

THE JET PROGRAMME'S *DE FACTO* 'ESID' POLICY AND ITS CONSEQUENCES: CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES FROM THE ONLINE 'ALT COMMUNITY'

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INTRODUCTION

Since 1987, Japan's government has invited thousands of foreign graduates, mainly from English-speaking countries, to work in the country's schools and local government offices under the auspices of the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme. The programme is operated jointly at the national level by three government 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)—in collaboration with the Council of Local Authorities for International Relations (CLAIR), a governmental agency described by David McConnell (2003:125) as “the coordinating office for the entire JET Program”. Throughout this article, these four entities will be referred to collectively as “the national JET organisation”.

According to CLAIR, the JET Programme was created in order to “increase mutual understanding between the people of Japan and the people of other nations and to promote internationalisation in Japan's local communities by helping to improve foreign language education and developing international exchange at the community level” (CLAIR 2019: 179). However, 90% of the programme's foreign participants are assigned to work within schools, where they are tasked with helping local schoolteachers to prepare and deliver their foreign language (overwhelmingly English) lessons. These participants are referred to as “Assistant Language Teachers” or, more commonly, as “ALTs”, while their Japanese teaching partners are known officially as “Japanese Teachers of Language” (JTLs), though many (especially the ALTs themselves) refer to them as “JTEs” (Japanese Teachers of English).

To provide some perspective for the discussion that follows, it is important to stress that, down the years, thousands of ALTs have taken to the Internet to praise the JET Programme. Many ALTs, past and present, have recommended the programme to would-be applicants and awarded it high marks in online surveys (such as that conducted by glassdoor.com). A few especially enthusiastic individuals have gone as far as to eulogize JET in their own weblogs. Conversely, however, a very substantial number of ALTs have also evinced dissatisfaction with their personal situations and criticised certain aspects of the programme's operation. With regard to the latter, this article discusses one of the most persistent targets of criticism, namely the complete lack of uniformity in terms of working and living conditions for ALTs; a reality commonly referred to as 'ESID'.

WHAT DOES 'ESID' MEAN?

The acronym 'ESID' is derived from the catchphrase "every situation is different", which was once commonly used by JET officials, particularly by staff responsible for orienting newly-recruited ALTs upon their arrival in Japan. In essence, the phrase was used to remind recruits that their living and working conditions were peculiar to their own situation; the implication perhaps being that they should not be disappointed if/when they discovered that some of their counterparts were enjoying conditions more favourable than their own. Although the phrase "Every Situation is Different"—which has been described variously as a "slogan", a "motto", even a "mantra"—once appeared in official JET publicity materials, it is today conspicuously absent. The acronym 'ESID' is, however, still in ubiquitous use within the online ALT community, as evidenced by its frequent appearance in discussion forum threads, although, as the following two comments indicate, opinions differ as to how it should be interpreted:

My personal take is that it's not a way of writing off bad experiences, just a way of being lazy... You don't have to think, advise, empathize, or anything. You just say, "ESID," and the problem, as far as you are concerned, is resolved. (vivianvixxen 2019)

ESID isn't really an excuse as much as it is a statement of fact, since to actually do anything about it would require broad systemic reform beyond the ability of CLAIR to implement in any meaningful way. (Mariamatic 2019)

'ESID' AS *DE FACTO* POLICY

From a literal perspective, the phrase "every situation is different" is merely the statement of a basic truism: no two individuals in any field of employment (even those with identical job titles)

will experience identical conditions in their working lives. However, in the context of the JET Programme, “Every Situation is Different” (ESID) is also *de facto* policy, the corollary of a decision by the national JET organisation to place their ALT recruits under the jurisdiction of various “Contracting Organisations” (COs) (*ninyō dantai*) and, more importantly, to give these COs a completely free rein in terms of how they manage their recruits and how they deploy them in their work locations. The ultimate authority of the CO in this regard is explained to prospective applicants on the main JET Programme website, as well as in the General Information Handbook (GIH), a reference material described by some as “the JET bible”, which is distributed to all ALTs. As the following passage from the GIH makes clear to all recruits, it is the CO (and not the national JET organisation) that, in a general sense, will determine their living and working conditions:

