

News from under the Southern Cross (Edition 43): The “Sharing Your Experience of Japan” Reception

17 November

Having just emerged from lockdown, Canberra is still far from normal. Nonetheless, in the midst of this situation the Embassy of Japan went forth to host the “Sharing Your Experience of Japan” Reception.



1. It all started with JET!

Well-informed people from English-speaking countries often offer high praise for the JET (Japan Exchange and Teaching) Programme as “an example of a hugely successful Japanese government policy in recent years”. Every year, hundreds of young people from Australia, the US, and UK, etc., are recruited and sent to various places around Japan. While working and receiving wages as assistants to English-language teachers in primary, junior, and senior high schools or as coordinators for international relations to local government bodies, they get to experience life in Japan’s regional areas.

In the 34 years since its inception, close to over five thousand Aussies have participated in the Programme. The main reason why it has been regarded as a “success” is that thanks to the

Programme, regional areas that are not typically visited by foreigners have benefited from the presence of JET participants who live and work there in their efforts to “internationalise” their respective local communities. In addition, the Programme also promotes understanding of Japan’s diverse regional areas among the JET participants and has produced a great many ‘Japanophiles’.

Actually, when I asked the former JET participants attending the reception where they had been posted, names of places from all over Japan came up: “Sapporo”, “Minakami-onsen”, “Iruma City”, “Akashi City”, “Ehime Prefecture”, “Oita City”, etc. I was impressed by the huge variety of their answers.



JET Alumni Association members
from the ACT and NSW



An exhibition in the Residence displaying
nostalgic photographs of JET participants
and MEXT scholars while in Japan

2. Life after JET: Success in Australia!

The length of stay in Japan under the JET Programme varies from person to person. One particularly interesting point is that in many cases, participants live in regional areas where virtually no one around them speaks English, enabling them to immerse themselves fully into life in Japan. They might struggle at first to fit in with Japanese society, where language, culture and customs are all unfamiliar to them. However, once they are able to overcome the barrier of the shyness and formality of the Japanese, they are charmed by the attentiveness, kindness, and homeliness of the local people. Many of them became regular visitors to Japan.

According to one of the executives of the Council of Local Authorities for International Relations (CLAIR) who has been working on the recruitment and allocation of JET participants, participants from Australia are praised for being reliable and trustworthy.

In fact, many of those who return to Australia after participating in the JET Programme become successful in business, government, and academia. Six former JET participants are currently working in the Embassy in Canberra. Without them the Embassy would not be able to function! To my delight, local staff from the Sydney and Melbourne consulates who are also former JET participants were able to make it to Canberra for the reception.

3. A reunion hosted by the Embassy

While former participants get together for reunions themselves from time to time, the key feature of this reunion was that the Embassy hosted it. With their precious experience of life in Japan and their continued interest in and affection for Japan, this occasion gave me an opportunity to encourage them to work for a stronger Japan-Australia relationship, acting as bridges between both countries.

4. MEXT Scholars

Of course, “bridges” between Japan and Australia are not just limited to JET participants. Under the scholarship program administered by Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), over 700 students from Australia have studied in Japan. Among them, one former participant has worked for the Tokyo 2020 organising committee until recently.



Former MEXT scholars, and a Japanese language teacher from Canberra, Sydney, and Melbourne



Former MEXT scholars, JET alumni, and a Japanese language teacher

The reception held at the Embassy on 5 November not only featured JET alumni from around Canberra but also former MEXT scholars, and offered an opportunity for them to warmly renew old friendships. Mr Brett Cooper, who studied at both the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies and Kobe University (and was formerly the minister responsible for trade at the Australian Embassy in Tokyo) gave an address at the opening ceremony for the reception.



Mr Brett Cooper

5. Success!

As we had not been blessed with opportunities for receptions and parties for so long because of the lockdown, the reception exceeded my expectations and was extraordinarily lively. Even though it commenced at 5:00 pm, I still saw some guests standing in circles excitedly talking with one another well after 9:00 pm.

The tea ceremony demonstration, held with the cooperation of Chado Urasenke Tankokai, and the Wadaiko (Japanese drum) performance added a uniquely Japanese flavour and liveliness to proceedings. Their workshop format where people could experience both traditions on the spot generated a lot of interest and attracted a crowd.



Wadaiko performance



Wadaiko workshop

The Japanese cuisine that the Residence staff, led by Chef Ogata, spent days pouring all of their effort into preparing, namely sasakama (grilled white fish-cake from Minami-Sanriku), prawn tempura, karaage (fried chicken), sushi, grilled onigiri (rice balls, flavoured with miso paste from Sendai), Wagyu steak, and fruit punch (featuring Matcha jelly and sticky rice

dumplings) practically flew off the plates. Another happy development was the popularity of Japanese alcoholic drinks, such as Ippin (Ibaraki Prefecture) and Nanbu Bijin (Iwate Prefecture) sake, and ‘Strong Zero’ chūhai (highball) courtesy of Suntory.



Sasakama (from Minami-Sanriku)



Grilled onigiri (using miso paste from Sendai)



Sushi



Japanese sake Ippin and Nanbu Bijin,
Chūhai (highball) Strong Zero

“I am grateful to the Embassy of Japan for taking the initiative and making such a bold decision (to hold the reception), especially given the continued decline in activity by many organisations out of excessive caution because of the COVID pandemic”. These are the words that I heard from a number of reception attendees, not only from JET participants and former MEXT scholars, but also Japanese language teachers, members of the Canberra-Nara Sister City Committee, Japanese residents of Canberra, Japanese corporate executives from around Australia, members of the Cowra City Council, and members of the Japanese press.



Japanese Decoration Recipient for Autumn 2021, Mrs Narelle Hargreaves OAM – Chair of the Canberra-Nara Sister City Committee



Members of the Cowra City Council and ACT Branch of the Australia-Japan Society

I am truly heartened by these words. I was able to keenly feel the significance of the event that so many Embassy staff had striven to ensure took place.

6. Making it an annual event

Despite the rainy weather, over 140 participants attended the reception. Amid the many conversations I had, I grew even more strongly aware of just how much these JET participants and MEXT scholars are a major asset to Japan (my speech at the reception can be read [here](#)).

As such, I am not satisfied in leaving this as a one-off event, but I am considering turning it into an annual one.

YAMAGAMI Shingo