

# Bilateral Relations Between Indonesia-Japan in Improving the Quality of Education in Indonesia

*Hubungan Bilateral Indonesia-Jepang*

*dalam Meningkatkan Mutu Pendidikan di Indonesia*

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## Riwayat Artikel

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## Abstract

This study aims to explain the contributions of state and non-state actors in improving the quality of education in Indonesia, focusing on Japan as the state actor and The Japan Foundation as the non-state actor. Previous studies have mainly emphasized the economic and political aspects of Indonesia-Japan relations, while the educational dimension has received relatively less attention. Therefore, this study addresses that gap by analyzing education as an instrument of soft power and institutional coordination in bilateral relations. A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining a survey of 100 International Relations students, interviews, and literature review. The analysis is grounded in Nye's soft power theory and institutional coordination framework. The findings reveal that Japan's contribution to Indonesia's education sector is realized through educational, financial, and technological assistance, as well as scholarship programs. Meanwhile, The Japan Foundation fosters a cultural and learning ecosystem through language courses, exchange programs, and the promotion of popular culture. These findings emphasize that the collaboration between state and non-state actors not only strengthens the quality of education in Indonesia but also represents an effective model of educational diplomacy in international relations. The academic contribution of this study lies in emphasizing education as a strategic soft power instrument to deepen bilateral relations and build long-term strategic trust.

**Keywords:** Quality Education; Indonesia; Japan; Soft Power; The Japan Foundation

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## Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menjelaskan kontribusi aktor negara dan non-negara dalam meningkatkan kualitas pendidikan di Indonesia, dengan fokus pada peran Jepang sebagai aktor negara dan The Japan Foundation sebagai aktor non-negara. Kajian terdahulu umumnya menekankan aspek ekonomi dan politik dalam hubungan bilateral Indonesia-Jepang, sementara dimensi pendidikan masih relatif kurang mendapat perhatian. Karena itu, penelitian ini berupaya mengisi kesenjangan tersebut dengan mengkaji pendidikan sebagai instrumen soft power dan koordinasi kelembagaan dalam hubungan bilateral kedua negara. Metode penelitian yang digunakan adalah metode campuran, dengan menggabungkan survei terhadap 100 mahasiswa Hubungan Internasional, wawancara mendalam, dan telaah

*pustaka. Analisis dilakukan menggunakan kerangka teori soft power (Nye) dan koordinasi kelembagaan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kontribusi Jepang dalam peningkatan mutu pendidikan di Indonesia diwujudkan melalui bantuan pendidikan, finansial, teknologi, serta program beasiswa. Sementara itu, The Japan Foundation berperan membangun ekosistem budaya dan kebiasaan belajar melalui kursus bahasa, program pertukaran, serta promosi budaya populer. Temuan ini menegaskan bahwa kolaborasi antara aktor negara dan non-negara tidak hanya memperkuat mutu pendidikan di Indonesia, tetapi juga merepresentasikan model diplomasi pendidikan yang relevan dalam studi hubungan internasional. Kontribusi akademik dari penelitian ini terletak pada penekanan pendidikan sebagai instrumen soft power yang efektif dalam memperdalam hubungan bilateral serta membangun kepercayaan strategis jangka panjang.*

**Kata Kunci:** Kualitas Pendidikan; Indonesia; Jepang; Soft Power; The Japan Foundation

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## Introduction

Foreign policy is often perceived as a domain that focuses only on issues of high politics such as security, economics, and diplomacy. In the contemporary global order, issues that are usually classified as low politics such as education, culture, and social interaction have become increasingly central to the way states pursue their national interests. These dimensions complement traditional political and economic cooperation while also helping to build long term legitimacy and trust between nations. Joseph Nye highlights that the effectiveness of a country's foreign policy cannot rely solely on hard power instruments such as military strength or economic pressure. Instead, the use of soft power that emerges from cultural attraction, values, and education provides a more sustainable and persuasive means of influencing others.<sup>1</sup> Education therefore has become one of the most important tools of soft power because it engages directly with people to people contact, capacity building, and the cultivation of shared understanding that lasts over generations.

Hans Morgenthau in his classical theory of international politics emphasizes that the essence of power lies in the ability of one state to influence the behavior of others.<sup>2</sup> Although power is often associated with military and political capabilities, influence can also be realized through nonmilitary instruments. Education serves this function effectively by creating channels for knowledge transfer, exchange of ideas, and cultural engagement. In the case of Indonesia and Japan, education has been transformed from a social sector into a strategic instrument that shapes perceptions, fosters goodwill, and builds mutual trust beyond the limits of formal political negotiations.

