

JETAA / JETAA International HISTORY

OVERVIEW

Organizational Development + Conferences & Meetings

Summary of Topics / Actions / Initiatives

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Introduction

This overview of the history of the JET Alumni Association has been put together by Japan Local Government Center / CLAIR New York, based on records held by that office. It, therefore, largely focuses on the JETAA conferences in North America and the development of the alumni chapters and activities there. It also covers the International Conferences and Meetings, and the development of JETAA International (JETAA-I), since these originated there as well.

Beginnings of JET & JETAA

JET, the Japan Exchange and Teaching Program(me), began in 1987, after its two predecessors, the Monbusho English Fellows program and the British English Teachers Scheme, were consolidated and expanded. Its development was also reportedly modeled on the Fulbright Program.

JETAA, the JET Alumni Association, was created in 1989, as a joint initiative between AJET (the Association for Japan Exchange and Teaching, for JETs currently on the Program) and CLAIR (the Council of Local Authorities for International Relations). Three main objectives were:

- To provide a support network for participants after leaving the Program;
- To allow CLAIR to maintain contact with this alumni community, and:
- To strengthen Japan's international ties.

The creation of JETAA appears to have been spearheaded by Scott Olinger, who was the AJET representative for Chiba Prefecture before going to work as a Program Coordinator at CLAIR Tokyo. AJET and CLAIR both had input into the original 1989 set of bylaws ("The Regulations of the JET-AA"), which were drafted by Scott, and which designated target cities for chapter formation and provided for the establishment of Regional Alumni Associations, RAA officers, a National Representative for each country, and annual national meetings.

Both organizations then agreed to adopt the bylaws, including the list of cities to have chapters and the provision that CLAIR would act, at least temporarily, as the alumni association's Secretariat, maintaining a membership database and sending out a membership directory and quarterly newsletters. At this stage, "JET-AA" was clearly seen as an extension of AJET under the aegis of CLAIR.

Chapter Formation

The first chapters were formed from 1989 into the early 1990s and carried on activities over the next few years in many cities. Information is spotty on these first years, but some reports are available on the JET Program website in the JET Streams section.

While target cities for chapter formation were designated in the 1989 bylaws, most people seem to

have been unaware of these and chapter formation appears to have happened fairly spontaneously as ex-JETs returned home and started networking with their fellow alumni using contact information provided by CLAIR and MOFA. In the US and Canada, at least, the chapter jurisdictions that are used today are based on the embassy & consulate jurisdictions that existed at that time. Those have carried over, even if some consulates were closed, and the newest chapter in North America, Music City, was formed after the consulate was moved from New Orleans to Nashville around 2008.

International Conferences & Meetings

The first JETAA “International Conference” was held in 1995 in New York. The director of Japan Local Government Center (CLAIR’s overseas office in New York) at that time, Mr. Otaki, wanted to learn about the chapters’ activities and give them a chance to exchange ideas among themselves. The entire conference was funded by CLAIR, as were the second in San Francisco and third in Montreal. This seems to have changed from the fourth, held in Atlanta, when the Ministry of Foreign Affairs began providing more substantial support.

The original conference format centered on the North American chapters, with four representatives from overseas chapters (Australia, NZ, Ireland, UK) first invited to the Montreal conference in 1997 as observers. This 1997 conference apparently had the first discussion about creating an international JETAA identity, and the name “JETAA International” first appears in reporting on the 1998 Atlanta conference. By the fifth conference, held in Los Angeles in 1999, there had developed a strong consensus to make the conference truly “international” by also holding it in places outside North America and including representatives from all countries with viable chapters as full participants in an independent, self-governing organization with its own bylaws written by alumni.

As JETAA developed, the Grant-in-Aid system was established in 1998 to introduce continuity and accountability into CLAIR funding for chapters and facilitate long-term support for alumni efforts (GiA for conferences and Country Representatives came later). There are records indicating that the creation of bylaws for JETAA International and chapters were at least partly driven by CLAIR as a prerequisite for receiving funding.

