

The Establishment of the Malaysia–Japan International Institute of Technology (MJIIT)
and the Honorary Doctorate Degree

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It is indeed a matter of great honor and delight that I have been selected to receive an honorary doctorate degree from the Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM). On November 15, 2025 at the Convocation ceremony held at UTM's main campus in Johor State, Malaysia, I had the privilege of receiving my degree from Her Majesty Raja Zarith Sofiah, the Queen of Malaysia and the Premaisuri of Johor, and currently the Chancellor of UTM.

I hesitate to boast, but honorary doctorates are usually conferred on foreign prime ministers, ministers, and university chancellors or presidents. It seems extremely rare for someone like me to receive such a distinction. Moreover, I was the only recipient of an honorary doctorate this year, and I was told that the decision was made with the approval of the Minister of Higher Education and the consent of the Chancellor of UTM, which made the honor feel all the more significant.

At the Convocation, other than myself four distinguished Malaysian professors were awarded the title of “Emeritus Professor.” The five of us sat on the stage, and our respective achievements were introduced one by one on the screen before Her Majesty the Queen presented us with diplomas and commemorative gifts. I was surprised and honored to be the only one invited to deliver a speech of gratitude to Her Majesty the Queen, to the dignitaries on stage, and to the audience.

Regarding UTM, during my four years as Ambassador to Malaysia, I had several opportunities to give special lectures. After that, except for the years affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, I have continued to provide special lectures and advice as a “UTM Distinguished Ambassador” and later as an “Adjunct Professor.”

However, the decisive factor in awarding me the honorary doctorate this time was my contribution to the establishment of the Malaysia–Japan International Institute of Technology (MJIIT), an institution under UTM that integrates both

undergraduate and graduate programs, supports robust research initiatives, and foster strategic linkages between Malaysia and Japan.

The Prime Minister Mahathir of Malaysia launched the “Look East Policy” soon after taking office in 1982. Its purpose was to have Malaysian youth learn Japan’s work ethics, technology, and management practices, and to apply them to Malaysia’s industrial development. Under this policy, the Malaysian government sponsored engineering-oriented students to study at Japanese universities spending the national budget.

In 2001, Prime Minister Mahathir told Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi that although Malaysia had been sending students to Japan under the Look East Policy, the high cost of living in Japan had become a budgetary constraint. He proposed that Japanese universities establish branch campuses in Malaysia as a means of reducing the cost of human resource development. This proposal triggered a series of bilateral government consultations. Although, an agreement was not reached for many years and the negotiations eventually stalled,

I arrived in Malaysia in 2007 and worked on the issue for four years. And finally, just two days before I left my post in April 2011, we were able to pledge Japanese yen loan assistance (approximately 6.7 billion yen) for the procurement of experimental equipment as part of the overall project cost of approximately 20.1 billion yen to establish MJIT. This remains one of my most unforgettable memories of my life.

At the point of my departure for my post in Malaysia in 2007, Vice-Minister Sasae told me, “Relations with Malaysia are extremely friendly, but the pending issue of a technical university has remained unresolved. I would very much like you to achieve this during your tenure.”

Immediately after my arrival, I visited the home of Minister of Higher Education Datuk Mustapa to propose forming a united front to advance the technical university concept, and he agreed. Thereafter, Minister Mustapa attempted twice to obtain Cabinet approval based on our discussions, but strong opposition, such as claims that Japan’s financial contribution too small or yen loans were too costly prevented progress.

And then, quite suddenly, a major problem emerged. While we had been spending time negotiating with the Malaysian government, the irony was that Malaysia's per-capita income had risen, causing the country to "graduate" from eligibility for yen loans. Since this could be a serious setback, I hastily petitioned the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Finance to keep Malaysia classified as a recipient of yen loans, and it was consented that Malaysia could be granted a special recognition as a "transitional graduation country" just for MJIIT case.

In parallel, in order to obtain the understanding of the Malaysian side, I personally decided to visit Prime Minister Najib at the Prime Minister's Office to persuade him. I also approached him several times, in the drawing room of international conferences in Kuala Lumpur and in the Assembly Hall during the UN General Assembly in New York, taking every opportunity to urge his support.

After I sensed no negative reaction, in 2010 we invited Prime Minister Najib to make an official visit to Japan. During his summit meeting with Prime Minister Hatoyama, the two leaders found common cause in the establishment of MJIIT. This was truly a bolt from the blue and became the decisive breakthrough for success.