The history of Indonesia and Japan relations demonstrates both complexity and resilience. Diplomatic ties were formally normalized in 1958 following Japan's colonial presence in Indonesia during World War II. This shared history was later complicated by the Malari Incident in 1974 when anti-Japanese protests broke out in Jakarta as a reflection of domestic dissatisfaction with what was seen as Japan's economic dominance. Despite these tensions, both countries gradually rebuilt their relationship through cooperation across multiple sectors. This shows how negative historical experiences are not necessarily permanent obstacles but can be addressed and balanced through constructive engagement in education and cultural exchange.

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1 Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2008), 31.

2 Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2010), 165.

The perception of Japan among Indonesian students further illustrates this shift. A survey conducted by the Indonesian City Diplomacy Academic Community (KADKI) in 2024 among one hundred International Relations students found that ninety nine percent of respondents were aware of Japan's colonial history in Indonesia and ninety eight percent recognized the existence of diplomatic ties between the two nations.



Source: KADKI, 2024

**Figure 1.** Knowledge of Japan's colonial history and Indonesia–Japan diplomatic relations among International Relations students.

These findings suggest that awareness of historical legacies does not necessarily create negative perceptions. Japan is instead widely regarded as a strategic partner that contributes to education, culture, and technology in Indonesia. This indicates that soft power strategies such as scholarships, cultural promotion, and educational exchange have successfully reshaped Japan's image and created a new basis of cooperation.

Japan's reputation as a country with a highly advanced education system, particularly in science, technology, and engineering, has been central to building its appeal. Programs such as the *Monbukagakusho* or MEXT scholarship scheme and various initiatives by the Japan International Cooperation Agency have enabled Indonesian students to pursue higher education and professional training in Japan.<sup>3</sup> The Japan Foundation has also played a vital role in promoting Japanese language education, facilitating cultural exchange, and expanding the ecosystem for Japanese studies in Indonesia. By combining the work of both state actors and non-state actors, Japan has created a multilayered approach that strengthens bilateral relations while improving the quality of education in Indonesia.

Nevertheless, existing academic studies on Indonesia and Japan relations still focus largely on issues of economic cooperation, infrastructure development, and political agreements<sup>4</sup>. Research that places education at the center of bilateral relations is still limited, and the role of soft power in shaping long term trust has not been fully examined. Even though MEXT scholarships, JICA training, and Japan Foundation activities are well known, they are rarely analyzed in connection with theoretical approaches such as Nye's concept of soft power or frameworks of institutional coordination.

This research seeks to address this gap by analyzing the role of education in Indonesia and Japan relations with particular attention to the contributions of both state and non-state actors. It aims to explain how these actors improve the quality of education in Indonesia, how Japan uses education as a soft power instrument, and how institutional coordination sustains bilateral cooperation in this field. By addressing these questions, this study seeks to reaffirm the

<sup>3</sup> Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), *Indonesia's Development and Japan's Cooperation: Building the Future Based on Trust* (Tokyo: JICA, 2018): 5-18.

<sup>4</sup> R. Seniwati, M. A. Ranti, O. N. Guntur, and I. A. Badiu., "Kerjasama Jepang dan Indonesia," *Hasanuddin Journal of International Affairs* 1, no. 2 (2021): 124-133.

position of education as a strategic pillar in bilateral diplomacy and to contribute to the broader academic debate on soft power in international relations.

## Literature Review

The existing body of scholarship on Indonesia and Japan relations has generally concentrated on political and economic aspects, while the dimension of education has received limited systematic analysis. Most studies describe cooperation in terms of trade, infrastructure development, and investment, thereby underestimating the importance of education as an instrument of diplomacy. Nye conceptualizes soft power as the ability of a country to achieve desired outcomes in world politics through attraction rather than coercion, stressing that culture, political values, and foreign policies that are perceived as legitimate can strengthen influence.<sup>5</sup> In this framework, education is an essential part of cultural attraction because it enables a country to shape the outlook and skills of future leaders and professionals in partner states. Morgenthau, although writing within the realist tradition, acknowledges that the essence of power lies in the capacity to influence others, and that this influence does not have to be exercised through coercive means.<sup>6</sup> When applied to the field of education, these perspectives underscore the importance of scholarships, exchange programs, and institutional cooperation as instruments that foster long term trust and legitimacy in international relations.

From a historical perspective, educational cooperation between Indonesia and Japan has evolved in parallel with broader diplomatic developments. Putralisindra notes that the 1958 cultural exchange agreement became a milestone that institutionalized cooperation in education and culture.<sup>7</sup> Through this agreement, both countries facilitated language education, student exchange, and cultural programs that laid the foundation for deeper cooperation in later decades. Seniwati, Ranti, and Guntur argue that the 1972 technical cooperation agreement further expanded collaboration into the field of higher education and technical training.<sup>8</sup> This agreement reflected Japan's recognition that investing in human resource development would generate long term benefits for both countries. These studies make important contributions by documenting the historical trajectory of cooperation, yet they remain largely descriptive. They explain the events and agreements but do not provide deeper theoretical engagement with concepts such as soft power or institutional coordination.