On the alumni side, building on a growing concept of “JETAA International”, attendees at the 1998 Atlanta conference agreed to draft a set of bylaws to govern the international body, and the first JETAA International “Organisational By-laws” were introduced and ratified in 1999 (reportedly based on the JETAA Houston bylaws). The 2000 conference, held in Tokyo, along the lines of the 1999 conference with all international chapters participating as full voting members, was the first of these new conferences. Each of the 43 chapters then recognized was invited to send two delegates. There were ultimately 84 delegates, with only Germany and Alaska sending one each. Brazil and Russia each sent two observers.

The 2000 conference has the first recorded election of JETAA-I executive officers (Paula Kelly – Ireland / Megan Kaino – Australia / Boleyn Relova – Canada / Julian Paisey – England), although there was an “Interim Organizational Committee” in place for the 1999 conference (chaired by Anita Chandan – Montreal / and including Daniel Lintz – Eastern Japan / Yvonne Thurman – New York / Tom Robles – Winnipeg / Bill Higgins – Philadelphia).

From the 2001 conference in London, England, JETAA-I began wrestling with the issue of scaling down and rethinking its annual conference, and its entire organizational structure, because of the increasingly severe fiscal situation in Japan and indications that funding and support could no

longer be maintained at the levels enjoyed up to that point.

Besides the fundamental issues of JET Program recruiting and alumni support, chapters at the regional and international levels began focusing more heavily on issues of communication, effective organization, coordinated action, and database development. The Vancouver conference in 2002 was devoted to these issues, and members worked on ideas and proposals through 2003, when there was no conference, in preparation for the 2004 conference in New York (officially listed as the 2003 / 2004 Int'l Conference). This was held in February, breaking with the tradition of holding the International Conference in November or December, as had been done up until then. In New York it was officially decided to try to hold an "International Conference" (with both country and chapter reps) once every five years, probably in Japan, and an "International Meeting" (with only country reps) in each of the intervening years, at some venue around the world. The last of these annual international conferences, or the first one on the "five year plan", was set for Japan for the following year.

The first of the 'International Meetings' was held in Portland, Oregon, in November of 2004, devoted to discussion of changes (voting procedures, etc.) that would need to be made to the JETAA-I Bylaws and to how members communicate and work together, given the new reality of no more full, annual conferences after the Aichi / Kobe conference in 2005. The JETAA-I executive officers and sub-committee members put together a package of proposed bylaw amendments to present to the alumni at the Aichi / Kobe conference. These amendments were formally adopted at the 2005 conference during the parliamentary session. Primary among these was authorization for Country Reps to vote on behalf of the chapters in their jurisdiction, something chapters had heretofore done directly. This shift along with JLGC's request for the Country Reps to provide more support for communications and coordination with chapters resulted in their taking on a much more active role than before.

The smaller-scale International Meetings were then held in Sydney in November of 2006, Toronto in 2007, Paris in 2008, Kingston in 2009, and Edinburgh in 2010. MOFA announced at the Edinburgh meeting that they would no longer provide funding, since they did not see any value coming from the annual gatherings. An International Meeting was held in Tokyo in 2011 using funding from CLAIR and the Japan Foundation. After that, "JETAA-I 1.0" ceased to function.

National and Regional Conferences

As the International Conference grew away from being basically a meeting of North American chapters and became a much larger, more truly international affair, the Canadian and American national groupings of chapters and CLAIR's New York office, Japan Local Government Center, decided it would be worthwhile to hold smaller, more regionally focused meetings. So, in 2000, JLGC held a North American Workshop for all U.S. and Canadian chapters, and the West Coast chapters (Vancouver, Seattle, Northern California, Southern California, and Portland) held their own regional conference in Seattle.

In 2001, the seven Canadian chapters held their first Canadian Conference in Edmonton, roughly half the U.S. chapters held an Eastern Regional Conference in Philadelphia, and JLGC held a second North American Workshop in New York. In 2002, the Canadians held their second annual conference in Winnipeg and the U.S. chapters held their first U.S. National Conference in Chicago. Both countries have held their own respective annual conferences every year since then.

In North America, besides national conferences, Regional Conferences (though not necessarily bounded by geography) have been held in Kansas City in 2009, Portland in 2010, Estes Park (Denver) in 2012, Cambridge (Boston) in 2014, and Atlanta in 2016. The Portland and Estes Park gatherings were called “Tech Regional Conferences” and focused on that theme. Participation in these conferences is open to all chapters, regardless of country.