The birth of MJIIT came after a difficult gestation lasting nearly ten years. Since the records had not been compiled until now, I would like to record the following concise account of the many twists and turns leading to its establishment and of its subsequent development.

1. Introduction

The Malaysia-Japan International Institute of Technology (MJIIT) was established to introduce Japanese engineering education philosophies and methods into Malaysia, and to cultivate the human resources necessary for the sustainable development of the Southeast Asian region.

MJIIT represents the culmination of Prime Minister Mahathir's "Look East Policy," launched in 1982, and serves as a symbol of Japan-Malaysia cooperation.

Prime Minister Mahathir valued Japanese ideals such as diligence, harmony, quality orientation, and on-site pragmatism, and sought to make them part of Malaysian nation-building. As an extension of this vision, the idea emerged to create a higher education institution in Malaysia that would offer Japanese-style education domestically, rather than relying solely on sending students to Japan.

Realizing MJIIIT required over ten years of intergovernmental negotiations and coordination in legal, financial, and cultural spheres. This process itself constitutes an important chapter in the history of Japan–Malaysia cooperation.

2. Origins of the Concept (2001–2002)

In December 2001 at the ASEAN Summit in Brunei, Prime Minister Mahathir formally proposed to Prime Minister Koizumi the establishment of a Japanese university branch campus in Malaysia. Following the 1997 Asian financial crisis, Malaysia found it increasingly difficult to continue sending young engineers to Japan, and thus considered establishing a local campus to embed Japanese-style education within the country.

At the summit meeting in Tokyo in January 2002, Mahathir reiterated his proposal, suggesting a framework whereby Malaysia would provide land and Japan would supply faculty and academic programs. Prime Minister Koizumi welcomed the idea and instructed the Ministry of Education and JICA to study it. This became the origin of the later MJIIIT concept.

However, since it could not be clearly decided whether Japan or Malaysia which side would bear the substantial construction and maintenance costs required for the buildings, the process ended up taking the next ten years.

3. Phase I: Japan Technical University (JTU) Concept (2002–2004)

Between 2002 and 2004, Malaysia's Ministry of Education formulated a plan to establish an independent institution called the Japan Technical University (JTU). A consortium of Japanese universities would form the faculty, and the curriculum would center on Japanese-language education, quality management, and production engineering.

However, bilateral negotiations faced several challenges:

- Japan's ODA system did not allow continuous funding of operational costs.
- Malaysia sought joint financing, but Japan lacked a legal framework for such arrangements.
- Japanese higher education law at the time did not envision overseas branch campuses.

As a result, the JTU concept made no progress. Nevertheless, basic surveys conducted by JICA experts during this period produced valuable materials on curriculum design, organizational structure, and human resource development models, which later culminated into the basic MJIT concept.

4. Phase II: Establishment of the Malaysia-Japan University Centre (MJUC) (2005–2008)

To advance the project gradually, both governments established the Malaysia-Japan University Centre (MJUC) in 2005. MJUC, with UTM Professor Marzuki as its Director, functioned as a preparatory organization to produce academic programs, research themes, and faculty development models.

Three professors were dispatched from Japan under the support of the Ministry of Education, initiating trial implementation of Japanese-style laboratory-based education (i-Kohza).

In 2007, a final report was issued outlining a ten-year plan to establish an independent university. However, concerns resurfaced within the Malaysian government regarding the unclear proportion of Japan's financial contribution, preventing formal approval. Consequently, MJUC concluded its activities before the university could be established.

5. Phase III: Administrative Reassignment and the MAJU Confusion (2008–2009)

In 2008, a Cabinet reshuffle under Prime Minister Abdullah transferred the university project from the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) to the Ministry of Entrepreneur and Cooperative Development (MECD). MECD proposed a new concept – the Malaysia Japan University (MAJU) to introduce Japanese-style education into existing vocational institutes. Although this plan of

using its campus with buildings even received Cabinet approval at one point, the Ministry of Finance refused to release the budget, and the project halted.

This confusion caused stakeholders in both countries to fear that the entire concept might collapse. Staff trained under MJUC and educational models developed there temporarily lost their roles.

6. Phase IV: Formulation and Realization of the MJIIT Concept (2009–2011)

When Prime Minister Najib Razak took office in 2009, the initiative was once again placed under the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE), but for a while no progress was made.