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. You accept your appointment with them, you work for them, and you are under their jurisdiction. It is their employees, teachers, students, and citizens who will make up your living and working community. (CLAIR 2019:179)

The COs constitute an extremely diverse range of organisations: local governmental authorities (prefectural, ‘designated city’, city, town and village boards of education) plus a number of private schools, located throughout all of Japan’s 47 prefectures. Aside from institutional differences among the COs themselves (e.g. the number and kind of schools under their jurisdiction), there are clear differences of policy vis-à-vis the terms and conditions of employment that are offered to ALTs.

Of course, the *de facto* ‘ESID policy’ extends to the workplace, i.e. the school, where individual JTLs are given complete freedom to utilise ALTs as they see fit. Indeed, as far as the national JET organisation is concerned, the ALT is obligated to carry out whatever duties the JTL demands. This is emphasised in the following passage from the GIH:

Please bear in mind that the ALT is an assistant to the Japanese teacher in the classroom. As an assistant, the ALT must respect the lesson plan and wishes of the Japanese teacher... ALTs can be a valuable resource for Japanese teachers, suggesting activities or creative and effective ways to use the textbook. (CLAIR 2019: 83)

Japanese schools also constitute an extremely diverse collection of institutions, with differences in size, resources, as well as the age and academic ability of students. While the overwhelming majority of ALTs are deployed in high schools and junior-high schools, a relatively small

number are assigned to elementary schools, where they collaborate with ‘homeroom teachers’ (HRTs). Another important distinction regarding deployment is that between ‘base-school’ and ‘one-shot’ ALTs. ‘Base-school ALTs’ are assigned to one particular school, which becomes their ‘base’. The ALT teaches classes within that school, but may also make regular visits to other schools. By contrast, ‘one-shot ALTs’ are based at a Board of Education, from which they visit a wide variety of schools. Crucially, as will be explained below, there are also clear differences among the JTLs within these schools in terms of how they perceive the role and duties of the ALT.

Against this background, it is entirely natural that the working conditions of any given ALT should differ from those any other. The problem with the ‘ESID policy’ is perhaps not that it countenances variations in conditions among ALTs, but that these conditions can vary so dramatically. To judge from the myriad of first-hand accounts posted on online discussion forums, it is clear that some ALTs experience, by any objective standard, far less favourable working conditions than others.

THE ‘ESID POLICY’ IN ACTION

Assignment (Placement) of ALTs

For newly-recruited ALTs, the ‘ESID policy’ first manifests itself in the assignment process. ALTs are assigned to COs in a wide variety of locations—from large urban centres to remote islands and rural communities—across all 47 prefectures of Japan. Under the current policy (as explained on the official JET Programme website), the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (MIC) contacts the COs in order to compile assignment plans within Japan for new participants, and, after consultation with MOFA, MEXT and CLAIR, creates acceptance guidelines for each participating country and specifies acceptance numbers. The COs then request the number and the nationality of the foreign participants they wish to employ. ALTs from English-speaking countries (*eigo-ken no kuni*) are allocated among COs in proportion to the total number of applicants from each country, while ALTs from non-English-speaking countries (*hieigo-ken no kuni*) or ‘minor countries of the English-speaking world’ (*eigo-ken no shōsū shōtai koku*) are usually allocated exactly as requested.

From the ALT’s perspective, however, the JET assignment process is akin to a lottery. While applicants are required to state their first-, second- and third-choice “assignment preferences”

on the JET Programme Application Form, they are advised that assignments may not necessarily be made according to their preferences. In this connection, the "Questions and Answers" section of JET's main official website warns prospective applicants of the high likelihood of being assigned to a smaller community (rather than a large urban metropolis):

The goal of the JET Programme is to enhance internationalisation in local communities in Japan and there is a relatively low demand for JET Programme participants from urban local authorities. For this reason, few JET Programme participants are placed in large cities. The majority of JET Programme participants are placed in small to medium sized cities or in small towns or villages. (The Japan Exchange and Teaching Programme n.d.)

