

JENESYS ALUMNI
ESSAY CONTEST
2025

What JENESYS
Means to Me

Award Winning
Essay Collection



July
2025

JENESYS 

Foreword

In today's increasingly complex world, connections between countries and between people are more important than ever before. Launched in 2007, the JENESYS Project has been running for 18 years to foster such connections, and to date, over 50,000 youth from across the Asia-Pacific have participated in the project. Originally aimed at enhancing Japan's soft power and promoting understanding of Japan, the outcomes of this project have far exceeded initial expectations.

The value of JENESYS lies not only in achieving its original objectives but also in promoting dialogue among participants and providing them with a forum to explore ideas together. Participation in the program has a cascading effect, influencing participants' future education, employment, and community involvement. While it may appear to be a simple international exchange program, it is, in fact, a platform that empowers youth to take their first steps forward—sparking inspiration, influencing those around them, and driving societal change.

This collection of essays records the diverse experiences of these participants. Some found inspiration for personal transformation, some began new initiatives after returning to their home countries, and some became driving forces for social change. The depth of this project is reflected in the diversity of its participants, which is far from uniform. JENESYS is, in essence, a project that sows seeds. Each participant will surely continue to blossom in their own unique way, wherever their journey may lead.

What all those involved in JENESYS share is a strong desire for peace. In addition to government diplomacy, Japan has steadily built relationships of trust with other countries through private diplomacy. JENESYS has the potential to become a unique initiative in the world, establishing a “new security based on trust.” However, only 18 years have passed since JENESYS was launched. Through consistent and large-scale implementation, the program can foster a compounding effect—where the hopes and aspirations of participants reach even those who have not directly participated, eventually leading to outcomes far deeper than initially imagined. We who live in the present have a responsibility to preserve and pass on these hopes and aspirations to future generations.

Finally, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the government officials who showed understanding and strongly supported JENESYS, the schools, communities, and host families who warmly welcomed the participants, and everyone involved in the project. Supported by the goodwill and cooperation of so many people, the heartfelt exchanges established through this project lay the groundwork of peace, offering a clear path toward a shared future for all of humanity.

July 31, 2025
SHIONOYA, Tsuyoshi
Managing Director
International Exchange Department
Japan International Cooperation Center

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Grand Prize Winner 🏆

Name: BHANDARI, Roshan

Country: Nepal

Year of Participation: 2018, Visited Tokyo, Nagasaki

Program: JENESYS SAARC

Affiliation: Hiroshima University Hospital, Hiroshima University Graduate School of Biomedical and Health Sciences (2025)

What JENESYS Means to Me

Participating in the JENESYS program in 2019 as a medical student from Nepal was a transformative experience that profoundly shaped both my worldview and my professional journey. What initially appeared as an exciting opportunity to explore Japan turned into a cornerstone moment that ignited my passion for global health, cross-cultural exchange, and academic excellence.

Back in 2018, when I first heard about the JENESYS Batch-II (Health) program from my university, I saw it as a golden opportunity. As a young and curious medical student at Kathmandu University, I was eager to explore Japan's advanced healthcare system, interact with medical professionals, and experience its rich culture. I applied without hesitation, driven by a sense of wonder and the desire to learn from a country that had long inspired me with its balance of tradition and innovation.

Among the many unforgettable memories from that visit, the homestay in Nagasaki stands out. I was welcomed with warmth and kindness by a Japanese family whose children, especially little Shi-chan, quickly became my closest companions. We played together, shared meals, and explored the community, making me feel truly at home. No textbook or classroom could replicate the depth of understanding I gained about Japanese family life, values, and traditions during that homestay. It was a touching reminder of our shared humanity and the power of genuine cultural exchange.

Before the program, I had the impression of Japan as a country of advanced technology and rapid modernization. After experiencing it firsthand, I realized that what truly sets Japan apart is its people—their humility, discipline, and deep-rooted respect in daily life. Whether it was the punctuality of public transport, the precision in healthcare systems, or the unwavering hospitality of our coordinators, everything reflected a nation where tradition and modernity coexist harmoniously.

I was not just mesmerized by the infrastructure, but by the soul of the country. Japan taught me that progress and environmental harmony are not mutually exclusive. It taught me that resilience, as shown in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, can lead to rejuvenation and hope.

