

In the spring of 2024, I, Abigail George, conducted a series of interviews with Clemson University alumni who have pursued various career and academic opportunities in Japan. These interviews provide valuable insights into different paths available for graduates interested in living and working in Japan, including teaching through ALT programs, working in corporate roles, and pursuing higher education. Below are some key takeaways from these discussions:

## **Kevin Burgess, '21:**

### Basic Info:

ALTIA ALT from April 2023

LAIB 2021

### Main Notes from Discussion:

Prefers ALTIA to JET Program:

- You'll likely have some choice on where you'll end up.
- You'll be placed within reach of a major hub city.
- You can get a car for many positions.
- Better management support
- You can't just be dropped by the BOE and not have a job lined up (If for some reason your BOE doesn't reconstruct with ALTIA, they'll find you a new position)
- More guidance on how to teach, unlike JET

### Main Questions:

**What motivated you to participate in an ALT program over other opportunities, such as the MEXT/ Fulbright research scholarships or getting a job in a different industry in Japan?**

“Fulbright/MEXT are certainly good opportunities but ultimately will not pay as much as ALT work (provide for basics but you aren't really making money) and from what I've heard seems to have a strange life balance regarding class schedules and community engagement. I really wanted to begin working and living in Japan and was accepted through Altia, which I heard good things from. You are also limited to just 1 year unlike Jet which is up to 5 or other dispatches that have people working for them for decades.”

“Something I think you should mention is that not all dispatch companies (altia, interac, borderline, etc) are not equal. In particular, some dispatches and eikawa are notably horrible. Heart for instance is shady and the bottle of the barrel. In all honesty, anything besides Jet, Altia, and Interac is not really worth it.”

**How can prospective ALTIA participants best prepare for the application and selection process? (application tips, interview tips, etc)**

There are a few interviews with recruiting managers, and a Japanese interview just to check your Japanese knowledge. It felt more relaxed than JET and they will see about putting you in a position that plays to your strengths. You also need to record and send a short lesson video to demonstrate your teaching style. They may ask you to add or change some things then re-upload it. Besides the intro lesson, it wasn't too bad.

The only real issue is that position availability can change. For instance they may say that there "might" be spots outside of the beginning of the school year when you can be hired or contracts might be lost for whatever reason in an area meaning current employees take priority on new spots to fill. For instance, I had an annoying time first getting here, since they kept pushing back my start date in Japan. If it ever gets to that point, just write an email saying you are moving to Japan and they will probably have you as a Standby where you can get paid while they find you a spot in Japan to work.

## **Sam Green, '18:**

### Basic Info:

LAIB, graduated fall of 2018

Studied abroad at University of Fukui

Began working for TD Synnex in Tokyo in 2019, but no longer works in Japan

### **What motivated you to pursue a job opportunity in Japan, and at TD Synnex in Tokyo specifically? Did you have any specific goals or aspirations in mind?**

"I had connections who worked at TD SYNnex and they introduced me to their peers in Japan office. I got lucky with networking, I had no goals or aspirations other than to get back to Japan and stay for a while honestly."

### **How did you look for job opportunities in Japan (through a website like Indeed, or something else)?**

"Networking. I studied abroad for a year and met people who introduced me to other people. For TD SYNnex specifically, I met with someone in US who introduced me to their Japan colleague."

### **What was the application process like? How does it differ from job hunting in America?**

"Application process was very similar to my interviews I had in US, but a couple of unique questions were asked. Japan companies do not really look for skills as much as they look for how you would fit in with the company. It was more of them assessing my personality and Japanese speaking ability. They ask questions more to understand the type of person you are and your thinking process from my experience."

**How did you navigate cultural differences and language barriers during the job search and interview process?**

“My girlfriend at the time helped me by doing a mock interview. I would highly recommend finding Japanese friends who have gone through interviews and asking them to help with mock interviews, similar to what you would do in US. Many questions will be similar regardless of company.”