While the above reminder might be interpreted as an implicit acknowledgement that some (of the overwhelmingly young) applicants might prefer to be assigned to a larger urban location, online discussion forums are replete with accounts (like those below) that testify to the satisfaction of ALTs based in more remote communities, even when their placements did not match the preferences they had specified on their application forms.

I'm placed in one of the most rural towns in the least populated prefecture in Japan and I absolutely love it. The people are very kind and it feels like it's easy to become a part of the town rather than just living in it (if that makes sense). (IndigenousVagabond 2019)

I'm on a remote island and I can confirm it is the most unique and best experience I could've asked for. I didn't ask for an island but I also am very thankful I was placed on one. The community is very accepting and genuinely Interested in me. (JdotRdotNyanko 2019)

Conversely, however, there are also those who express disappointment at their assignment location, perhaps particularly because it did not conform to their stated preferences:

I recently got my placement which is in a quite rural part of Shikoku, many hours away from any major cities on Honshu. It was essentially the opposite of what I requested in my placement preferences. I'm a city person so I requested three urban locations with a high number of JETs...I can't help but think of many people who probably requested a warm, rural, coastal locale and would've been happy to get my placement, yet got placed in a big city further north that I would've preferred instead. This is frustrating. (wasuremashita 2016)

I came here wanting to experience life in Japan but I'm totally cut off from everywhere in a small town with only public transport. I never thought my life here would be so dismissally (sic) boring and mundane. (TallinJapan 2018)

Irrespective of whether they ended up loving or loathing their placement, many ALTs (including the two below) find themselves assigned to a geographical location far away from the one they had requested, and/or receive an urban placement when they had requested a rural one, and vice versa:

I requested Kyushu. I got Tohoku. Jet choices are just BS. (Gizmotech 2015)

I wanted somewhere a bit more rural and got placed in Tokyo! (glampireweekend 2016)

In addition to having no control over the geographical location of their placement, ALTs have no control over what kind of school(s) they are assigned to. Given that the assignment process resembles a lottery, it is entirely conceivable that a recruit who had harboured a strong desire to develop relationships with groups of mature Japanese high-school students will get placed in charge of classes of boisterous eight- and nine-year-olds at several different elementary schools.

Consequences of the ‘ESID Policy’ for the Day-to-Day Working Conditions of ALTs

By any objective measure, the ‘ESID policy’ countenances major disparities in day-to-day working conditions for ALTs. To judge from their online comments, ‘more fortunate’ ALTs have found themselves presented with a highly advantageous set of workplace conditions, while comparatively ‘less fortunate’ ones have encountered conditions that not only have caused personal distress, but have also diverged radically from the idealised scenarios described in the General Information Handbook (CLAIR 2019). In the GIH, the most fundamental element of the ALT’s job description, i.e. their role in language teaching, is straightforwardly defined thus: “the main duty of an ALT is to engage in team teaching with Japanese teachers of foreign language (JTL) in foreign language classes in Japanese schools”. The team-teaching relationship described in the GIH is one in which “ALTs work in cooperation with the JTLs to plan lessons, team teach, and evaluate the effectiveness of the lessons” and in which “the students, the JTLs, and the native speaker (ALT) engage in communicative activities” (CLAIR 2019:83).

