

FELLOW FOLLOW UP:

Dr. Mohd Suhaimi Mohamad, UKM

**Recipient of JF-JSA-ASEAN Fellowship
Program (2025)**



Introduction & Background

Can you share a little about your academic background and current role in UKM?

I am currently a Senior Lecturer and Deputy Dean of Industrial and Community Engagement (HEJIM) at the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, UKM. I hold a PhD in Clinical Social Work from the University of Bristol and a Master's in Medical Social Work. Previously, I worked as a medical social worker at HCTM UKM for two years and taught at Kolej Islam Melaka before joining UKM in 2005. This is currently my 21st year with UKM.

How did you discover The Japan Foundation's Japanese Studies Fellowship Program and what drew your interest to apply? How was the applying process like, such as filling up all the Application Forms?

The Japan Foundation is a key collaborator for student mobility and faculty visits at UKM. In my role as Deputy Dean, I noticed their prestigious gateway for studying Japanese culture and language. Though I initially felt

hesitant due to age-related concerns, my colleague Dr. Malis encouraged me to apply and connected me with JFKL. Hearing success stories from previous fellows like Dr. Kuik and Dr. Ikbal also inspired me.

The application process requires clear, specialized, and practical proposals. JFKL provided strong support throughout the online submission process, leading to my selection for the FY2025 fellowship.

As per Japan Foundation's application process, you nominated Hokkaido University of Education as your host institution and supervisor. How did this collaboration take place?

Initially, I reached out to Prof. Masanobu Ohashi, whom I met in 2017. However, after he transitioned to a new university, he recommended his colleague, Prof. Naoki Nakamura at Hokkaido University of Education. Since Prof. Nakamura's expertise aligned with mine in mental health and child social work, JFKL approved the change of host institution and supervisor.



Dr. Suhaimi bonds with the students during his fellowship

What inspired you to research on Non-Suicidal Self-Injury (NSSI) and adolescent mental health?

Having completed a national grant project on NSSI among Malaysian youth in 2021, I wanted to benchmark adolescent mental health frameworks against East Asian models. Japan has long established evidence-based advocacy

and school mental health frameworks. Comparing Japan's system with Malaysia's helped me address research gaps and explore how Eastern cultural approaches tackle youth psychological distress.

Fieldwork Experience

What were some of the biggest challenges you faced while developing your research project before applying for the grant, during your fellowship period, and after returning to Malaysia?

Before applying for the fellowship, one of the key challenges was securing ethics approval, as my research focused on a sensitive topic—non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI)—within an international research context. During the fellowship, I navigated language barriers and strict privacy protocols related to mental health data. Fortunately, my supervisor assigned a trilingual Malaysian degree student, Husna, as my translator, which supported smoother communication. After returning to Malaysia, the focus shifted towards applying these insights locally. Japan's established support systems, such as school social workers, provide valuable references that Malaysia can learn from and adapt while continuing to strengthen its own mental health support framework.



Looking back, how has this fellowship experience contributed to who you are today as an educator, researcher, and individual?

It transformed my personal and professional approach. Coming from a Western-trained background that favours direct questioning, I learned to deeply respect Japanese hierarchy, communication protocols, and implicit signals. It taught me to listen more carefully and prioritize cultural respect in fieldwork.

How do you navigate the intersection of your role as a clinical researcher and being a guest within a foreign cultural context?

Extreme privacy surrounds mental health topics in Japan. My host supervisor acted as a vital gatekeeper, refining my daily interview questions, translating materials into English and Japanese, and leveraging his local network as a city council member to connect me with relevant health and educational professionals.



Can you describe what it was like conducting fieldwork in Japan's school-based services compared to Malaysia?

Japan integrates community support and school ecosystems tightly. Japanese teachers are trained to spot early signs of distress or school refusal (hikikomori). Furthermore, community-based NGO spaces called *Ibasho* (such as Mikanbako in Hakodate) provide non-judgmental, safe environments for youth to connect, cook, and interact. Malaysia's school system remains pragmatic, with limited counsellors and no equivalent *Ibasho* spaces.

