

LETTER from Kanji (山野内勘二)

In this Ottawa newsletter, I am discussing the JET Programme.

As you are all aware, the JET Programme is a program primarily aimed at recruiting university graduates, predominantly native English speakers, to enhance foreign language education and promote international exchange at the local level in Japan. JET participants are dispatched to various municipalities, including elementary schools, middle schools, high schools, or international exchange offices, where they work for a period ranging from 2 to a maximum of 5 years as Assistant Language Teachers (ALT), Coordinators for International Relations (CIR), or Sports Exchange Advisors (SEA).

JET, which began in the 1987 fiscal year with 848 participants from four countries, has expanded and developed steadily over the Showa, Heisei, and Reiwa eras. In the 2023 fiscal year, a total of 5,831 participants (1,995 new participants plus 3,836 reappointed participants) from 50 countries were dispatched to approximately 1,000 local government entities in 47 prefectures and 18 designated cities. In total, it is the world's largest international exchange program, with 77,355 participants (a total of 172,618 individuals) from 81 countries having participated thus far.

First Memory

This is a purely personal recollection, but I have memories of the inception of the JET Programme. I joined the ministry in 1984, and after completing a two-year training program in the United States from 1985, I returned to the ministry and was assigned to the Economic Cooperation Bureau. It was the summer of 1987 when this happened. My fellow trainee, Ken Okaniwa, who I was very close to, had also finished his training in the UK and was assigned to the Domestic Public Relations Division. While sharing stories about our experiences during overseas training and our first assignments at the ministry, he mentioned, "There's this amazing program called JET starting this year. It's like the Japanese version of the

Fulbright program, and I'm sure it will have a significant impact in the future." He spoke with sparkling eyes. That was the first moment I heard about the JET Programme.

At that time, for me, "JET" was synonymous with the hit song from Paul McCartney's iconic album "Band on the Run." I remember thinking it had a cool name, just like that song. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Japanese economy was in its bubble period and thriving. Japan accounted for 15% of the world's GDP, and half of the United States' trade deficit was with Japan. To address the trade surplus issue and play a bigger role on the international stage, the ODA budget was also expanding. Amidst constant power struggles within the ministries in Kasumigaseki, it was groundbreaking that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Education, and the Ministry of Home Affairs came together to launch an entirely new project that would benefit both foreign language education and international exchange.

Looking back now, even though I was in a completely different department and not directly involved with JET, I understood the significance of the program. A friend of mine from my U.S. training days had stayed in Tochigi Prefecture as a JET participant. However, to be frank, I did not anticipate that it would grow so large and have such far-reaching influence. Truly, "continuity is strength."

Canada's First Appearance

The first group of JET Programme participants, known as the JET 1st cohort, arrived in Japan in 1987, comprising 848 individuals from four countries: the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand. From Canada, participation began in the following year, 1988 (Showa 63), with 121 Canadians coming to Japan. Therefore, 2023 marks the 35th anniversary of JET's presence in Canada.



Taking a trip down memory lane, we find a vivid portrayal of Canada's initial participation in JET when we delve into the archives of the Embassy's Information and Culture Section. Here, we have a photograph from July 29, 1988, taken during a farewell reception held at the official residence of the Japanese Ambassador to Canada for the inaugural group of Canadian JET participants. Nineteen individuals from Ottawa surround Ambassador Yoshio Okawa in the photograph. The second person from the left in the back row is Laurie Peters. Laurie Peters has had an illustrious career, serving as Counsellor and Head of Public Affairs at the Embassy of Canada in Tokyo, High Commissioner to Jamaica, and the Canadian Commissioner General for Expo 2020 Dubai. Presently, she holds a pivotal role as Director General and Commissioner General for Expo 2025 Osaka-Kansai.

According to Peters, she heard about the JET Programme when she was contemplating her future after completing her university studies. She applied and was accepted, which comes as no surprise given her sharp intellect and cheerful personality. From August 1988, she worked as an Assistant Language Teacher in Sendai for two years. Initially, she couldn't speak any Japanese and didn't even understand the meaning of "kampai" (cheers). The first Japanese phrases she learned were, "Watashi wa Laurie desu. Kanada kara kimashita. Yoroshiku onegaishimasu," which translates to "I am Laurie. I came from Canada. Nice to meet you." Sendai residents warmly welcomed Laurie in those early days. By the time she

returned to Canada, she had become proficient in Japanese and had extensive knowledge of Japan's culture and history. She then joined the Canadian Foreign Service and embarked on her career as a diplomat.

Canada: A JET Powerhouse

Canada's participation in the JET Programme began in its second year, and while it initially trailed behind the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand, it rapidly expanded in subsequent years. In the 1988 fiscal year, 127 Canadians came to Japan, and by the following year, that number had surged to 290. In 2001, the program saw a record-breaking 1,057 Canadian participants. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2020 fiscal year saw no new participants, but in 2023, 566 Canadians are actively engaged in JET Programme activities across Japan.

Today, it's clear that Canada is a JET powerhouse. Among the 77,355 JET Programme participants mentioned earlier, the United States boasts the largest number with 39,297 participants, followed by the United Kingdom with 11,966, and Canada in third place with 11,118 participants. Australia follows with 4,882, and New Zealand with 3,533. When considering the population of these countries, it becomes evident that Canada and New Zealand make substantial contributions to the JET Programme.