The GIH is decidedly less clear when seeking to explain the other elements of the ALT’s job description, as exemplified by the following statement:

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,” but this should not alarm you. (CLAIR 2019: 43)

As a broad indication of the kind of tasks that ALTs might be expected to perform, the GIH lists a number of both “extra-curricular activities” (such as participating in English conversation clubs, judging speech contests, and conducting informal English conversation classes for school staff) and “other ALT duties” (like proofreading and translation, public speaking, participating in training seminars, teaching a foreign language to adults) (CLAIR 2019: 83). Ultimately, however, as CLAIR concedes to ALTs: “it is impossible to list, or even anticipate, all the activities that you might be asked to perform, as each job varies so greatly” (CLAIR 2019: 87). In other words, the ALT should be prepared to do whatever is demanded by the person responsible for managing them.

Since work duties are not mandated by the national JET organisation, but are entirely based on decisions made by staff in the local workplace—whether JTLs, school administrators or CO officials—it is natural that there should be significant disparities among ALTs, both in terms of the content and amount of work assigned to them. To judge from comments online, it is clear that these disparities manifest themselves not only in terms of “extra-curricular activities” or “other ALT duties”, but also in terms of what is, ostensibly at least, the ALT’s primary duty, i.e. team-teaching with JTLs. In this regard, posts in discussion forums have revealed major differences among ALTs in terms of the number of classes they have been required to teach each week, as well as the nature and extent of their participation in these classes. Consequently, there are also major differences in terms of how ALTs perceive their work situation. Some, like the following, describe their situations in highly positive terms:

My schools are all wonderful. They make me feel valued and my students are so funny and enjoy my classes. (jlv111 2019)

My school is awesome. The teachers I work with are really nice. Any time I have had trouble (which has been very rare) they’ve done a good job helping me out. (mekanikstik 2019)

However, it is probably fair to say that many other ALTs perceive their situations less positively, and there are often striking similarities in their descriptions of negative experiences. In this connection, three of the most widely reported dysfunctional workplace scenarios will now be discussed. All three scenarios are ultimately attributable to the ‘ESID policy’, which entrusts to local staff all decisions regarding the utilisation of ALTs in the workplace. These scenarios also contravene JET guidelines, as set out in the GIH (CLAIR 2019), and run contrary to the long-established policy of Japan’s education ministry, whose primary declared aim is the fostering

of communicative competence in English (see Ministry of Education, Science and Culture 1989).

Three Dysfunctional Workplace Scenarios

1) “Desk Warming”

The expression “desk warming” is used to refer to situations in which an ALT is, in essence, obliged to sit for a considerable length of time at a desk, typically in a school staff room or BoE office, without any formal work duties to perform. It is worth clarifying, however, that almost all ALTs experience some amount of “desk warming” during school holidays, since they are usually required to report for work even though no lessons are being conducted during those periods. “Desk warming” only becomes problematic during term time, when an ALT is left sitting at his or her desk when they had expected to be team-teaching with a JTL partner. The following comments illustrate how some ALTs feel about being left in this position:

Please someone make this desk warming end...I have taught a total of 5 classes since I started (3 self intros and 2 human tape recorder classes). I am only at one SHS (Senior High School) and most of the students are preparing for an exam so I'm not really needed at the moment but I still have to spend 8 and half hours at my desk all day. Oddly enough I come home more exhausted from desk warming than I do from teaching. (loooongodoggo 2018)

About 5 months out of this year so far I have quite literally had no work, and the remaining 3, the work is very intermittent, about 1-4 hours out of the 9 hour day. Right now I have done literally nothing other than desk warming since the start of June. (Mariamatic 2018)

There may be a myriad of explanations as to why individual ALTs have been marginalised in this way. It is conceivable that some JTLs simply regard the presence of an ALT as a superfluous distraction from their central priority, i.e. preparing students for important examinations and, hence, prefer to conduct their lessons alone. It is also the case that students' communicative ability in foreign languages—the enhancement of which is, ostensibly at least, the primary rationale for deploying ALTs in school classrooms—is not usually assessed in such exams. Although the National Center Test for University Admissions (*Daigaku Nyūshi Sentā Shiken*) has, since 2006, required students to take an English listening examination, their oral skills have never been tested.