The program also served as an unexpected academic turning point. Meeting Professor Moji and his students at Nagasaki University was eye-opening. Their global, evidence-based approach to medicine and education inspired me deeply. For the first time, I realized that Japan could be more than just a travel destination—it could be the place where I would shape my future.

I returned to Nepal with a new dream: to pursue advanced clinical and research training in Japan, and someday bring that knowledge back home to help build a better healthcare system.

Today, I am proud to say that dream has become a reality. I am currently a postgraduate trainee in cardiology at Hiroshima University Hospital and a PhD candidate in Cardiovascular Medicine at Hiroshima University's Graduate School of Biomedical and Health Sciences. Under the mentorship of Professor Nakano and Dr. Utsunomiya, I am conducting advanced clinical training and research focused on heart failure and echocardiography. I have gained hands-on experience with cutting-edge technologies that are rarely accessible in my home country.

The training and mentorship I am receiving in Japan go far beyond technical skills. I am being nurtured in an environment that values precision, ethics, collaboration, and innovation—values that I first observed during my JENESYS visit and now live daily. I feel deeply indebted to the program that first connected me to Japan and opened the door to this journey.

Looking ahead, my vision is to return to Nepal and establish a clinical and research heart center—an institution that not only provides quality cardiovascular care but also fosters training, research, and international collaboration. I hope to maintain strong ties with my Japanese mentors and institutions, creating a bridge of mutual medical advancement between Japan and Nepal.

I also plan to stay actively involved in JENESYS alumni networks and cultural exchange initiatives to continue promoting the friendship and understanding that the program represents.

In essence, JENESYS was not just a short visit or an exchange—it was the seed that grew into my life's mission. It gave me lifelong friendships, invaluable cultural insights, and the inspiration to dream bigger than I ever thought possible.



Even now, when I face challenges in my clinical and academic path, I think back to those days in Nagasaki, to the kindness of Shi-chan's family, to the lessons of resilience at the A-bomb museum, and to the words and encouragement of Japanese mentors I met during the program.

JENESYS, to me, means transformation. It means connection. It means building bridges of understanding and collaboration that transcend borders and disciplines. I will forever carry its spirit in my heart, and through my work and future endeavors, strive to pass it on.



At the Nagasaki Peace Park

Excellence Award



Name: Aung Si Kyaw

Country: Myanmar

Year of Participation: 2022, Visited Tokyo, Aichi

Program: JENESYS ASEAN

Affiliation: Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University, Japan (2025)

How JENESYS Sparked My Global Connection and Vision for Empowering Community

Participating in the JENESYS program was a defining chapter in my life. Coming from Kyauk Taw, a small and conflict-affected town in Rakhine State, Myanmar, I had rarely seen beyond the borders of my region both physically and mentally. But JENESYS changed that. It gave me not only a passport to explore Japan, but also a key to understanding the value of international exchange, empathy, and youth leadership. It shifted my perspective, helped me find my voice, and strengthened my determination to work toward peace and inclusive development.

When I joined the JENESYS program, I was a young person full of hope but uncertain about how I could contribute to change. During the program, we visited local Japanese communities, interacted with students, and exchanged ideas on topics like sustainable development, disaster preparedness, and youth cooperation. Each interaction opened my eyes. What stood out most to me was how Japan emphasized discipline, mutual respect, and collective responsibility values that deeply resonated with me as someone who grew up in a community affected by division and distrust.

One of the most impactful moments was a discussion with fellow participants from ASEAN countries and Timor-Leste about the role of youth in peace building and development cooperation at ASEAN Center. I shared stories of life in Rakhine, where ethnic and religious conflicts have harmed communities for generations. Instead of pity, my peers responded with solidarity, curiosity, and shared experiences from their own countries. That moment taught me that international exchange is not just about learning new things it's about realizing that, despite our different backgrounds, we all face similar struggles and can support one another in meaningful ways.

The program helped me build a network of friends and changemakers across ASEAN and Japan. Even after the program ended, many of us kept in touch. We exchanged project ideas, offered encouragement during hard times, and continued to discuss issues in our home countries and I even visited some of their countries and met with them. These connections became a source of strength for me, especially during Myanmar's ongoing political crisis, reminding me that I am not alone in my pursuit of peace and justice.

