Any long-term government initiative is bound to face criticism, and the JET Programme is no exception. Having recently celebrated its 30th anniversary, the youth exchange program has received its fair share of complaints, from politicians, third-party observers, and JET participants both past and present. But a former JET-turned-academic is receiving international attention for research that shows how the JET Programme boosts Japan’s soft power immeasurably.

Sharleen Estampador-Hughson worked as a JET ALT in Ishikawa Prefecture, an area on the Sea of Japan coast, for three years, finishing in 2009. “I thoroughly enjoyed my time as an ALT, which is not to say that there weren’t tough times. I wanted to understand why I felt such a strong connection to Japan after we leave,” she says.

“Much of my work at JETAA involves facilitating yet more cross-cultural exchange between former JETS and the rest of the world, which Sharleen’s findings have highlighted the importance of. You can’t manage what people think about an entire country, but each former JET is a potential salesperson for Japan. I think a little more strategy on how to harness this goodwill would go a long way!”

“Soft power can’t be measured, but it is very powerful. That soft power is fueled by the participants’ strong sense of nostalgia, a result of most JET alumni being in their early to mid-twenties. “During this time, we are impressionable as we are continuing to form our characters. So the connection we feel to Japan is felt especially strongly,” she explains.

This sense of connection means that the majority of JETS become mini ambassadors when they return to their home countries. “American scholars such as David McConnell and Emily T. Metzgar have previously studied the program. They have found that JET alumni are interpreters of Japanese culture and society to those unfamiliar with the country. My research echoes those findings.”

Sarah Parsons, chairperson of the JET Alumni Association UK (JETAA UK), shares this enthusiasm for the JET Programme. Parsons worked as a JET for three years in Gunma Prefecture, finishing in 1998. “It was a fantastic experience, but the culture shock can be difficult. For me and many others, it’s the challenge of overcoming those cultural differences that becomes the best part of the experience, with nostalgia playing a huge part in keeping us connected to Japan after we leave,” she says.

“With over 10,000 JET alumni in the UK alone, it is no surprise to find JET alumni working in important positions. They have lasting influence on how Japan is seen by the rest of the world,” Parsons adds. As enthusiastic as she is about JET, she believes even more could be done to enhance JET’s creation of soft power. “Much of my work at JETAA involves facilitating yet more cross-cultural exchange between former JETS and the rest of the world, which Sharleen’s findings have highlighted the importance of. You can’t manage what people think about an entire country, but each former JET is a potential salesperson for Japan. I think a little more strategy on how to harness this goodwill would go a long way!”

“But it’s clear from both my experience and Sharleen’s study how successful the program has been in its present form. The JET Programme does a fantastic job of generating positivity and goodwill towards Japan,” she adds. Estampador-Hughson feels the same way: “JET provides fantastic opportunities for participants, while Japan reaps rewards through harnessing the connective power of nostalgia. I hope this continues long into the future.”