Outside of North America, Sydney also hosted the first Oceania regional conference in 2000; there was a series of Far East Conferences from 2003 to 2007; and two European conferences were held in 2004 & 2006. The Asian and European conferences faded out for many years, but there has been a push to hold gatherings again from 2016 in Europe and 2022 in Asia. Those in North America and Oceania have continued annually from 2000 onward. At least currently, there are unfortunately few records available for any of these other conferences.

The Role of Conferences

At the international level and in North America, certainly, aside from the pivotal conferences already discussed, most have either produced small but lasting results (logo marks, JETAA merchandise, improved communications and governance, stronger ties among chapters, etc.), or have left little if any discernable benefit in their wake. Very often, these accomplishments, too, have been the fruit of initiatives or ideas spanning several years, and are not necessarily attributable to any one conference. Basic topics over the years have remained fairly constant, though, including communications, increasing member involvement, recruiting officers, funding and fundraising, database management, engaging with the community, and creating a brand or identity for JETAA and its various components from the international to chapter level.

The conferences have been important venues for the development of JETAA, mainly as opportunities to share information on events, activities, communications strategies, and other ideas for membership engagement that have come out of the efforts of the individual chapters over this time. Chapters have been the heart of JETAA, laboratories for how to engage and serve the alumni, how to harness their energy for other goals such as supporting Japan’s relationships with other countries, and how to extend the benefits of JET beyond simply being an educational exchange program. Also, most importantly for the Japanese government, chapters maintain the membership databases that allow continued contact with former JETs. Since the pandemic, much more activity takes place online, across chapter and national boundaries. However, chapters are still the fundamental realm of engagement and activity.

It often appeared at the time to be a fruitless effort, discussing the same issues year after year, with little or no discernable progress (“reinventing the wheel” being a favorite phrase among the alumni). However, looking at the incredible developments since 2012 in the US in terms of organizational capacity at the national (and somewhat later the international) level, it becomes clear that time was needed to overcome a number of daunting challenges. Among these are:

1. Continuity: This is a problem both for the all-volunteer alumni groups and for the Japanese government offices, which practice *jinji idou*, or staff rotation, every two or three years. The constant turnover of people (except for the local staff in the New York office) frustrates deep, ongoing familiarity with people and issues, which in turn makes effective action over time almost impossible. Every other challenge is exacerbated by this.
2. Codification: Identifying issues and possible solutions, including a body of best practices and successful examples of these, takes years, and agreeing on formal guidelines or bylaws

based on these to guide the chapters and their officers, much less any national-level organization, takes even longer. Without these, alumni are left scrambling, frustrated for means of addressing issues, or “reinventing the wheel”.

3. Communications and coordination: The alumni recognized early on that they needed effective means of disseminating information, keeping track of members, and conferring with one another. Many different initiatives were tried, but until the advent in recent years of effective, easy-to-use, off-the-shelf platforms and apps none of these were as effective as hoped.
4. Concentration: Separate from but somewhat related to continuity, concentration refers to the unfortunate tendency for life to intrude on even the best-intentioned volunteer’s efforts to serve the alumni community. Careers, families, health or personal issues – many distractions divert attention and energy away from addressing issues facing chapters and national or international organizations.
5. Capacity: JETAA is an all-volunteer organization, whose chapters largely grew organically out of former Program participants’ desire to retain a connection with their experience in Japan and share it with others. While the chapters have grown and developed over the years and come together to create national support mechanisms, there is a limit to what they can do. What the Americans have found is that even with advancements in addressing all of the challenges listed above, the lack of formal 501(c)(3) nonprofit status and an established secretariat office severely hampered their ability to carry out initiatives such as fundraising on behalf of disasters in Japan and acting as a “front office” for the community.

Addressing these challenges has taken many years and considerable effort to build up the critical mass of talent, experience, governance capacity, and viable solutions necessary to overcome the shortcomings of an all-volunteer effort.