JENESYS also gave me the confidence to pursue bigger dreams. Inspired by the values I encountered in Japan, I applied for and was accepted into Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University (APU) in Beppu, Japan, where I am now studying social science and global economics. Studying at APU an international university that celebrates diversity and intercultural learning has expanded my worldview. I currently serve as a Resident Assistant, where I support international and domestic students and foster a sense of inclusion, dialogue, and mutual respect in our dormitory community. Beyond campus, I continue working on youth-led initiatives for displaced communities in Rakhine, including mobile library projects and civic education projects. My work today is deeply rooted in the spirit of exchange, trust, and dialogue I first experienced through JENESYS.

Of course, the journey has not been without challenges. As a student from Myanmar living abroad during times of crisis at home, I often feel helpless. Balancing academic life, part-time work, and advocacy efforts is difficult. But the resilience I witnessed in Japan from communities recovering from natural disasters to youth volunteering and development cooperation passionately for social causes reminds me that perseverance and collective action matter.

Looking toward the future, I am committed to becoming a bridge between communities between Myanmar and Japan, between conflict zones and peace efforts, between young people and policymakers. I want to create educational platforms that empower youth in conflict-affected areas like mine to access knowledge, develop leadership skills, and believe in their ability to create change. I also want to share the lessons I've learned from Japan with my community: the power of community harmony, the importance of discipline, and the beauty of cultural coexistence.

JENESYS did not just influence my life it transformed it. It turned my curiosity into commitment, and my background into a source of strength. The program made me realize that youth voices, especially from marginalized areas, matter. And today, I carry that belief with me in every step I take.

I am grateful to the JENESYS program for planting the seeds of global citizenship in me. I will continue to nurture those seeds through learning, leading, and contributing wherever I can so that one day, I too can inspire others, just as JENESYS inspired me.



Exchange with Nagoya University Students



With Myanmar delegates



Learning session about Nagoya Tourism and development



Memories in Tokyo



Completion Ceremony with my friends from Vietnam

Excellence Award



Name: MAGHUYOP, John Roger

Country: The Philippines

Year of Participation: 2010, Visited Tokyo, Ibaraki

Program: JENESYS ASEAN

Affiliation: International Programs Coordinator, Xavier School (2025)

Change for the Better!

My journey with the JENESYS Programme began in 2010 when I was selected as a student exchange participant to Japan through the National Youth Commission of the Philippines. I was assigned to Ibaraki Prefecture, where I had the unforgettable opportunity to stay with a Japanese foster family, attend a local high school, and experience daily life in a new and exciting culture. That short-term exchange opened my eyes to a world beyond textbooks and taught me the true value of respect, empathy, and cultural appreciation.

During our stay, we were enrolled at Toyo Ushiku High School, where we joined classes with Japanese students and got a real taste of the Japanese education system. I vividly remember how warmly we were welcomed and how curious the students were about us. Despite the language barrier, we shared many moments of laughter and learning—whether through school activities, collaborative projects, or simple lunchtime conversations. The experience taught me how young people from different backgrounds can connect through mutual respect and shared experiences, even without speaking the same language really.

My foster family played a huge role in making the exchange so meaningful. They welcomed me like one of their own, and through them, I saw the everyday beauty of Japanese life. They brought me to visit Ushiku Daibutsu, one of the tallest Buddha statues in the world, where I learned not just about religion but about Japanese reverence for tradition and spirituality.

We also visited the local aquarium, which was both educational and fun, and shared countless delicious meals featuring local Japanese food and fresh seafood.

I remember being nervous at first to try unfamiliar dishes, but my host mother patiently explained everything with the help of the translation app—and soon, I was asking for second helpings of tamago sushi and miso soup.

Of course, the language barrier was one of the biggest challenges. At the time (even now), I barely spoke Japanese, and my host family knew limited English.

We relied heavily on non-verbal cues, body language, and sometimes hilarious attempts at sign language to communicate.

It was frustrating at times, but also incredibly rewarding. In many ways, those imperfect conversations brought us closer. We learned to listen not just with our ears, but with our hearts. Today, I still keep in touch with my foster family through LINE, where the translation feature has made it easier to maintain our bond. It's funny to think how far we've come from sign language to instant translations but what really matters is the love and effort behind every message.