The experiences gained by JET participants during their 2- to 5-year stay in Japan have been instrumental in their individual career development and have also contributed to fostering friendship and goodwill between Japan and Canada. From a networking perspective, organizing alumni associations is crucial. Worldwide, there are 54 chapters in 18 countries with 25,134 JET alumni members. The largest JET alumni association is in the United States, with 20 chapters and 12,396 members. Canada ranks second with 7 chapters and 3,606 members. Australia has 5 chapters and 2,109 members, and the United Kingdom has 5 chapters and 2,001 members.

The presence of JET alumni across Canada's vast landmass, which is 27 times larger than Japan, provides a valuable foundation for the further development of Japan-Canada

relations. Notable individuals, like Laurie Peters, who was a member of the inaugural group of Canadian JET participants, have excelled in various fields including diplomacy, government, business, culture, the arts, and journalism. In Ottawa, there are many JET alumni working within the Canadian Foreign Service, including Jonathan Miller, Senior Fellow and Director of Foreign Affairs, National Defence and National Security at the MacDonald-Laurier Institute, and Trevor Kennedy, Vice President, Trade and International Policy, of the Canada Business Council.

There's another individual I would like to introduce in the context of JET. That's Ahmed Hussen, Minister of International Development. Recently, we had the privilege of hosting Minister Hussen at the official residence for a dinner where we engaged in a very meaningful exchange of views, primarily focusing on Japan-Canada relations. Minister Hussen is a first-generation immigrant from Somalia who moved to Toronto with relatives during his high school years. He excelled academically, attended Queen's University in Kingston, majored in history, and even studied Japan's Meiji Restoration. After graduating, he applied to the JET Programme, was accepted, and began the process of preparing for his departure to Japan. However, just before departing, he received a job offer from a major corporation and made the difficult decision to decline the position on the JET Programme and accept the job offer instead. He shared with me, "I still wonder how my life would have turned out if I had gone to Japan at that time." I told him that, as an almost-JET alumnus or an honorary JET alumnus, I hope he will support the JET Programme. Minister Hussen is a symbol of Canada, a nation that values diversity and inclusivity, and his connection to the JET Programme is a testament to how deeply JET is ingrained in Canadian society.

JET Canada's 35th Anniversary - Alumni Convention - Ambassador's Award and Reception

Over two days from August 19th, the JET Alumni Association of Canada held its National Convention in Ottawa. This marked a significant event, being the first in-person convention post-COVID-19 and coinciding with the 35th anniversary of JET in Canada. Representatives from all seven Canadian chapters, totaling 19 members, participated. The National Representative of the JET Alumni Association of Canada is Mr. Brandon Wallace, who also

serves as a Political Assistant in the Political Section at the Embassy of Japan in Canada. Under his leadership, the convention saw in-depth discussions on enhancing cooperation among JET alumni. A representative from JETAA USA joined the convention and a representative from Jamaica participated online as observers. The expansion of the JET network not only broadens opportunities for JET alumni but also deepens relations with Japan.

In conjunction with the JET Canada National Convention, an Ambassador's Award ceremony for the JET Alumni Association Ottawa Chapter was held on the evening of August 18th. Ottawa, the capital city, boasts a significant number of JET alumni, many of whom contribute to Japan-Canada relations either directly or indirectly. Furthermore, the JET Alumni Association Ottawa Chapter, with approximately 300 members, has collaborated with the Ottawa Japanese Community Association (OJCA) and the City of Ottawa to organize events such as the "Summer Festival," Japanese language courses, and various Japanese cultural introductions. They have also supported JET Programme outreach and selection processes. In recognition of their outstanding contributions, Mr. Shuaib Syed, Ottawa Chapter President, received a certificate of appreciation. Additionally, as a guest, Senator Victor Oh, Vice-Chair of the Canada-Japan Inter-Parliamentary Group, offered warm and humorous congratulations.

One notable highlight was the speech delivered by Laurie Peters, a member of the inaugural group of Canadian JET participants, who attended the ceremony as a representative of JET alumni. Her speech emphasized the profound impact of JET on individual lives.



Following the awards ceremony, a reception was held with around 100 attendees, including JET convention participants and members of the Ottawa chapter. The beautiful weather allowed guests to enjoy BBQ cuisine prepared by Chef Shima on the terrace.



And now, a few words about the entertainment offered at the reception. In fact, the taiko drummers and the Embassy band, previously featured in last month's "Ottawa Newsletter," collaborated in a performance. It was an East Meets West-style presentation. It began with the electric guitar playing the hard-hitting intro of "Smoke on the Water" with distorted tones. In the ninth measure, the taiko drums joined, and the taiko and electric guitar played together for 16 measures. Then, the taiko drums took center stage in a solo performance. After a brief break, the taiko drums and electric guitar joined forces again, playing "Every Breath You Take," and then transitioning into The Beatles' "She Loves You." The lead vocalist was Mr. Jono, a staff member in the General Affairs Section at the Embassy, with Ms. Yamasaki, Head of the Information and Culture Section, joining in as chorus. This collaborative performance by the taiko drummers and the Embassy conveyed appreciation and gratitude for JET's 35th anniversary and the Ambassador's Award.



Passing the Torch to the Next Generation

In fact, 1988 holds significant historical relevance in the modern history of Canada's relationship with Japan. That year, the Canadian government, through the Redress Agreement, formally acknowledged and put an end to the unjust treatment of Japanese-Canadians during World War II. The fact that the forward-looking JET Programme began in the same year can be seen as highly symbolic.

The COVID-19 pandemic posed a significant challenge for the JET Programme. However, it is my hope that the program will continue to evolve, fostering even closer bonds of friendship, goodwill, and cooperation with Japan and producing the leaders of tomorrow.