Some ALTs have attributed their own “desk warming” experiences to the culture of their host school, which is not receptive to the presence of foreign teaching assistants. As one ALT explains: “some of my schools didn’t even want me there at all so I just hung out in the teacher’s room with nothing to do” (Assistant Language Teacher, Satsuma-cho, Kagoshima 2018). There may be other cases where an ALT’s “desk warming” is the direct result of their dysfunctional relationship with a JTL. Indeed, to judge from the sheer number of personal accounts from ALTs in online discussions, such relationships are extremely common.

2) “Human Tape Recorder Syndrome”

Another dysfunctional workplace scenario, albeit one that occurs inside the classroom, is what some have referred to as “Human Tape Recorder Syndrome”. In simple terms, this refers to team-teaching situations where the JTL limits the ALT’s role in the lesson to reading out comprehension passages or pronouncing English words on command, as illustrated in the following accounts:

I go to class a fair bit but it’s pretty much just human tape recorder. Sometimes I just stand and (sic) the front and say nothing. For half the year, half of my classes are translation from Japanese to English. (mushingo 2019)

Tape recorder roles with 3 of 4 schools I go to. I typically stand at the back of the class until I’m called to read a passage from the textbook or help run a game. (Chiafriend12 2017)

Although the occurrence of this phenomenon is impossible to quantify in precise terms, it has certainly persisted for many years, having been documented in publications dating back to the early days of the programme’s existence (e.g. Yokose 1989), and has even been acknowledged in some official JET publications (e.g. CLAIR 2013: 66-68). What is clear is that the use of ALT as “human tape recorders” is starkly at odds with the way in which the team-teaching dynamic is customarily explained to ALTs in official JET publications (e.g. CLAIR 2013; 2019). Again, there is surely no simple catch-all explanation as to why ALTs are being utilised in this way, though the decision to do so rests entirely with the JTL. In some cases, the JTL’s decision may be motivated by feelings of insecurity over their own inability to communicate in fluent English in front of their students. This very phenomenon has been discussed by numerous commentators, including Luxton et al. (2014:48), who claim that “many Japanese teachers are embarrassed by their poor English communication skills, fear a loss of face, and avoid the communication necessary to make team teaching work”. Whatever the explanation, “desk warming” represents

a waste of an expensive and potentially valuable human resource. Although many ALTs have expressed their frustration at being relegated to the role of human tape recorder, they are largely powerless to change their situation. ALTs are, as mentioned above, obligated to fulfil whatever role their JTL demands.

“Desk warming” and “human tape recorder syndrome” are two manifestations of what is sometimes more broadly referred to as “underutilisation”. While it is difficult to determine what percentage of ALTs have ever considered themselves “underutilised”, complaints of such are long-standing, having been discussed in online forums and referenced in publications dating back to the early days of the programme’s existence (see McConnell 1996). The fact that these complaints have persisted for so many years would suggest that the national JET organisation attaches a relatively low priority to addressing the issue.

3) ‘Overutilisation’ of Elementary School ALTs

There are some ALTs whose day-to-day workplace reality is vastly different from the two scenarios described above. Far from feeling ‘underutilised’ in their places of work, some ALTs have found themselves burdened with a workload with which they struggle to cope. The problem of ‘overutilisation’, as it were, appears particularly acute among ALTs assigned to elementary schools.

There are perhaps two principal reasons why this should be the case. Firstly, unlike their counterparts deployed in high schools and junior high schools, elementary school ALTs are charged with collaborating with homeroom teachers (HRTs), who, in the main, lack any formal training as language teachers. A 2014 survey by MEXT found that just 5.3% of elementary school teachers possessed an English teaching licence (MEXT 2015). On this basis, it is perhaps understandable that many HRTs rely on their ALT partners to plan and deliver their English classes; at least to a much greater extent than would be the case for JTLs. Secondly, elementary school ALTs do not operate in conventional language classrooms. Rather, as explained in the GIH, their work can extend to “singing songs” and “playing games”, as well as participating in other classes within the school, such as physical education, music, art, cooking, or calligraphy classes. Ultimately, however, as the GIH makes clear: “the ALT’s involvement and activities will vary according to the wishes of the school and the frequency of visits” (CLAIR 2019:87).