In addition to state driven initiatives, Japan has consistently relied on agencies and institutions to implement its educational diplomacy. The Japan International Cooperation Agency has been at the forefront of providing scholarships, training programs, and technical assistance that have directly contributed to Indonesia's capacity building.<sup>9</sup> JICA's work in supporting universities, professional training, and community development has been essential in strengthening bilateral relations at the societal level. At the same time, the Japan Foundation has played a critical role as a non-state actor that promotes Japanese language education, organizes cultural events, and develops exchange programs. The foundation's work creates an enabling environment in which Indonesian students and academics can interact with Japanese culture and values, thus reinforcing the soft power of Japan. Despite their importance, academic discussions on

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5 Nye, *Soft Power*, 11.

6 Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 165.

7 D. Putralisindra, "Upaya Diplomasi Kerjasama Kebudayaan Indonesia dan Jepang Guna Meningkatkan Sektor Pariwisata," *Kronik Journal of History Education and Historiography* 1, no. 2 (2017): 35-42.

8 R. Seniwati, "Kerjasama Jepang dan Indonesia, 124-133.

9 Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), *Indonesia's Development and Japan's Cooperation*, 5-18.

Indonesia and Japan relations rarely give theoretical weight to the contributions of non-state actors, leaving a gap in understanding the multilayered nature of cooperation.

Comparative perspectives in the literature reveal that other Asian countries such as China and South Korea also employ education as a diplomatic tool to expand influence in Southeast Asia. By offering scholarships, establishing cultural centers, and supporting language education, these countries project their image as partners in development. However, research on Indonesia and Japan does not sufficiently address how Japan's educational initiatives compete with or complement the efforts of these regional actors. This absence in the literature is significant because it limits the understanding of how Japan positions itself strategically in a competitive regional environment where education and culture are increasingly used as tools of diplomacy.

Therefore, the literature provides valuable insights into the historical development and descriptive aspects of educational cooperation between Indonesia and Japan, but it falls short of critically analyzing education as a central pillar of bilateral diplomacy. There is little discussion of how Japan's initiatives in education represent a deliberate use of soft power to cultivate long term trust and strategic partnership. Moreover, the coordination between state actors such as the Japanese government and non-state actors such as the Japan Foundation is rarely addressed in a comprehensive manner. This study responds to these gaps by applying theoretical frameworks of soft power and institutional coordination to examine how education functions as an effective instrument in Indonesia and Japan relations. By doing so, it seeks to enrich the academic debate and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the role of education in bilateral diplomacy.

## Methodology

This research applies a qualitative approach that is supported by quantitative elements in order to obtain a comprehensive understanding of educational cooperation between Indonesia and Japan. The qualitative approach is essential for examining the meaning of policies, programs, and institutional coordination, while the quantitative element strengthens the findings with empirical evidence drawn from survey data. Creswell notes that the combination of qualitative and quantitative methods provides a more complete perspective on social phenomena because qualitative research captures context and meaning whereas quantitative research presents measurable trends.<sup>10</sup> By using this approach the study achieves analytical depth while ensuring empirical validity.

The object of this study is the contribution of state and non-state actors in the educational dimension of Indonesia and Japan relations. The Japanese government is considered a representative of state actors through institutions such as the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology as well as the Japan International Cooperation Agency. The Japan Foundation represents a non-state actor that plays a central role in promoting language learning, cultural activities, and academic exchange. These actors are analyzed with reference to Nye's theory of soft power and the framework of institutional coordination in order to explain how their contributions complement one another in improving the quality of education in Indonesia.<sup>11</sup>

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10 John W. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2014), 4-5.

11 Nye, *Soft Power*, 11.



The data used in this study were collected through three techniques, namely surveys, interviews, and literature review. The survey data were obtained from the Indonesian City Diplomacy Academic Community in 2024, which involved one hundred International Relations students from several universities in Indonesia. The questionnaire examined student awareness of historical relations, knowledge of scholarship opportunities, and perceptions of Japan as an educational partner. Interviews were conducted with selected academics and practitioners involved in Japan related educational programs in order to gain deeper insights into the practical implementation of cooperation. Secondary data were drawn from books, peer reviewed journals, government documents, and reports published by institutions such as the Japan International Cooperation Agency and The Japan Foundation. The use of multiple sources enhances the credibility of the study, since Denzin argues that triangulation reduces the risk of bias in qualitative research.<sup>12</sup>

The population of this research is International Relations students in Indonesia, who represent the younger generation of scholars and future practitioners in international affairs. While the survey respondents were drawn from several universities in Indonesia, they are considered representative of broader perspectives within the discipline. This focus is important because students in International Relations are expected to possess awareness of historical legacies, contemporary diplomacy, and educational opportunities that shape bilateral relations. Their perceptions provide valuable evidence regarding how Japan's educational initiatives are understood and evaluated by Indonesian youth who are most likely to participate in academic and professional exchanges in the future.<sup>13</sup>

The data analysis combined descriptive and interpretive techniques. Descriptive analysis was applied to present the survey results and factual information regarding educational cooperation, while interpretive analysis was applied to identify patterns, meanings, and theoretical implications. The analysis was carried out with direct reference to the research questions, namely how state and non-state actors contribute to education, how education functions as an instrument of soft power, and how institutional coordination supports the sustainability of bilateral cooperation. Through this method the study not only describes educational programs but also interprets their significance in the broader framework of international relations.