Around that time, UTM adopted a new university strategy to upgrade its Kuala Lumpur (KL) campus into an international campus and began redeveloping the KL campus. In this context, UTM Deputy-Vice-Chancellor Marzuki, taking into account the transfer of jurisdiction to MOHE, persuaded Vice-Chancellor Zaini and others, and proposed to MOHE and the Ambassador Horie to establish, though not a fully independent university, an institute under UTM: the Malaysia–Japan International Institute of Technology (MJIIT) by using a newly built building in the KL campus.

MOHE also supported this idea as a realistic and sustainable plan.

This plan combined:

- academic and research support from a consortium of Japanese universities
- technical cooperation from JICA
- a yen loan for experimental equipment provided by the Japanese government

In May 2010, Prime Minister Najib visited Japan and formally requested cooperation at his meeting with Prime Minister Hatoyama, who agreed. In December of the same year, the Malaysian Cabinet approved the establishment of MJIIT. In April 2011, the Japanese government approved the yen loan notification, and Ambassador Horie pledged support to establish MJIIT during his farewell call on Prime Minister Najib. In September 2011, MJIIT officially opened.

7. Development and Achievements After MJIIT's Opening

MJIIT has uniquely evolved while upholding Japanese educational principles. Along with several other faculties at UTM, MJIIT boasts a 100% employment rate and consistently ranks among the top three in securing competitive research funding and publishing in leading journals, earning high overall evaluations.

Education and Research System

MJIIT adopts the Japanese “laboratory-based education (i-Kohza)” model, allowing students to participate in research from early stages. It operates 20 i-Kohza, 76 laboratories, and two research centers (the Disaster Preparedness and Prevention Centre and the Advanced Research Centre), fostering international joint research.

Cultural and Language Education

The Japanese Language and Culture Centre at MJIIT offers a systematic educational approach that extends beyond mere linguistic proficiency. It is dedicated to instilling essential Japanese value, such as craftsmanship, on-site pragmatism, and collaborative teamwork, to provide students with a deeper understanding of the nation's culture and professional ethos.

Human Resource Development

As of 2025, MJIIT has approximately 750 undergraduates and 400 graduate students. More than 3,000 graduates now work in industry, government, and research institutions across Malaysia and abroad.

Notably, around 60 graduates, roughly 5% of all bachelor's degree recipients, have been hired by Japanese companies in Japan, demonstrating the high caliber of MJIIT's education.

Japanese faculty members numbered 20 at their peak in 2017, but localization has progressed and there are currently 5. Of the 105 total faculty members,

Japanese staff constitutes about 5% with an additional 20% of Malaysian faculty members who graduated from Japanese universities to continue the legacy of “Look East Policy”.

International Collaboration

A consortium of 29 Japanese universities and two research institutions continues to support MJIIT.

The Malaysia Japan Linkage Office (MJL) fosters academia–industry collaboration.

Moreover, the high reputation of MJIIT has prompted ASEAN universities including those in Laos, Cambodia, and Timor-Leste to begin collaborative programs.

8. Conclusion and Future Prospects

The realization of MJIIT is the fruit of persistent negotiation and mutual understanding between the two countries, and represents a successful model for how Japanese higher education can be shared and developed within ASEAN. The distinctive feature of this project is not merely technology transfer, but as Prime Minister Mahathir envisioned the “sharing of educational culture itself.”

Future priorities include:

- expanding faculty and student exchanges between Japan and Malaysia,
- enhancing research cooperation in emerging fields such as AI, environment, and disaster management,
- increasing the intake of students from other ASEAN countries,
- establishing an autonomous financial base.

Furthermore, discussions have begun on “MJIIT 2.0,” which envisions advancing Malaysian industry with the highly skilled human resources cultivated by MJIIT, expanding diploma programs consistent with Japanese-style education, and possibly reaching into primary and secondary education.

As an embodiment of the Look East Policy, MJIIT is expected to continue serving as a hub for deepening Japan–Malaysia cooperation and contributing to sustainable development across Asia.

9. Closing Remarks

The twists and turns leading to the establishment of MJIIT, its subsequent development, and the reason of my receiving the honorary doctorate are as described above.

None of this would have been possible without the dedicated efforts of the many individuals involved from both governments, the three professors of the consortium university who created the foundational curriculum at MJUC, the numerous Japanese and Malaysian teachers who taught at MJIIT after its establishment, and the JICA staff who skillfully coordinated all aspects of the project. I am firmly convinced that without their contributions, MJIIT would not have achieved the remarkable growth it enjoys today.

I would like to take this opportunity to express my deepest appreciation to all those contributors.

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