The JENESYS Programme didn't just leave me with fond memories; it made a lasting impact on my life and career. Today, I work as a teacher and an international programs coordinator, roles that are deeply influenced by my JENESYS experience. The program taught me the power of exchange not just in knowledge, but in building respect, resilience, and global citizenship. As a coordinator, I now have the privilege of designing programs that allow our students to experience the same kind of cultural immersion and transformation that I did. I always tell them: it's not about where you go, but how open you are to learning from every moment.

Since my first visit in 2010, I've made it a point to return to Japan at least once a year. I've been fortunate to receive multiple-entry visas, allowing me to explore different regions of Japan, build professional networks, and most importantly, reconnect annually with my foster family. Every visit is a heartfelt reunion—a reminder of how one short program years ago created lifelong connections. These trips have also led to meeting new friends and institutions, some of which have potential for future partnerships in my work.

The JENESYS Programme truly changed my life for the better. It did more than just give me a chance to travel; it reshaped how I see the world and my role in it. As a young student, I was exposed to a culture that values harmony, respect, and community. These values became embedded in me and now influence how I interact with my students, colleagues, and international partners.

Through JENESYS, I learned that meaningful human connection transcends language. What matters most is openness, empathy, and a genuine curiosity about others. That understanding continues to guide me in my work as an international programs coordinator. I strive to create opportunities where students can be immersed in unfamiliar environments and grow through the same kind of transformative experiences I had.

JENESYS gave me a reason and purpose. I am forever grateful to have been part of a program that does not just open doors, but also hearts and minds.



Ibaraki team visit Ibaraki Nature Museum



Attending a Japanese
Calligraphy Class



Presenting our group analysis to JICE
Supervisors



Class photo at Toyo Ushiku high school

The Virtual Bridge Award

Name: CORALDE, Joshua

Country: The Philippines

Year of Participation: 2022, Online

Affiliation : BLGF (Act now for Ranow Movement)(2025)

Connecting Cultures Beyond Borders: What JENESYS Means to Me

In 2022, I had the unique opportunity to participate in the JENESYS (Japan-East Asia Network of Exchange for Students and Youths) exchange program, held virtually due to global travel restrictions. Though the program was conducted online, the impact it had on me was real, powerful, and lasting. Representing the Philippines and engaging with fellow youth from different countries gave me a chance to explore Japan's culture, values, and innovations, while also reflecting deeply on my own identity and role in fostering cross-cultural understanding.

At first, I was unsure how meaningful an online exchange could be. I imagined that not being physically present in Japan would limit my learning. However, I was soon proven wrong. The JENESYS organizers thoughtfully created an interactive and engaging program that introduced us to various aspects of Japanese society—from its rich traditions and customs to its modern technologies and sustainable practices. The virtual tours, cultural demonstrations, and discussions with experts and peers were all carefully designed to bridge the physical distance and bring Japan closer to us, no matter where we were in the world.

One of the highlights of the program was learning about Japanese culture through virtual experiences, such as tea ceremonies, origami workshops, and local community tours. These sessions allowed me to appreciate the beauty of Japanese customs and the importance of harmony, respect, and mindfulness in their daily life. I was particularly struck by how much value is placed on group harmony (wa) and mutual respect—values that are also present in Filipino culture, though expressed differently. This realization helped me see how, despite our differences, we share common principles that can unite us.

Another key part of JENESYS was the opportunity to engage in dialogue with youth from various Asia-Pacific countries.

Through group discussions and collaborative activities, we shared our thoughts on current global issues, such as climate change, education, and regional cooperation. These exchanges opened my eyes to the different challenges and opportunities faced by each country, and how interconnected our futures really are. I learned to listen actively, speak respectfully, and appreciate diverse perspectives. It was inspiring to hear how other young people were working to make a difference in their communities, and it motivated me to think about how I could do the same.

Participating in JENESYS also helped me develop important skills. Communicating in English in a multicultural environment required clarity, patience, and cultural sensitivity. I improved my public speaking and presentation skills, especially when representing my country's culture and traditions to an international audience. More importantly, I gained confidence in expressing my ideas and standing up for what I believe in. The program encouraged us to ask questions, challenge assumptions, and explore new ways of thinking—skills that are essential not only for international dialogue but also for personal growth.