JETAA USA

Through the early years, JETAA-I was seen as the umbrella organization uniting all chapters. The idea of JETAA USA, JETAA Canada, JETAA Australia, etc. as a collective body between the chapters and JETAA-I grew slowly, over many years as separate countries developed their own national governance systems. The term “JETAA USA” was first used in 2005, and the organization was only codified as a formal entity in 2012. Functionally, however, the American alumni have been working as a national group for even longer – having closely followed the lead of the Canadian alumni, who first decided to hold their own national conference and begin working together as a collaborative grouping on various cross-chapter projects back in 2001.

One way the US and Canadian alumni had been working to develop and strengthen their nascent national organizations was through codifying and enforcing an evolving set of guidelines for the Country Reps. This was partly due to the increasing workload being asked of them and partly due to a number of people who took on the position but then neglected their commitments or vanished. In the US it was also in response to a wrenching national incident in 2009-2010 concerning allegations of malfeasance by a Country Rep during his time as a chapter officer, which eventually resulted in his removal from office. This project was given further urgency by two major events: Calls for the JET Program to be reduced or eliminated after the Democratic Party of Japan took power in 2009, and the devastation of 3.11.

Supporters and past participants of the JET Program were central in responding to criticism of the Program by the DPJ and efforts to justify reducing or ending it through the “*jigyoshiwake*”

government spending review process the party initiated after taking power, and alumni in various positions in the US helped coordinate this. Sometimes referred to as the “JET Threat”, the DPJ position on the Program destroyed any sense of complacency that, despite its shortcomings, JET would continue to be there for its participants and for the US-Japan relationship. Fortunately, the danger seemed to recede once Prime Minister Kan reaffirmed the importance of JET in November 2010 and certainly by the time Secretary of State Clinton spoke in support of it in October 2011.

What’s more, after regaining power in 2012 the Liberal Democratic Party under PM Abe announced plans to expand JET, and sometime after this the Tokyo Metropolitan Government announced it would increase its participation from 5 JETs to over 200 (thanks to the outstanding efforts of a couple of New York alumni, Monica Yuki and George Rose). Having the support of TMG further solidified the Program’s footing.

Overlapping the latter stages of the JET Threat, the triple disasters of March 11, 2011, saw both current and former JETs mobilizing from that very day to set up fundraising drives, search efforts on the ground in Tohoku, relief operations, and information-sharing networks to respond to the unprecedented scale of destruction. JET alumni were also crucial to the activities of the US Embassy (and certainly many others) in Tokyo following the disasters (124 alumni worked there at one point), where they filled positions from top aids to Ambassador Roos to staff on the ground in Tohoku supporting Operation Tomodachi.

Alumni in the US, motivated partly by the fact that two American JETs died in the tsunami, raised almost \$90,000 through the JETAA USA Relief Fund and then directed where exactly that money would go, using their expertise to bypass large organizations like the Red Cross to support smaller local efforts throughout Tohoku that would normally struggle to find funding. Besides this, alumni helped raise at least \$313,000 through other chapter drives – and this does not include the tens of thousands of dollars raised by the Canadian chapters or other alumni around the world. Fundraising in the US was made more difficult, however, by the lack of any central nonprofit entity to handle the donations, requiring a work-around where the New York chapter, a 501(c)(3), handled them on behalf of JETAA USA.

With the realization of what they could accomplish as a group, the alumni community, with the support of CLAIR and other elements of the Japanese government, launched renewed efforts to create effective mechanisms to organize the alumni in order to increase their capacity for coordinated action in pursuit of various goals. These efforts followed two parallel paths. One path that built on the work done up to then produced the JETAA USA Bylaws, strengthening the existing national organization by better codifying its functions and creating a Board of Advisors for support. The other led to the national capacity-building project that resulted in USJETAA. The two entities are mutually-supporting and fulfill complementary roles. Citing one without the other would miss the full range of alumni accomplishment in the US.

These efforts to improve governance in North America have continued, with a major revision of the JETAA USA Bylaws in 2022 under the leadership of Melissa Golden and Megan DeVille, to address issues that had come to be recognized since the original set was adopted. This included the addition of a Chapter Council to better codify the roles played by individual chapters in the national organization and stronger provisions for transparency and accountability. JETAA Canada also adopted formal bylaws that same year to replace the ad hoc guidelines they’d used for selecting and guiding their Country Rep.