**What was your experience like working at Synnex in Tokyo?**

“My first 6 months were very stressful. It got better but if I did not have a support network, I might not have made it. I would have stayed longer than 3+ years if family did not bring my back to US. The work made no sense, and the training I underwent had nothing to do with my job the first 3 months. Then when I finally started, my coworker quit, and I only had a week to learn my actual job. My manager also was micromanaging, which no matter the culture I do not think is a good management style. I switched positions internally at end of my first year, and that made all the difference. I excelled in my new role and my abilities increased much faster than my previous role all because of the new environment. I would say one good aspect of Japan work culture is that you can move around internally looking for roles that suit you if you do not fit well in current role for whatever reason.”

**Lastly, do you have any tips or advice for students looking to find a job in Japan following graduation?**

“Talk with locals, make friends with people who are in different circles and expand your connections. It is cheesy but it really makes all the difference knowing people. Also, talk with your counselor that you were assigned to during study abroad. My counselor knew an executive at a company and helped me get an internship during my Study abroad, and that looked great on my resume. I also would recommend making videos in Japanese and put on YouTube or a portfolio or somewhere if you can. Talent acquisition would probably enjoy that. Companies take risk hiring foreigners who are not in Japan because they need to sponsor your visa. So showing that you are worth the risk is important.”

**Marcus Hance, ‘20:**

Basic Info:

LAIB, graduated 2020

Studied abroad at Fukui

Really enjoys his school, not too busy

Notes on Main Questions:

**What motivated you to participate in the JET Program over other opportunities, such as the MEXT/ Fulbright research scholarships or getting a job in a different industry in Japan?**

“The money and, from what I hear at least, how hands-on JET is with getting you on board and getting you home if you go home is better than the other ALT companies. As for other industries or jobs, I just don't have the qualifications for anything else I could've gotten from outside the country and I don't want to do anything else in academia”

**How can prospective JET Program participants best prepare for the application and selection process? (application tips, interview tips, etc)**

“It's been a while so I don't really remember the application process too well honestly, but I think if you just show up looking nice and speak well that'll carry you through the interview a decent ways. And they sometimes ask you for an example of a class topic you might give and how you might run it, so be prepared with an idea of a small lesson plan.”

**Have there been any long-term benefits or impacts of participating in the JET Program on your life and career?**

“JET allowed me to actually get into the country where I've been able to improve my Japanese and make business connections to have a career after JET, so it was pretty much the crux of my future plans, I literally have no idea what I'd be doing if I didn't get into JET.”

**Emily Richards, '18:**

Basic Info:

Graduated in May 2018 with dual degrees in Japanese Language and History

Master's degree in Japanese Language and Literature from Nagoya University, graduated in 2023, worked as a teaching assistant during her time there

Questions:

**What motivated you to pursue a Master's degree in Nagoya?**

“I wanted to pursue a master's and potentially a PhD and become a professor of Japanese/Asian history at a university. I believed getting my master's from a Japanese university would make me more competitive for a PhD program and give me easier access to primary sources for research.”

**How was the application process?**

“It was very similar to American programs. I submitted my application, took my GRE and sent it to the school. I had to include a detailed abstract of my thesis and how I planned to complete it and research it, samples of my writing from undergrad, and transcripts from Clemson. I then had a video interview where they questioned me on my prospectus. I actually didn't get in the first time around, I had to reapply the next year after taking their feedback into account.”

**How did your academic experience in Nagoya differ from your undergraduate studies?**

“The coursework is much more reading heavy and learning how to interpret and critique text, but you only take 3-4 classes per semester, which meet once a week. It was not unusual to read 3-4 complete books every week, and part of it was learning how to skim/find the important parts. It’s also self driven research and writing heavy, as you are expected to conduct your own research with your remaining time, and reach out to your advisor as needed, as well as meet with them regularly to discuss your progress. You are also expected to lead discussions on the readings in each class several times during the semester. The only grades I received in each class were for papers written submitted 2 or 3 times, depending on the class, during the semester. These were expected to be related to the class theme or my thesis.”