While comments on discussion forums suggest that many elementary school ALTs find

their work enjoyable and rewarding, others, like the two below, have found themselves overburdened:

4 elementary schools, go once or twice to each one every week. Insane amount of work, 36 different 3rd to 6th grade classes, always hiking around from class to class, constant shouting kids, constant madness. (TallinJapan 2019)

The amount of work and responsibility I have is insane compared to many of the nearby JHS (Junior High School) and SHS ALTs, and it has been even rougher coming in as someone without teaching experience or experience with young kids... I really wish that I had a JHS to break up the insane grind of ES (Elementary School) as opposed to being ES-only. ES leaves me so tired that I often don't feel like I can really enjoy being in Japan/life outside of work. (pumpkabooghost 2018)

Although the GIH states categorically that the ALT should not "be expected to conduct classes alone, nor be the 'main' teacher" (CLAIR 2019:83), many ALTs, like the one below, have reported being required to teach classes with little or no input from their HRT partner:

I am T1 (the lead teacher) for 95% of my classes. I plan and execute my classes with little if any help from my HRT. Now that classes have increased, I only have about 45 minutes after class to plan the following day's lesson (unless I take my lesson planning materials home). (Msinochan1 2019)

In light of the lottery-like assignment procedure, there is always a chance that some individuals unsuited to teaching young children will find themselves assigned to elementary schools. It is conceivable also that some ALTs will lack the physical stamina required to conduct classes full of small children, particularly if they are largely left to conduct those classes largely unaided.

Disparities in Holiday Time

The 'ESID policy' countenances major disparities in the amount of holiday time that ALTs receive. Some ALTs (like the two individuals below) are required to report for work during the long summer recess, even though no classes are being conducted:

I gotta sit here and do nothing for weeks at a time, as do the other teachers. I did argue my way into getting a week off in the summer, at least. (Badalight 2019).

Summer break? Ain't never heard of it in 3 years. (DJFiregirl 2018)

Other ALTs, by contrast, are given the same amount of summer holiday time as the children in the schools where they work:

In addition to national holidays, I have 20 days of paid leave plus five weeks where my town doesn't expect us to go in (so we basically take the same summer break as the kids), and only work half days on Fridays... I try not to brag about it too much, but yeah, my BOE is generally kind of fantastic. (kidaore 2018)

Private school - get about 6 weeks off from mid July to beginning of September. (atBaronSamedi 2018)

In the following statement from the GIH, CLAIR absolves the national JET organisation of responsibility for such stark disparities, by explaining that all decisions regarding holiday time are based on regulations established by the local CO:

Since yearly paid leave for local government employees is determined by local regulations, the number of days JET participants receive varies according to contracting organisation. Be prepared for the fact that JET participants you meet working in other contracting organisations may receive more vacation days than you. (CLAIR 2019: 45)

What the above statement implies is that ALTs should automatically be subject to the same "local regulations" as ordinary local government employees, since they are (in most cases, at any rate) employed by a local government organisation. What it disregards is the fact that ALTs are not entitled to the same benefits as permanent employees (for instance, with regard to pensions), nor do they enjoy any job security.

IS THE 'ESID POLICY' REFORMABLE?

In its statements, CLAIR (as the JET Programme's official PR organ) has always sought to explain away the *de facto* 'ESID policy' as an unavoidable corollary of the diversity among the COs that host ALTs. By requesting that ALTs understand and accept that some of their counterparts will enjoy more favourable living and working conditions than their own, they are implying that the national JET organisation is powerless to implement reforms that would help to create a fairer, more equitable system.