## Japan's Contribution to Education in Indonesia

Education has long been a priority in the cooperation between Indonesia and Japan. Since the normalization of diplomatic relations in 1958, Japan has consistently identified education as one of the most effective pathways to strengthen its ties with Indonesia. Unlike sectors such as trade or defense, which are often influenced by political and economic fluctuations, education is perceived as a stable and long term investment. By focusing on human resource development, Japan has been able to build relationships that go beyond the state to state level and extend into the societal and generational dimensions.<sup>14</sup>

Japan's role in Indonesia's education sector has been institutionalized through two main actors, namely the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) and the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA). MEXT has for decades offered scholarships

12 Norman K. Denzin, *The Research Act: A Theoretical Introduction to Sociological Methods* (New Brunswick: Aldine Transaction, 2009), 291-294.

13 Creswell, *Research Design*, 199-201.

14 Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), *Education in Japan: Statistics and Reports 2019-2022* (Tokyo: MEXT, 2022), 45-46.

for Indonesian students to pursue higher education in Japan, covering undergraduate, master's, and doctoral levels. These scholarships are not only financial assistance but also opportunities for cross cultural learning, access to advanced technology, and global networking. JICA has specialized in technical cooperation that often focuses on vocational training, teacher exchange, and institutional strengthening in key areas such as health, governance, and environmental management.<sup>15</sup> The combination of academic scholarships and technical programs illustrates how Japan has developed a comprehensive approach to supporting Indonesia's human resource development.

Awareness of these programs is high among Indonesian students, particularly those in International Relations. Figure 2 demonstrates that more than eighty percent of students surveyed acknowledged JICA's presence<sup>16</sup>. This high level of awareness is significant because it reflects that Japan's educational diplomacy is visible and widely recognized among young people who are future policymakers, diplomats, and scholars. Awareness at this level also shows that Japan's institutional initiatives are not only functioning but also successfully shaping perceptions of bilateral cooperation at the grassroots level of academia.



Source: KADKI, 2024

**Figure 2.** Awareness of Indonesian International Relations Students of JICA

Beyond recognition, students also associate JICA with tangible benefits. Figure 3 shows that more than seventy percent of respondents identified JICA as a provider of scholarships and educational cooperation.<sup>17</sup> This figure highlights that Japan's involvement is not merely symbolic but linked to direct opportunities that influence students' academic and professional trajectories. For many Indonesian students, scholarships from Japan represent one of the few pathways to access advanced education abroad, particularly in fields such as technology, medicine, and international governance. This means that Japan is not only building its image but also addressing a gap in Indonesia's education system by expanding access to higher quality learning opportunities.

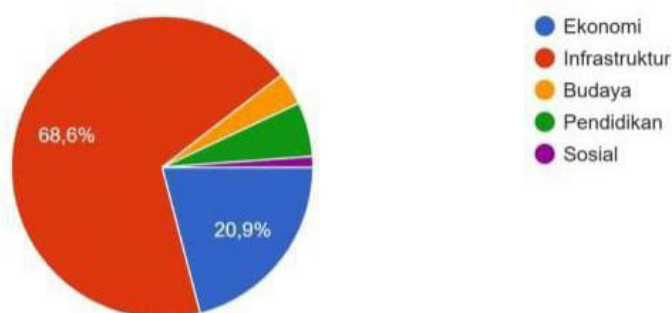
<sup>15</sup> Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), *Indonesia's Development and Japan's Cooperation*, 5-18.

<sup>16</sup> KADKI, *Survey on Perceptions of Indonesian International Relations Students toward Japan 2024* (Jakarta: Komunitas Akademik Diplomasi Kota Indonesia, 2024).

<sup>17</sup> Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), *Annual Report 2020* (Tokyo: JICA, 2020), 38-40.