**Ibasho: (place where you feel accepted, comfortable, and like you truly belong)*

Do you think physically being in Japan was essential for gaining a deeper understanding of your research topic?

Absolutely. Experiencing spaces like *Ibasho* centres firsthand allowed me to see how non-judgmental environments and social workers operate on the ground, which cannot be fully captured through online research.

Did you receive institutional or local support while in Japan, and how did that shape your field experience?

I had to adapt my methodology when engaging with Japanese practitioners. Rather than relying on spontaneous interviews, I adopted more structured, pre-planned protocols that respected organizational hierarchies and professional schedules. With the support of my host supervisor, Prof. Nakamura, I was able to expand my research beyond the initial four planned interviews to eight comprehensive sessions involving hospitals, schools, NGOs, and government-related organizations. Hokkaido University of Education also provided a dedicated workspace, which supported my research process. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and back translated using AI tools with supervisor verification to ensure accuracy.

What was the most memorable experience you had during your fellowship in Japan?

Building a close personal bond with my supervisor and his family. They shared local cultural activities, prepared halal meals for me, and took me on weekend outings. A standout moment was sipping coffee at an exclusive hillside café overlooking the sea around Hakodate, discussing social work policies and research over a peaceful sunset.



Interacting with students of Hokkaido University

What are the findings and current progress of your research under the Fellowship?

One comparative research paper on adolescent mental health and NSSI in Japan and Malaysia is currently undergoing peer review. I am also revising a proposal to adapt Japanese suicidal prevention and mental health modules (including the use of anime as discussion tools) for Malaysia.

Why does Japanese society possess a more cohesive framework for youth reintegration compared to local systems?

Japan's strength lies in community-level support through *Ibasho* spaces run by senior social workers, offering structured care outside the formal school system. Malaysia currently lacks these mid-level community spaces between home and hospital care.



Do the emotional catalysts for self-harm align across both nations, or are they shaped by cultural nuances?

While globalization and social media trigger similar pressures across borders, coping mechanisms and support structures differ. Japanese youth benefit from dedicated community spaces, whereas Malaysian youth face higher societal taboos and fewer specialized non-clinical support channels.

Did you observe a perceptible shift in how families and peers engage in dialogues about mental health?

In Malaysia, social media often displays ideal images while sweeping internal struggles under the rug. In Japan, privacy is strictly guarded, but youth often express themselves through alternative outlets like cosplay or anime narratives. Both societies need greater advocacy to normalize mental health conversations and encourage active listening from parents.

How has this environment informed your drafting of the Psychosocial Support Module for Malaysian schools?

It highlighted the urgent need for school social workers who can bridge schools, families, and community resources. I plan to pilot an Ibasho-concept space under UKM's Youth Empowerment Centre (PERKASA) in local PPR housing communities.

Experience with JF Grant

Did the fellowship open doors to academic or cultural networks in Japan with your work?

Yes. It expanded my professional network to Japanese practitioners, university lecturers, and fellow international scholars. I now advise and mentor younger colleagues on navigating the Japan Foundation application process and building host university connections.

What distinguishes JF's support from other academic or cultural grants?

The Japan Foundation provides established, flexible, and culturally grounded support mechanisms that truly facilitate international research collaboration.

What elements of the grant could be improved for future candidates?

Offering flexible age parameters for experienced research applicants. Expanding funding for multi-country, ASEAN-Japan comparative research grants over longer timeframes (e.g., one year) to measure policy and behavioural impacts effectively.

What would you highlight as its greatest strength to future applicants?

The structured application process and the deep, meaningful connections forged with host professors. My primary advice is to establish early, genuine contact with a prospective host supervisor in Japan and trust the application process.



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