One of the most meaningful lessons I learned from JENESYS was the power of cultural exchange in building peace and understanding. Even though we were separated by screens and time zones, we were able to form connections that transcended borders. We laughed, learned, and sometimes struggled together, but in doing so, we built bridges of friendship and trust. I realized that cultural exchange is not about erasing differences, but about embracing them with curiosity and respect. It's about finding common ground while celebrating what makes each of us unique.

JENESYS also deepened my appreciation for my own Filipino identity. Sharing our local traditions, festivals, and values with other participants made me proud of my heritage. It reminded me that we all have something valuable to contribute to the global community, and that understanding others begins with understanding ourselves. The program encouraged me to be an ambassador of goodwill—not just by showcasing our culture, but by living its values of hospitality, resilience, and openness.

Now, months after the program has ended, I carry the lessons of JENESYS with me. I remain connected with several participants and continue to engage in conversations about culture, youth leadership, and social issues. More importantly, I am now more committed than ever to promoting intercultural dialogue and collaboration. I want to use what I've learned to support initiatives that bring people together, break down stereotypes, and build a more inclusive and peaceful world.

In conclusion, JENESYS was not just an online program—it was a gateway to understanding, friendship, and transformation.

I It showed me that even through a virtual screen, we can learn deeply, connect meaningfully, and grow as individuals and global citizens. JENESYS taught me that the youth have the power to shape the future through empathy, cooperation, and mutual respect. For me, JENESYS means opening minds, connecting hearts, and working together across borders for a brighter tomorrow.



The Dream Chaser Award

Name: GARCIA, Jannie Dell

Country: The Philippines

Year of Participation: 2018, Visited Tokyo, Yamagata

Affiliation : Polytechnic University of the Philippines / National Youth Commission (2025)

Indeed, Third Time's a Charm

Before I became part of the delegation, my perseverance and stubbornness made me earn the spot. It was a step-by-step process, participated in events for me to learn further, tried not once, not twice, but thrice to become an Exchange Student. I had to achieve it in the hardest way.

The first time I learnt about Jenesys Programme was way back 2014 when I was a junior high school student who took Nihongo class as my elective for two years.

For the first try in 2015, I was disqualified due to not being able to get a passport within the timeframe given to me. It was indeed disappointing and felt so sad after that, however, the optimism in me is still in there, intact, when Norman sensei told me that there is Jenesys Programme for University students, too. It will be a long wait but it can be an anticipated opportunity for me if I am still interested by that time.

And yes, I was still interested to be part of the programme, so for the second try in 2018, I submitted my entry, however, I was not qualified for the background that they were looking for which is a Media Student, and I, an International Relations student. I told myself; I know one day, I'll be part of this programme.

On January 2019, I saw another call for application, and this time, I know it was for me. Everything that the programme asked for in the background of participants fitted me: an International Relations student and must have studied Japanese language as part of curriculum. That's me! So, for the third time, I submitted my application and on 14 February 2019, I will never forget that Valentine's Day that I got accepted to be a participant in Jenesys 2018 Japanese Language Communication and Culture Exchange. Third time is indeed a charm. I worked hard to get this opportunity and so I will never take this for granted.

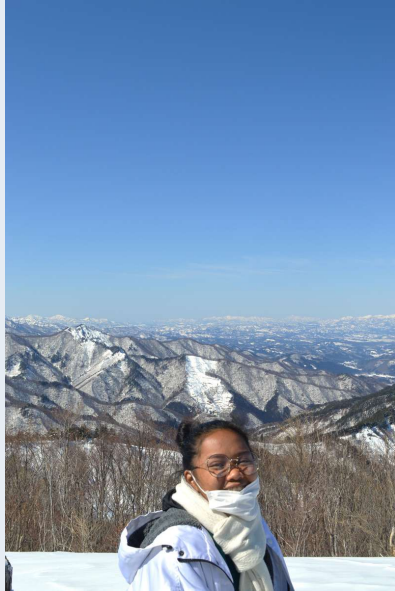
When I arrived in Japan, it felt like I came home to a place that I have never been before. There's the presence of solitude and orderliness that you can see in the streets of Tokyo.

It was transition of winter to spring season which is the best time to visit Japan. I saw lots of plum blossoms blooming and some sakura trees as well while I enjoy the cold weather.