It should also be noted that during this time, JETAA-I ceased functioning in any meaningful way, and the alumni network became comprised of only chapters, with some organized into national or regional groupings. International alumni communication continued, however, through the JETwit International Google Group. This group was the bridge to the creation of “JETAA-I 2.0” in 2015.

USJETAA

As mentioned, JETAA USA has evolved over the last 20 years or so to more effectively coordinate activities, disseminate information, and act as the collective voice of the alumni in the US.

However, even as JETAA USA developed it became clear that there were limits to what it could do, especially in terms of providing continuity and handling money, since it is not a legally incorporated entity and depends wholly on volunteers who serve year to year.

Paige Cottingham-Streater, Executive Director of the US-Japan Bridging Foundation and a JET alumna who helped found several of the first chapters in the US, along with other people active in the US-Japan relationship recognized the value of the alumni and the fact they were not being effectively utilized as a resource for that relationship. She therefore set out to explore the creation of a federally-recognized 501(c)(3) nonprofit corporation that could raise funds, hire staff, and work to build greater capacity for the alumni to carry out their various efforts in support of Japan, its relationship with the US, the JET Program, and the alumni community. She then presented a proposal to JETAA USA at its national conference in 2012 to work toward creating some type of national organization.

A working group consisting mostly of JET alumni was formed immediately following the conference to consider Paige’s proposal and how best to support it. The working group advised and assisted in assembling and implementing a plan for the proposed organization and in gaining the chapters’ agreement to and support for it. This work was grounded in the collective experience of the participating members, who had been engaged with building and strengthening the alumni community for years already. With guidance and support from the working group, Paige and her team worked intensely with the chapters on formulating a plan reflecting their input.

JETAA USA and USJETAA are sister organizations that fulfill separate roles. JETAA USA is the representative and coordinating body of the American alumni, with its elected chapter and country officers, but, as already mentioned, having no legal status and limited organizational capacity to function as a formal organization. USJETAA, on the other hand, has the legal and, even if constrained, organizational capacity to support the alumni, but it cannot claim any mandate conferred through elections or other processes to speak for or act on behalf of the alumni, except in a very limited sense.

Although creation of “a national JETAA” was discussed at the first International Conference in 1995 and efforts were made over the years toward this goal, it took until 2012, with the establishment of JETAA USA and the creation of the capacity-building project and working group that resulted in USJETAA, for those efforts to bear fruit.

Ultimately, after three years of meetings, chapter visits, information and workshop sessions at NatCon, and securing federal nonprofit status, USJETAA was formally established in 2015 and immediately turned its attention to developing programs to support alumni as individuals and in chapters. In 2017 they held their big inaugural event, the JET30 Reunion, in Washington, DC, and in 2022 they held a JET35

Reunion in Seattle.

Since then, under Paige's guidance, USJETAA has worked under its first Executive Director, Laurel Lukaszewski, and then Bahia Simons-Lane, to cultivate the funding and programs that will allow it to carry out its mission. That effort will now be carried on into the future under the leadership of Jessyca Livingston, who brings a wealth of experience to the role through her work as a longtime officer for the Rocky Mountain chapter, former CoR, and BoA member. She also spearheaded the creation of the 2012 JETAA USA Bylaws.

However, USJETAA faces the same fundamental challenges that the chapters do. It needs to find ways to attract members, as well as funding, in order to become a successful, sustainable supporting member of the alumni community. Going forward, its most pressing issues are building its membership base through providing valued services and cultivating revenue streams and other financial support.

JETwit

One of the most fundamentally important elements of the alumni community has been JETwit, the JET writers, interpreters, and translators group created by Steven Horowitz in 2008. JETwit was the product of Steven's frustration with longstanding efforts to create a national JETAA newsletter to improve the process of disseminating job listings, articles, updates on activities, and a whole range of other items of interest to current and former JETs. Working from the philosophy that "it's better to ask for forgiveness than permission", he launched JETwit himself and then announced it to the alumni community, encouraging everyone to make use of it. As such, it has always existed somewhat outside the JETAA system.

Over the years, and even with the recent explosion of online communication channels, JETwit has served as the go-to source for information, and it is probably the most recognized online gathering place for Program participants and stakeholders. For many years it was the only effective way to communicate across chapters and countries, bringing alumni closer together and facilitating communications and coordination that made possible much of the growth of JETAA as an organization, both nationally and internationally.