Unquestionably, there are some aspects of the JET Programme that would be impossible to standardise. One such aspect is the assignment of ALTs. The ALTs' *de facto* employers, the COs, serve a wide range of communities—from large urban centres to rural towns and remote

offshore islands—and, crucially, there is only a limited number of them. Indeed, the range of potential assignment locations for ALTs has gradually diminished over the years, as numerous COs have chosen to discontinue their involvement with the programme, opting instead to use government funds to recruit their teaching assistants from sources other than JET. Today, “non-JET ALTs” constitute a very large majority of the foreign language teaching assistants deployed in Japanese schools. To illustrate: just 24.5% of the 18,484 ALTs in 2016 were employed through the JET Programme (MEXT 2017). In this context, it would surely be impossible for the JET administration to satisfy the assignment preferences of all ALTs. It is necessary to acknowledge also that the national JET organisation would find it impossible to ‘standardise’ the behaviour of the wide array of individuals responsible for implementing the programme on a day-to-day basis (whether administrators, JTLs, or indeed the ALTs themselves).

This is not to say, however, that the national JET administration could not, if it so desired, introduce measures to bring about a greater degree of convergence vis-à-vis some conditions for ALTs. The Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIC), in particular, surely has some ability to exert leverage over local authorities (which make up the overwhelming majority of COs) by virtue of the funding it provides. MIC distributes a “Local Allocation Tax” which is used to cover the cost of hosting and remunerating JET participants. On this basis, it would surely be within the power of the national JET organisation to, for example, dictate the number of paid holidays that every ALT is entitled to.

However, to ameliorate significantly what is arguably the most problematic consequence of the ESID policy for ALTs, i.e. the (sometimes extreme) inconsistencies in terms of the role/duties assigned to them within schools, MEXT would need to be prepared to implement some revolutionary reforms. Most fundamentally, the Ministry would need to sanction the formalisation of the status of ALTs within Japanese schools. Instead of viewing the ALT merely as a “valuable resource”, albeit one that “must respect the lesson plan and wishes of the Japanese teacher” (CLAIR 2019: 83), MEXT would need to regard them as a genuine partner for their JTL, with a clearly defined role. In order to guarantee more effective team-teaching relationships, training—which is widely regarded as inadequate—would need to be enhanced considerably, both for ALTs and for their designated Japanese team-teaching partners, the JTLs and HRTs. Alternatively, MEXT would need to be prepared to abandon the team-teaching model altogether, and allow native-speaker teachers (who, logically, would be given a different job title) to plan and teach their English classes unaided. However, this would unquestionably require

radical changes to recruitment policy (with emphasis placed on the hiring of Japanese-speaking teaching professionals) and the abolition of the five-year term-limit. In simple terms, it would require a root-and-branch reform of how language education is conducted across the Japanese school system.

To judge from its track record, however, there is nothing whatsoever to suggest that MEXT would ever be willing to countenance such reforms. Indeed, the ministry's commitment to the JET Programme has always been questionable. David McConnell (2000)—who chronicled the policy-making process leading up to JET's creation in 1987—has drawn attention to the lack of enthusiasm for the programme shown by *Monbushō*, the then Ministry of Education. According to McConnell, *Monbushō*'s lukewarm support for the programme's creation was motivated in part by a fear of encountering resistance from Japanese English teachers, anxious that their authority would be undermined by an influx of foreign educators. Although the education ministry—which, since 2001, has been known as MEXT (or, in Japanese, “*Monbukagakushō*”)—has continued to pay lip service to JET's contribution to the enhancement of communicative language teaching, its policies suggest that it considers the programme to be of very peripheral importance in the wider context of Japanese school education. Indeed, JET barely rates a mention in MEXT's major foreign language-in-education policy initiatives. Arguably, the most graphic illustration of MEXT's lack of enthusiasm for JET is the fact that the programme currently provides less than a quarter of all the foreign language teaching assistants operating within Japanese school classrooms.

