). JET's 'soft power' successes in the United States have received particular praise, though this is perhaps understandable, given the comparatively high percentage of American participants. To judge from the policy evolution it has presided over, it would appear that the (LDP) Japanese government currently (i.e. in 2018) perceives JET primarily as a vehicle for garnering influence overseas—whether in terms of cultivating foreign friends or gaining leverage with foreign governments—rather than a vehicle for engendering any systemic change within Japan itself. However, given the extent to which the operational policy has meandered thus far, it is difficult to predict how the programme might evolve in the future. What does seem highly unlikely, however, is that any LDP-led government would countenance JET's discontinuation, having presided over its launch and announced plans for its further expansion. Rather, the JET Programme will be retained as a flexible instrument of policy, whose orientation can be adjusted to meet new perceived needs as they arise.

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