Steven, through JETwit, was in the forefront of responding to the JET Threat and developing initiatives for such things as demonstrating "Return on JET-vestment" through showing how many people had visited Japan as tourists because of JET and asking JETs to create and post videos introducing their communities to the world and encouraging people to come visit. After this, JETwit became a critical source of information on the situation in Tohoku after 3.11 and efforts by current and former JETs to aid in disaster response and recovery. For this, Steven and JETwit received a formal Certificate of Appreciation from the Japanese government, through CLAIR, in 2011.

JETwit's main undertaking now is its JETwit Jobs Google Group, conducted in partnership with USJETAA and AJET. Having originally received advice from an expert in online resources, Steven was told that the two most effective ways to get attention are pornography or jobs, and he (happily) went with posting job openings to attract views. Now, JETwit Jobs continues to provide valuable information to alumni around the world who are working to build their careers, and it helps tie the alumni community together, whether users belong to a chapter or not.

JETAA-I 2.0

As noted, after “JETAA-I 1.0” ceased functioning following the 2011 International Meeting, Steven Horowitz set up the JETwit International Google Group to serve as a platform for communication across the JETAA community around the world, including stakeholders like CLAIR. This provided the foundation for assembling a group of people interested in recreating JETAA-I in a new, hopefully more effective and sustainable form. This group, drawn from Steven’s network, began planning and reaching out to potential collaborators and supporters, looking for ideas and consensus on how a new structure might look and operate.

Eventually, this group joined with the last Chair of JETAA-I 1.0, Kay Dunkley, and began coordinating with CLAIR Tokyo, which had been asking the alumni community to revitalize JETAA-I ahead of the 30th anniversary of the JET Program and other upcoming events. CLAIR then called a JET Alumni Global Forum as part of their Satogaeri Project in 2015 and asked the three Country Reps in that group to take on the revitalization effort.

After a period of inactivity, parts of Steven’s group began working with the US Country Rep among the Satogaeri group, Xander Peterson, to complete the rebuilding effort, bringing the other two US Country Reps along with all the others from around the world into online discussions, launching a rudimentary website, and drafting a new set of bylaws to define and govern the organization. These bylaws were adopted by a formal vote of the Country Representatives in May of 2016, at which point JETAA-I 2.0 began officially functioning. Most of the people involved in this revival effort moved into positions helping to run “2.0”, whether as officers, webmaster, or board of advisor members.

The new Executive Officers and Executive Committee (comprised of the Country Reps) met in Tokyo in November 2016 for the first International Meeting since 2011. Based on discussions there, they continued to build the new organization and its programs, and undertook various initiatives over the next three years. Most notably among these, JETAA-I took the KenJETkai and Post-JET Opportunities projects under its aegis, and also worked to improve its information-sharing and chapter support functions.

These efforts received a boost from the 2019 IM, where a slate of projects for the next three years was discussed and agreed upon by the assembled countries. Unfortunately, almost immediately after that, the Covid-19 pandemic shut down all travel, forced the cancellation of in-person activity, and became the overwhelming preoccupation of almost everyone in the world. JETAA-I’s efforts were revived in late 2022, as Japan began to reopen its borders and the next International Meeting was held, and they are now underway again, along with new projects like a video contest.

Finally

This is a very broad, North American-centric overview of how JETAA has developed since 1989 and how it has branched out to encompass different manifestations of collective alumni effort. The hope is this can be expanded to include more elements of the global JETAA community should more information become available.

You can find reports and documentation on the JETAA-I and JET Program(me) websites, and the author is always happy to talk about any of this in more detail, if anyone is interested.

APPENDIX

For further information on JETAA, please access the following:

JET Streams Archive: <http://jetprogramme.org/en/jet-streams/>

JETA Archive: <https://www.jetaainternational.org/jetaarchive>

- Past JETA AI Officers: <https://www.jetaainternational.org/comm>
- List of All Past Conferences: <https://www.jetaainternational.org/list-of-conferences>
- Reports on Past Conferences : <https://www.jetaainternational.org/international-meetings>