### Apa bentuk kontribusi JICA di Indonesia?

86 jawaban



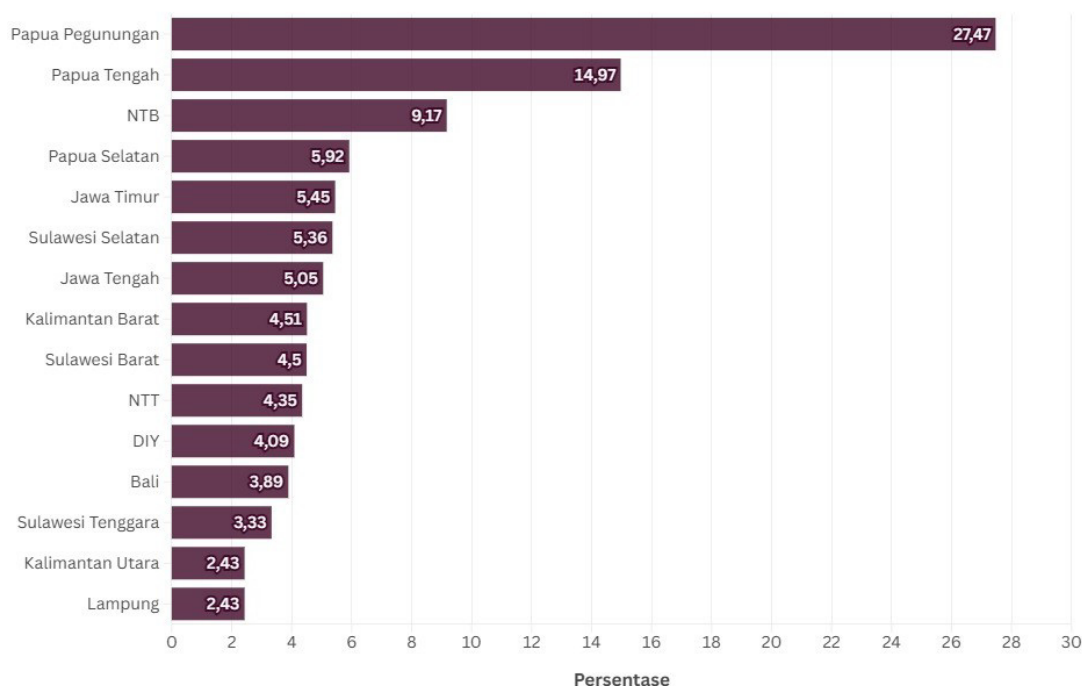
Source: KADKI, 2024

**Figure 3.** Perception of JICA's Role in Educational Cooperation

At the same time, Indonesian students remain highly aware of the challenges within their own education system. Figure 4 reveals that a significant number of respondents recognized the persistence of illiteracy in Indonesia. While national literacy rates have improved over the decades, the fact that students still highlight illiteracy shows that they view it as a fundamental barrier to inclusive development. The persistence of illiteracy, particularly in rural and marginalized regions, suggests that Indonesia's education system struggles not only with quality but also with equitable access.

### Provinsi dengan Angka Buta Aksara Tertinggi di Indonesia

(2024)



Sumber: Badan Pusat Statistik

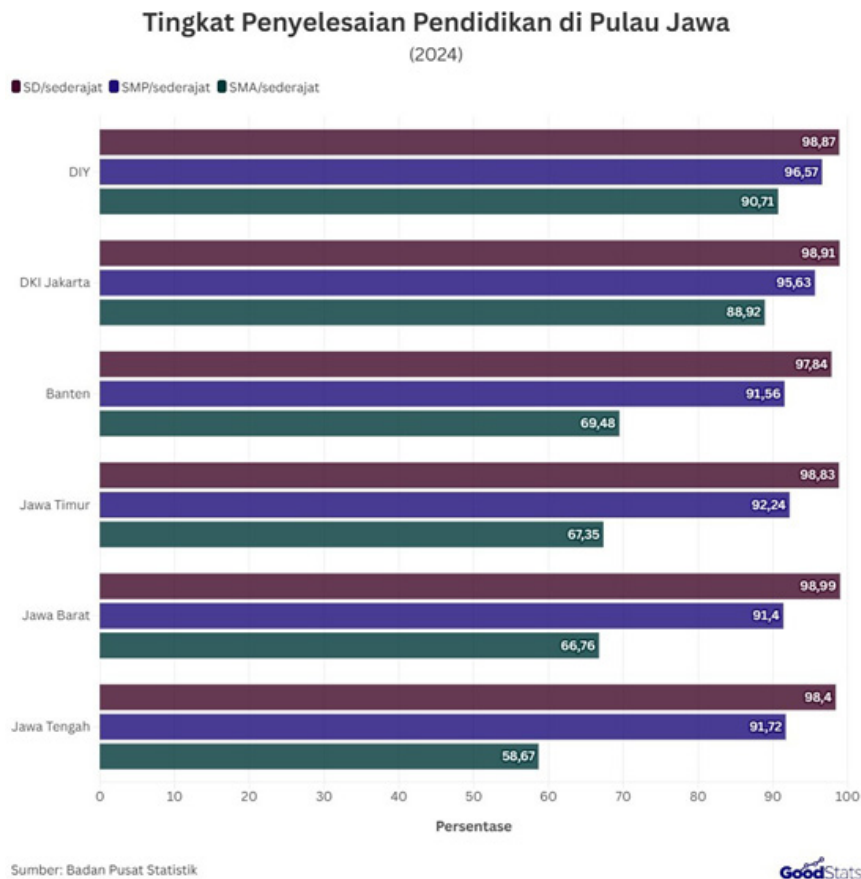
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Source: BPS, 2024