Thus far, the national JET organisation has evinced no desire to reform its *de facto* ‘ESID policy’. Little, if anything, has been done to rectify the disparities in ALTs' conditions or address various other implementation issues that were identified as problematic more than thirty years ago. Indeed, these same issues are still being discussed by ALTs today. While some might perceive this lack of desire for change as wilful intransigence on the part of the national JET organisation, it may simply reflect the fact that the Japanese central government is much more concerned with enhancing its “soft power” in the world than with implementing radical reform of its domestic institutions and systems. In other words, although official statements suggest that the JET Programme is geared towards the promotion of systemic change within Japan (whether in terms of overhauling school language education or “internationalising” Japanese communities), it is actually geared much more towards furthering the Japanese government's perceived overseas interests. In this connection, McConnell (2000) rationalises the programme's creation in 1987 as an attempt to address ‘Japan's image problem’ at a time of trade friction with the US

government. By instituting a programme that would potentially provide jobs for thousands of young American graduates, the Japanese government was seeking to curry favour with US lawmakers. Given the well-documented deficiencies in Japanese school language education at the time, the government decided that the overwhelming majority of these graduates should be deployed in English language classrooms in local communities across Japan—and this system has remained in place for more than three decades.

As of July 2019, more than 70,000 foreign graduates had participated in the programme, 22,000 of whom had joined its official alumni association, JETAA. Today, JET is widely lauded as a key resource in Japan's cultural diplomacy arsenal, and a veritable “soft power” success. By affording schools and COs complete authority to implement the programme as they see fit, the Japanese central government has succeeded in keeping the JET Programme in operation for 32 years without causing disruption to long-established institutions and systems. On this basis, it is likely that the ‘ESID policy’ will remain in place for the foreseeable future.

CONCLUSION

To judge from their online posts, many, if not most, ALTs appear grateful simply to have been given the opportunity to live in Japan and receive remunerated employment under the auspices of the JET Programme. Nonetheless, many also regard the national JET organisation's *de facto* ‘ESID policy’ as highly problematic. On the employer review website ‘glassdoor.com’, where participants were invited to list the ‘pros and cons’ of the programme, “every situation is different” was specified by a wide margin as the most common ‘con’.

In essence, JET's *de facto* ‘ESID policy’ is perceived as problematic because it places ALTs in situations that they are powerless to control. As one ALT puts it:

The JET Programme is like the Japanese lottery tickets you can buy at some stores from your favorite characters... Accepting your position is betting. From then on, your future is not in your hands anymore. (agedashi_tofu 2019)

The lottery-like assignment process coupled with the apparent reluctance of the national JET organisation to guarantee more equitable conditions have created, in relative terms at least, ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ within the ALT community. It is clear that the sense of unfairness felt by ‘unluckier’ ALTs saps their morale and probably increases the likelihood that they will not seek to renew their JET contracts. The following comment encapsulates the frustration felt by many

ALTs with the national JET organisation's *laissez-faire* approach:

Some jets will desk warm all day, some will be treated like a full time teacher (despite having zero qualifications or teaching experience). Some will be used as a human tape recorder for 2 hours a day. All this will be easily explained by the overused "ESID" mantra. You'd think being a government run programme that there would be a concrete set of guidelines and a universal across the board structure but no, it's just a huge waste of taxpayers money. But hey, ESID*...*god I hate that saying so much. It defines everything that is wrong with the programme. (wogsy 2018)

The unfairness of the 'ESID policy' is perhaps compounded by the fact that there are no disparities in terms of the remuneration that ALTs receive. While there are those who regard this remuneration as generous, not least given the young age of many ALTs, the JET salary is determined neither by the size of an ALT's workload nor the quality of their work; neither is it dependent on the cost of living in the area where they live, nor the level of hardship they have to endure. Rather, the ALT's salary varies only according to the number of years they have spent working on the programme. Emphatically, then, the JET Programme does not operate on the principle of 'equal pay for equal work'.

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