From Tokyo, we moved up to the north, to Yonezawa, Yamagata. It is still winter in the mountainous town of Yonezawa and I loved that I was able to experience snowfall in March and the smell of winter still lingers to me. Yonezawa is a serene place, full of warm people despite being in a cold place. I experienced being more exposed to the Japanese culture that I used to study before, and now I learned so much about it.

With these experiences, what I loved the most about is the waste segregation system in Japan that made me realise that being proper can be adopted by the citizens if it is properly implemented by the government. The specific trash bins for certain wastes and the availability of the trash bins itself in the public is what makes Japan clean. This made me propose to write a policy briefing of a Philippine law RA 9003 or the Ecological Solid Waste Management Act of 2000, in which it became our batch's post-activity output to National Youth Commission of the Philippines. This paper was also presented to the Department of Sanitation and Cleanup Works of Quezon City (DSQC), the waste management department of Quezon City Hall to which I worked at in the latter as a Public Affairs Officer, trained barangay officers to issue Environmental Violation Receipt to individuals caught in the act violating the QC Environment Code, and assisted when conducting inspections in establishments and residential complaints that violated the said city code.

To sum up, it was a fruitful experience for me. It began to the 14 year old me, dreaming to become an Exchange Student in Japan, to 18 year old me achieving that dream and enjoying the exposure to Japanese culture and weather while trying to communicate in Nihongo as much as I can, as well loving the nature, cleanliness, and orderliness in Japan, and ended to 23 year old me working for my hometown's waste management department while incorporating what I have learnt in Japan. All of this is thanks to my optimism, perseverance, and never-ending love to learn.



Enjoying winter in the mountains of Yonezawa, Yamagata
(Tengendai and nearby hill in Tateishi)

The Power of Promise Award

Name: PHOMVICHIT Xaikhone

Country: Laos

Year of Participation: 2022, Visited Tokyo, Osaka, Wakayama

Affiliation : Wakayama University (2025)

A Journey Inspired by Kindness

In 2022, I joined the JENESYS Culture and Language Program. It was my first time visiting Japan—a country I had dreamed of for years as a Japanese language student. Walking through the streets of Tokyo felt like a dream. Everything—the people, the food, the sun, the sea, and the peaceful beauty of Wakayama—made me want to come back again someday.

The program took us to Tokyo, Osaka, and finally to Wakayama. One of the most memorable places we visited was 湯浅醤油九曜蔵 (Yuasa Soy Sauce Factory). The staff kindly guided us and even gave us free sauce as a gift. Just before we left, we wanted to say thank you. Mother Sorn, one of the JICE staff members from Laos who inspired me deeply, asked me to represent the group and express our gratitude in Japanese. But at that time, I lacked confidence in my Japanese skills and was afraid I wouldn't be able to express everyone's feelings properly. So, I couldn't do it. That moment stayed with me for a long time.

But Wakayama gave me more than regrets. It gave me memories and motivation. I still remember the beautiful sunset over the red bridge—an image I will always carry in my heart. Before we returned home, I looked back at the JICE staff who came to see us off at the airport. I told them, "I'll come back to Japan again." They smiled and said, "頑張ってください." That was the moment something changed inside me.

Back in Laos, I continued my studies in the Japanese Department at Savannakhet University. But this time, I studied with a purpose. I had something to aim for. I started working harder, remembering the promise I had made at the airport. And then, a golden opportunity came—the MEXT Scholarship. It was the bridge that could take me back to Japan and give me the chance to truly challenge myself.

I applied at the Embassy of Japan in Laos. After multiple exams and interviews, I waited anxiously for the results.

One day, during class, my teacher told me the good news: I had been selected as one of six students to receive the MEXT Scholarship. I was overjoyed.

But I could not have done it alone. I want to give heartfelt thanks to the Child's Dream Foundation, who has supported me since my first year at university. Their mission—"Educated and empowered people responsibly shaping and sustaining fair, just and healthy societies for generations to come"—has deeply inspired me. I also appreciate JICA Laos, whose support for education and development in Laos has opened many paths for students like me. Their efforts planted the seeds of possibility.

Now, I am back in Japan, studying as a Japanese Language and Culture Research Student at Wakayama University. It feels like coming full circle. Here, I have met amazing people—not only Japanese, but also fellow international students from Brazil, America, Sri Lanka, China, Korea, Vietnam, and Thailand. We share our stories, learn from one another, and grow together.