**Figure 4.** Data on Provinces with the Highest Illiteracy Rates in Indonesia



The awareness extends beyond access to education, as students are also critical of Indonesia's international performance. Figure 5 illustrates that more than sixty percent of students acknowledged Indonesia's poor results in the program for International Student Assessment (PISA).<sup>1819</sup> These results consistently show Indonesia lagging OECD averages in reading, mathematics, and science. Student awareness of these outcomes demonstrates their engagement with global benchmarks and their concern that Indonesia's education system is not adequately preparing the country to compete on an international scale. PISA performance is thus interpreted not simply as numbers but as a reflection of systemic weaknesses in teaching methods, infrastructure, and educational governance.



Source: BPS, 2024

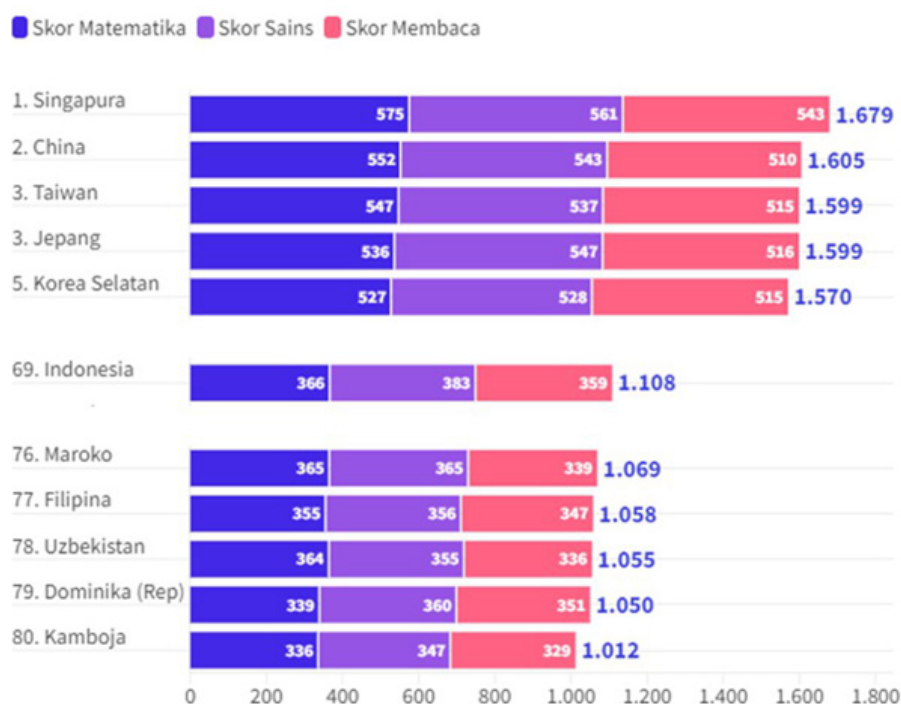
**Figure 5.** Data on education completion rates in Java

In addition, Figure 6 demonstrates that more than seventy percent of respondents expressed concerns about the overall quality of education in Indonesia. Their concerns include inequality in education between urban and rural areas, insufficient teaching materials, outdated curricula, and lack of investment in modern facilities. These responses suggest that Indonesian students are acutely aware of the systemic challenges facing their country and understand how these issues may hinder national development. Importantly, their criticism of domestic education does not diminish but rather amplifies their appreciation of Japan's contributions, as Japan is seen as helping to address these very gaps.

18 Badan Pusat Statistik, *Statistik Pendidikan Indonesia 2021* (Jakarta: BPS, 2021);

19 A. H. Prasastiwi, "Posisi Indonesia di PISA 2022, Siapkah untuk 2025?" GoodStats, 2024.

## Skor PISA Tahun 2022



Sumber: OECD 2022

GoodStats

Source: BPS, 2021

**Figure 6.** Concerns of Students on the Quality of National Education

The juxtaposition of Figures 4 through 8 is telling. On one hand, Indonesian students recognize and critique the structural problems within their education system, including illiteracy, poor international performance, and systemic inequality. On the other hand, they strongly identify Japan through institutions such as JICA and MEXT as a credible partner providing solutions in the form of scholarships, technical training, and institutional cooperation. This dual recognition explains why Japan's soft power strategy in education has been effective. As Nye argues, soft power is most influential when foreign actors respond to the needs of the target society.<sup>20</sup> Japan's approach resonates with Indonesian students because it directly addresses their concerns while simultaneously building a positive and trustworthy image of Japan.