**How did you get your experience as a Teaching Assistant at Nagoya University? What was it like?**

“I worked as a TA for 3 semesters for my advisor. My primary function was to prepare the undergraduate students for class discussions. I would meet with students before classes and go over the readings for the class to ensure they understood the English, as all of them were Japanese freshmen or sophomores. I then attended the classes that were mixed graduate/undergraduate and participated as needed. I enjoyed working with the students, though the large gaps in their primary education, especially related to their knowledge of Japan’s history and activities during WWI and WWII was frustrating at times, as it indicated an intentional suppression of those topics in the Japanese public school system.”

**Can you share your career path since completing your graduate program in Nagoya?**

“I decided to not complete my masters program due to issues with access to primary sources and my advisor leaving Nagoya university. As I was in Japan when COVID hit, Kyoto university denied me access to their magazines from the interwar period which were to be my primary sources. I then had to completely start over and change my thesis, which put me behind my peers. My mental health began to suffer, and my advisor and I agreed I would return to America and complete my degree remotely after the death of my grandmother. However, the university changed the rules on me as soon as I left the country and revoked my scholarship, leading me to have to begin working in America to cover expenses. Ultimately, their inflexibility with assisting me in completing my thesis and coursework, as well as changing my advisor 3 times and none of them passing on my materials, led to me withdrawing from the university. I worked as an administrative assistant for a couple years, before I got my current position, which is Japanese and English compliance. I work in electronic communication, monitoring messages in Japanese and English to ensure compliance with SEC and bank regulations.”

**What advice would you give to students looking to pursue a career or further education in Japan?**

“My advice would be to recognize that Japanese universities are far stricter in terms of rules and regulations and to expect that if your circumstances change drastically while you are attending,

that you will often not find the support you need to continue your studies. I was not the only student who encountered major issues during their studies. In addition, the Japanese library systems are not centralized, even inside a university, so all research often needs to be conducted on site and requesting documents and articles online is very rare. In addition, without an N2 or higher from the JLPT, often your job options are limited to eikaiwa and other English teaching positions. Strong written and verbal communication skills are required for a Japanese company, and successfully getting into a regular Japanese company can be quite difficult for a foreigner. That being said, you have a higher chance of getting hired for an American branch of a Japanese company if you return to the states after completing your education in Japan. However, if your mental health suffers greatly, accessing quality help can be challenging. Pursuing education and careers in Japan can be very rewarding and you can have a fulfilling time, but the additional barriers should be taken into account.”

## **Calvin Schaasfma, ‘20:**

### Basic Info:

Teaches at smaller school in Kanon, Osaka, about 200 kids

Some ALTs have multiple schools, he just has one

Really enjoys his school, not too busy

### Notes on JET:

“Some people in jet program get like 5 schools, some have one, you kind of roll the dice with JET”

“JET pays for your flight, rent is incredibly cheap, they found an incredibly affordable apartment for me.”

“Everyone’s experience is different, most will help you find an apartment, but not always.”

### **What motivated you to participate in the JET Program over other opportunities, such as the MEXT/ Fulbright research scholarships or getting a job in a different industry in Japan?**

“When I was in college, I decided to wait until the last semester to study abroad. Unfortunately, last semester senior year was March 2020, so my study abroad got cancelled due to Covid-19. After I graduated, I decided to participate in the JET program. I loved Japan so much, so I kept on renewing my contract.”

### **Did you consider teaching as a career prior to the JET Program?**

“When my advisors talked about JET, I thought it sounded interesting, but I never thought about teaching long term. When I return to the US, I don’t plan on teaching at all. My ambitions were never to be a teacher. But, I thought it was a great opportunity to further practice my Japanese, get to Japan, and just a great opportunity all around.”