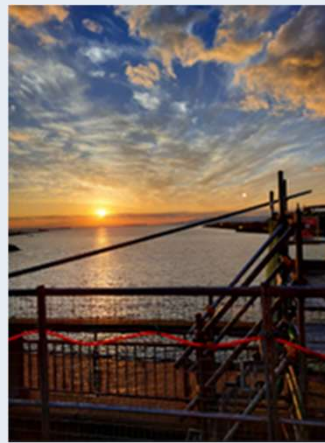
Living in Wakayama has become even more meaningful thanks to the support from WIN Concord. They are a home for those seeking connection, growth, and smiles. Their presence makes a big difference in my everyday life here.

After graduation from my home university, I hope to return and live in Wakayama again. But more than that, I want to focus on the opportunity I've received—the support, the kindness, the connections. I love both Japan and Laos, and I want to give back. My dream is to work with Japanese organizations that support Lao children and citizens, to help build a better future for our people. I want to be a bridge of love, understanding, and real action between our two countries.

頑張ります。



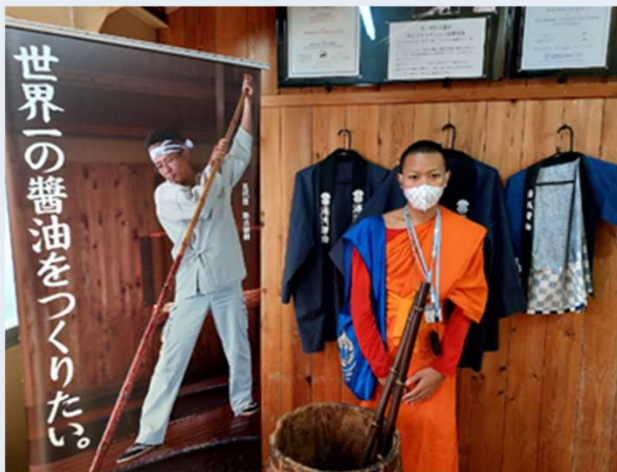
Wakayama Castle



Sunset in Wakayama



At the airport



Yuasa Soy Sauce Factory



JENESYS2022 Team



Spreading Hope – Child's Dream Foundation Scholarship, Laos



The Expressive Writing Award

Name: YANG, Shirley

Country: Singapore

Year of Participation: 2016, Visited Tokyo, Hokkaido

Affiliation : Temasek Polytechnic (2025)

My Many First Times

Before the JENESYS programme, my knowledge of Japan was pretty much what you'd expect from a typical teenager: anime, dramas, and J-pop. Japan, to me, was all sakura and Studio Ghibli, cute and polished. But through JENESYS, I discovered a very real and grounded Japan. One that is filled with warmth, discipline, and unexpected inspiration. Most importantly, the programme gave me a whole string of "first times" that still shape me today.

It was my first time seeing snow in Hokkaido. You'd think I'd be prepared, but no amount of drama-watching warned me about how snow feels when it sneaks into your shoes. Still, I was wide-eyed and thrilled. I was so happy eating ice cream in winter because it doesn't melt, no matter how long you take to eat it. It was also my first time wearing a kimono. It was so tight I could hardly breathe, I felt like a sushi roll! But I loved it anyway as it looked so elegant.

I also remember visiting a vocational school (Kitami Beauty College) where students were learning how to cut hair. I was fascinated. It was like being in a real-life beauty salon, and I gained a new respect for crafts I'd never thought deeply about. These days, I even get my hair cut at a Japanese salon in Singapore!

We also visited the Kitami Region Museum of Science, History and Art. It turned out to be a highlight. I was blown away by how Japan makes science so interactive and accessible. I originally thought I'd go into film. Spoiler alert: I didn't. Life rerouted me into an administration and operations career. But, weirdly enough, my JENESYS experience helped me here too.

JENESYS taught me about structure. The Japanese way of planning, executing, and even greeting people, it all felt so precise, yet human. Now, in my current job, we sometimes work with Japanese companies, and I find myself admiring their attention to detail and professionalism. Our team even helped organise a design masterclass featuring a Japanese designer and everything I'd learned during JENESYS came rushing back especially the punctuality and the calm chaos behind the scenes.

Since JENESYS, I've been more curious about Japanese culture, not just pop culture, but everyday life. I've started learning the language on Duolingo (yes, I'm the owl's hostage now), and I hope to take formal classes someday. Baby steps, as they say.