Moreover, Japan's educational initiatives reflect elements of liberal institutionalism as they create predictable frameworks of cooperation, reduce mistrust, and institutionalize interaction between societies. Programs such as scholarships and joint research do not only benefit individual participants but also build institutional ties between universities, ministries, and civil society actors in both countries. These ties form the foundation of a durable partnership that can withstand shifts in political and economic relations.

In conclusion, Japan's contribution to education in Indonesia is highly visible, widely valued, and strategically aligned with the country's developmental priorities. The high levels of awareness and positive evaluations reflected in Figures 2 through 6 confirm that Japan's initiatives are not perceived as symbolic gestures but as practical, impactful, and legitimate forms of cooperation. Education thus emerges as a cornerstone of Indonesia-Japan relations, demonstrating the power of soft diplomacy to strengthen bilateral ties while addressing real domestic needs.

<sup>20</sup> Nye, *Soft Power*, 111.

## The Role of The Japan Foundation

The Japan Foundation plays an essential role as a non-state actor in the development of Indonesia-Japan relations, particularly in the field of education and culture. Its activities are different in nature from those of the Japanese government or JICA because they focus not on direct technical assistance but on creating cultural familiarity, social connections, and intellectual exchange. This dimension is crucial because cultural and linguistic understanding provides the foundation upon which broader political and economic cooperation can grow. The Japan Foundation therefore contributes to Japan's soft power by cultivating long term interest and trust among Indonesian society.

The most significant contribution of the Japan Foundation has been in the promotion of Japanese language education. Since 2015, the Foundation has expanded its cooperation with schools, universities, and language training centers across Indonesia. It supports the development of curricula, supplies teaching materials, and organizes teacher training programs to enhance pedagogical capacity. One of the most important activities facilitated by the Foundation is the Japanese Language Proficiency Test, which is conducted annually in several Indonesian cities.

<sup>21</sup> The growing number of participants in this examination reflects the increasing desire among Indonesian students to learn Japanese, whether to pursue further studies in Japan, to build professional opportunities, or to engage with Japanese culture. This demand demonstrates the long term effectiveness of the Foundation's strategy of cultural engagement.

Beyond language education, the Japan Foundation organizes a wide variety of cultural programs that attract audiences from different age groups and social backgrounds. These include Japanese film festivals, cultural exhibitions, music and dance performances, and art collaborations. By showcasing both traditional practices such as tea ceremonies and calligraphy as well as modern cultural products like anime, manga, and J pop, the Foundation ensures that Japanese culture remains appealing to Indonesian youth. <sup>22</sup> These programs are not limited to entertainment but function as platforms for dialogue and understanding. They allow Indonesians to encounter Japan not only as an economic and political partner but also as a cultural community with shared human values.

The Foundation is also active in strengthening academic collaboration between Indonesia and Japan. It provides funding for Japanese studies programs, facilitates joint research, and supports academic conferences that bring together Indonesian and Japanese scholars. Since 2017, the Foundation has co organized seminars on cultural policy, higher education, and area studies in collaboration with leading Indonesian universities. <sup>23</sup> These initiatives contribute to the development of Japanese studies in Indonesia and ensure that future generations of Indonesian academics remain engaged with Japanese society. Academic cooperation of this kind also serves as a mechanism for building mutual trust, since it enables open intellectual exchange on issues of common concern.

From a theoretical perspective, the Japan Foundation's activities illustrate the importance of soft power in bilateral diplomacy. Nye defines soft power as the capacity to influence others through attraction rather than coercion, and culture is one of its most important sources.<sup>24</sup> By

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<sup>21</sup> The Japan Foundation, *Annual Report 2019* (Tokyo: The Japan Foundation, 2019), 52-55.

<sup>22</sup> The Japan Foundation, *Activity Report: Japanese Language Education in Indonesia 2017-2021* (Jakarta: The Japan Foundation Jakarta Office, 2021), 10-14.

<sup>23</sup> The Japan Foundation, *Japan Foundation Asia Center Report 2017* (Tokyo: The Japan Foundation, 2017).

<sup>24</sup> Nye, *Soft Power*, x.

expanding Japanese language education, supporting cultural programs, and facilitating academic collaboration, the Japan Foundation makes Japan more attractive in the eyes of Indonesian students, professionals, and the wider public. This attractiveness enhances Japan's ability to sustain positive relations with Indonesia in the long term. The cultivation of soft power through cultural institutions is therefore an integral part of Japan's overall diplomatic strategy.

