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The Red Brick Bulletin

Feature: International Affairs Division
JET Spotlight: Lê Minh Ngọc (Obihiro City CIR)



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The Red Brick Bulletin is published by CIRs (Coordinators for International Relations) working at the International Affairs Division of Hokkaido Government. But what exactly is this mysterious office? Let's find out!

Hokkaido Government



Let's start from the basics: Hokkaido Government is, as you might guess, responsible for the administration of the prefecture of Hokkaido. It has a total of 14 Subprefectural Bureaus serving the different areas of our large island, but the core of this governing body functions in the middle of Sapporo City. Where exactly? Well, many might associate the Government with the beautiful red brick building pictured on the left – that's where the name of this bulletin comes from, too! However, that auburn beauty is unfortunately the

Former Hokkaido Government Building: where we work now is a much drabber concrete block (see below).

The Hokkaido Government is big: within just our building, there are over 3500 Government employees. If you include the various branch offices, you'll find over 12 000 of us! One of the many departments of the Government is the Department of Policy Planning and Coordination, which is further divided into various bureaus, such as Bureau of Community Revitalization, Bureau of Transportation Policy, and Bureau of International Affairs. The last one is naturally where my workplace, the International Affairs Division, is located!



All issues of The Red Brick Bulletin can be accessed at https://www.pref.hokkaido.lg.jp/ss/tsk/akarenga_eng.html

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International Affairs Division

Most of the International Affairs Division operates within one office, located on the 4th floor of the main Hokkaido Government building. Here, we have as many as six different sections:

- International Relations
- Promotion of Internationalization
- Multicultural Coexistence
- International Planning
- Future Human Resources
- Planning Coordination

As the names suggest, the Division handles various tasks. Among these tasks are for example working with various institutions to support the foreign residents of Hokkaido, translating materials from other departments, and coordinating courtesy meetings between representatives of foreign regions and Hokkaido.

Much of the work to sustain Hokkaido's sister-state relationships is also handled by the International Affairs Division. Hokkaido currently has a sister-state relationship or similar cooperation with the following areas:



- Alberta (Canada)
- Sakhalin (Russia)
- Chiang Mai (Thailand)
- Hawaii (USA)
- Massachusetts (USA)
- Heilongjiang (China)
- Seoul (South Korea)
- South Gyeongsang (South Korea)
- Busan (South Korea)
- Jeju (South Korea)

About the Writer

My name is Armi Henriksson, and I am about to start my second year as a Hokkaido Government Coordinator for International Relations (CIR), hired through the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme. I first joined the JET Programme as an Assistant Language Teacher (ALT), and spent three years working in the high schools of Esashi and Hamatonbetsu in northern Hokkaido.

My role at the International Affairs Division is to be an “English-speaking CIR”, but I’m actually not from the Anglosphere: my home country is Finland. I have been happy to see Finnish culture, such as sauna and the yard game mölkky, gain more popularity in Hokkaido as of late!

Besides the usual CIR duties, such as checking translations, visiting schools, and holding English conversation classes, a big part of my job is being a Prefectural Advisor for other JET Programme participants in Hokkaido. Hokkaido currently has over 300 JET participants from 25 different countries, and we at the International Affairs Division aim to help them thrive on the island. This includes communicating with their contracting organizations, distributing information, and responding to queries. If you would like to know more about the JET Programme, please have a look at the “Hokkaido JET Spotlight” on the next page!



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HOKKAIDO JET SPOTLIGHT



There are over 300 participants of the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme who call Hokkaido home. They come from all over the world and they all have a very unique experience with the island. In this issue, we introduce one of the JET participants in Obihiro, the capital of Tokachi Subprefecture.



MEET LE MINH NGOC

Tell us a bit about yourself.

Hello everyone! My name is Lê Minh Ngọc, I'm from Vietnam and I work as a Coordinator for International Relations at the International Relations Division of Obihiro City. Please call me Ngọc. I came to Obihiro in October 2021, so I'm now a second year CIR.

I majored in Japanese Language and Culture at Hanoi University. During my studies, I came to Japan three times for training and exchange, but now is the first time I'm here for work, so I'm enjoying many new experiences.



What brought you to the JET Programme?

Since I studied Japanese for five years and had a really fun year as an exchange student in Tokyo, I always thought that I want to work in Japan after graduation. After hearing about the JET Programme from my friend, I quickly applied and was finally able to start working here.

What kind of work are you doing as a JET participant?

I'm currently working as an Obihiro City CIR at Tokachi International Relations Center. My main job is to create events where the foreign and Japanese residents of Tokachi can mingle. Some of the events that I'm currently in charge of are International Talk, Potluck Night and Multicultural Festival. Besides events, I also do translations and interpreting into Vietnamese and English, and visit elementary schools to introduce my country. Sometimes I also conduct cooking classes or cultural lectures.

I like talking with people, so getting to meet many people and hearing everyone's stories makes me really happy to be a CIR.

What in your experience are some of the differences between Japan and where you're from?

There are indeed many differences between Japan and Vietnam.

When I first came here, what I struggled with the most was the lack of napping culture. If you work in Vietnam, you will for sure take a nap every day. After finishing lunch, Vietnamese people spread sheets and mattresses on the floor, turn off the lights and sleep. With just 15 or 20 minutes of sleep, we can then keep working for the rest of the day without nodding off. Coming to Japan, I realized that none of my coworkers take naps, so I also decided to stop napping. At first, I was so sleepy in the afternoons that work was tough. I had to start drinking coffee and such to stay awake. Now that I'm used to this way of life, I'm totally fine even without naps though!

I have also realized something I really like about Japanese culture. When taking time off from work, it's okay to just write "personal reasons" – no one will come to demand a detailed explanation. When I wanted to take time off in Vietnam, I was often asked to provide the details. There was also an unspoken rule that reasons to take leave are divided into "acceptable" ones, like a headache or stomach ache, and

“unacceptable” ones, like traveling or meeting friends. This meant that I sometimes had to pretend I was sick if I had things to do, even if I didn’t want to lie. Here in Japan, I won’t be judged if I take time off for “personal reasons”, and I think that’s a wonderful thing.

Tell us of a memorable moment you’ve had in Hokkaido!

One of my most memorable experiences in Hokkaido was an event called Hùng Kings’ Festival in April 2022. This event was not related to my work, but rather just something that I planned and organized with the other Vietnamese people living in Tokachi. Before I came here, there were no Vietnamese events like this, but many of my fellow countrymen gave their support to make the event a success. As a result, we were able to create a warm atmosphere and celebrate a traditional Vietnamese festival, even if not actually in Vietnam. Since there are not many opportunities like this, I think this event was a valuable experience for not just myself and other Vietnamese people in Tokachi, but also the Japanese people who took part in it out of interest in our country.



What are your favorite things about Obihiro and the surrounding region?

I love the food, scenery and atmosphere of Tokachi. Cakes, meat and vegetables are all delicious here. As for scenery, places like the Naitai Highlands and Lake Shikaribetsu are very beautiful. Finally, what I love the most about living in Tokachi is the calm atmosphere. After living in Tokyo for a year and moving back to Vietnam, I suffered from reverse culture shock as I couldn’t get used to the noise of cars and motorcycles blasting their horns. The peaceful life here feels just right for me. Many say that this region is inconvenient, but now that I have a car, I am free to go wherever I want and don’t feel any inconvenience. I’m enjoying every day of my life here.