**How can prospective JET Program participants best prepare for the application and selection process? (application tips, interview tips, etc)**

“JET says they don't actually judge Japanese ability, but I don't know how much I believe that. I think it would be best to have some Japanese ability, but from what I remember, they advertise that that isn't something they judge on. The reason I believe I was able to get in is because, during Covid, I worked as a math tutor and substitute teacher. I had a lot of teaching experience, so I think that was really helpful for my resume. Also, my recommendation letters were written by my Japanese professors. Also, one of the main questions in the interview was, ‘Do you think you will be able to cope with moving to another country, separated from friends and family? Can you handle that sort of change?’ I think I have handled it pretty well. I have always been adventurous and can handle myself well.”

**Have there been any long-term benefits or impacts of participating in the JET Program on your life and career?**

“Of course. On a practical level, there are so many things I can add to my resume. My Japanese ability has increased so much. This was my first post-college work experience, so all of the responsibilities and skills from that, and the adaptability that JET brings to you. You learn to become self-sustaining.”

**What would you say to advocate for the JET program over an industry job in Japan?**

“I would say, for starters, it gets you in the door. A lot of Japanese employers aren't looking for prospective employees in America. It would probably be easier to leverage your JET experience and increased language skills than to apply for, say, a Tech company in Japan while living in America. Also, Japanese work culture is known to be very stressful, you work a lot of hours. JET, from my experience, has a lot of safeguards in play. For example, you aren't ‘supposed’ to work over 40 hours, and you get time off for holidays. JET wants you to be a sort of cultural ambassador, so they want you to travel and experience Japanese culture. A Japanese company doesn't really care if you travel or get to see Japan.”

**Chris Schumard, ‘23:**

Basic Info:

Studied History at Clemson, Bachelors and Masters, minor in Japanese  
Finished Masters in 2023, JET Alt from August 2023  
Placed in Takasaki, Gunma Prefecture  
Thinks JET is better than ALTIA or Interac

Notes on JET:

“It is a really easy job I would say, it varies from person to person, and school to school, but where I am, it is easy. The city hall provides a teaching plan in English and Japanese, and you

work with the main teacher you are partnered with following the lesson plans. There isn't much room for creativity, but the truth of it is, we aren't real teachers. We are assistant teachers.”

“It isn't a terrible gig, but it isn't a career.”

“You can put the prefectures that you have preferences for, and I think most people that put preferences get close to their secondary preference.”

#### Notes on Main Questions:

#### **What motivated you to participate in the JET Program over other opportunities, such as the MEXT/ Fulbright research scholarships or getting a job in a different industry in Japan?**

“I pretty much chose JET because of Takeuchi Sensei and Kumiko Sensei's influence. I graduated with my master's, but even before then, I didn't really know what I wanted to do. I was always interested in Japanese, so I decided to go to Japan and feel it out for a year. The JET program seemed like one of the easier ways to work in Japan. I thought JET was the best out of the ALT programs available, because they give you the most benefits and the most time off. ALTIA is good too, but I would caution anyone who wants to come to Japan as a direct hire. From what I understand, both reading online and talking to people in real life, it is kind of bottom-of-the-barrel work, and you have no protection or middle-man like you do with JET.”

#### **How can prospective JET Program participants best prepare for the application and selection process? (application tips, interview tips, etc)**

“For the first part of the application, filling out all of the information, getting your criminal record check done— as soon as you have the instructions, start getting stuff ready. You want to have all of that information and appointments ready way before the application is actually due. You don't want to procrastinate on that. You don't need Japanese strictly speaking, but I think it will help to have Japanese language skills for the application.

For the essay, you don't want to write a whole essay about ‘I love Japan’ and ‘I want to go to Japan.’ They already know you like Japan. This is an employer, so you should consider how to market yourself to them based on what they want out of an employee. They want someone who is good with children, eager to be a cultural bridge between their home country and Japan, and someone who wants to teach. Teaching experience is great for the application. You also want to talk about your career after the JET program, because they want to know if you will continue being a cultural bridge even after leaving the program. The interview is the other part. Dress nicely, even if it is just a Zoom interview. Also, they will throw a teaching demonstration at you on the spot. Even just knowing that beforehand is better than not knowing, and many people are blindsided by it. They are looking for an interviewee who won't freeze up.”