One of the best parts of the programme was seeing films made by people from different countries. Each film was like a window into someone's world. It was humbling and exciting.

Our team even won an Excellence Award at the film festival for a beautifully written short film by my teammate Cherlyn.



To be honest, I didn't celebrate our win as loudly as I expected to. Instead of jumping with joy, I felt a bit empty inside. Everyone's work was so good that I couldn't help but feel a little guilty, like the congratulations didn't quite belong to us alone. It was a strange emotional mix, pride and self-doubt.

Even though I haven't had the chance to return to Japan, mainly due to financial reasons and a family member's health issues, I still feel connected.

I follow Japanese news, watch content, and keep an eye out for opportunities. JENESYS didn't just give me a passport stamp; it gave me a lifelong curiosity and a sense of connection to a country I now see with far more depth.

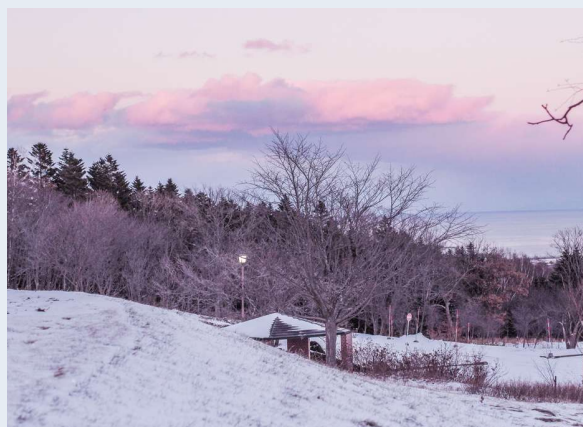
JENESYS has made me more open to the idea of international exchange. It's shown me how powerful it is to step outside your comfort zone, whether it's snow boots or Japanese salons. I now understand the value of cultural exposure, and I want to give back.

In the future, I hope to contribute to society by supporting exchange programmes like this, perhaps by mentoring participants or even helping organise such events. If someone like me who is awkward, curious, and usually the quiet one in group photos can be this impacted by a single trip, imagine how many more lives could be changed through similar opportunities.

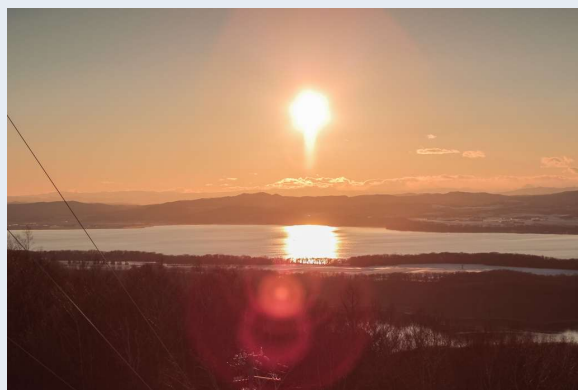
To me, JENESYS wasn't just a programme. It was a turning point. It gave me new firsts, new friends, and a new way of seeing the world. It wasn't just about Japan; it was about discovering who I could be when I stepped into something unfamiliar. And honestly? I can't wait for my next "first time."



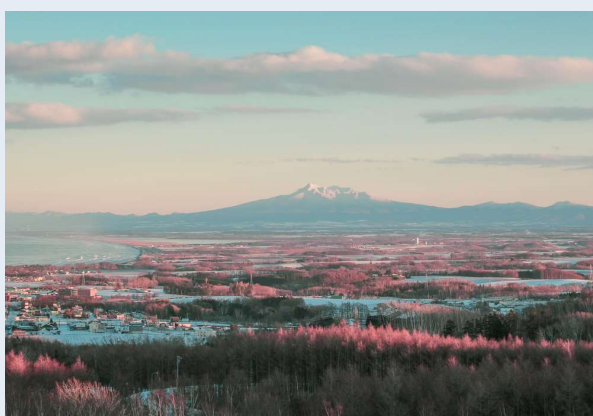
Award Ceremony with Takahiro Nishijima and my teammate Cherlyn



Pink Snow



Sunset Glow



Mount Rishiri in Winter

JENESYS ALUMNI ESSAY CONTEST 2025

“What JENESYS Means to Me” Award Winning Essay Collection

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