Equally important is the principle of institutional coordination. The Japan Foundation complements the work of Japanese state agencies such as MEXT and JICA by focusing on areas that they do not directly address. Whereas MEXT emphasizes scholarships and higher education programs and JICA prioritizes technical cooperation, the Foundation nurtures the cultural and linguistic environment that makes these programs effective. This division of labor ensures that Japanese educational diplomacy is comprehensive, addressing both structural and societal dimensions of cooperation. The coordination between state and non-state actors highlights Japan's recognition that sustainable bilateral relations require more than formal agreements; they depend on long term social and cultural connections.

In conclusion, the Japan Foundation has significantly shaped Indonesia Japan relations through its focus on language, culture, and academic exchange. Since 2015 its initiatives have expanded opportunities for Indonesian students to learn Japanese, increased public exposure to Japanese culture, and strengthened academic collaboration between universities in both countries. These efforts demonstrate the effectiveness of cultural institutions in promoting soft power and in deepening bilateral ties. The Japan Foundation thus stands as a vital partner in Japan's broader strategy to engage Indonesia through education and culture, laying a foundation for cooperation that is both sustainable and mutually beneficial.

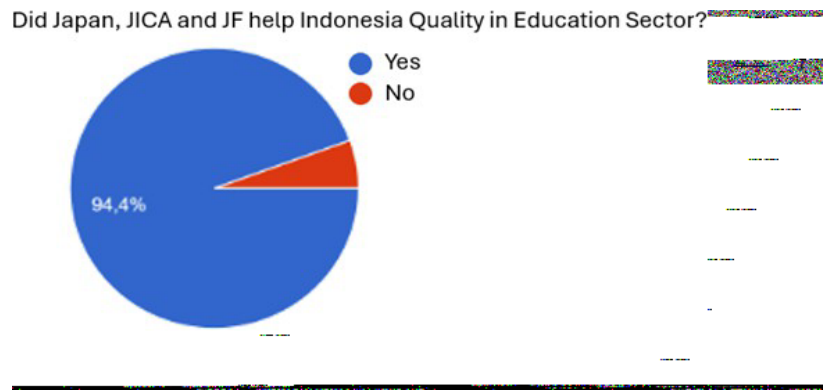
### **Institutional Relations in Indonesia-Japan Diplomatic Relations**

Institutional relations between Indonesia and Japan have become one of the central pillars in sustaining and expanding bilateral cooperation. Since the restoration of diplomatic ties in 1958, the two countries have established a wide range of institutional mechanisms that allow for the management of diverse interests, from economic development to cultural exchange. These institutional frameworks are not only instruments of intergovernmental coordination but also channels that shape societal perceptions and long term trust between the two nations<sup>25</sup>.

An important dimension of this relationship is reflected in the way Indonesian students of International Relations perceive Japan's role. As shown in Figure 7, students were asked about their awareness of Japanese colonialism in Asia. The data reveals that nearly seventy percent of respondents acknowledged Japan's colonial past.□ This indicates that historical memory continues to play a role in shaping perceptions. While the figure reflects awareness of Japan's imperial history, it also underscores that present day cooperation has been able to move beyond these legacies, as students simultaneously recognize Japan's contemporary contributions in development and diplomacy.

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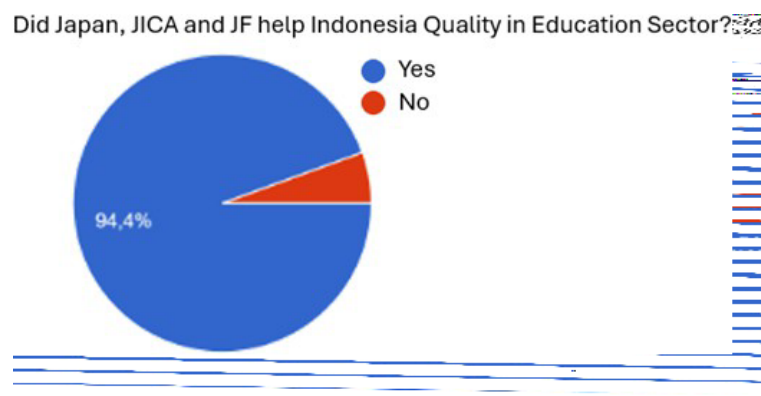
25 Ahmad Rizky Mardhatillah Umar, "Indonesia and Japan: Sixty Years of Diplomatic Relations," *Journal of ASEAN Studies* 7, no. 2 (2019), 115-117.



Source: KADKI, 2024

**Figure 7.** Awareness of Indonesian International Relations Students of Japanese Colonialism

The complexity of historical perceptions is further highlighted by Figure 8, which presents student awareness of the Malari incident of 1974, a protest movement partly associated with Japan's economic dominance in Indonesia.<sup>26</sup> The data shows that more than sixty percent of students are aware of the Malari incident. This finding is significant because it demonstrates that students situate current bilateral relations within a historical continuum that includes both cooperation and contention. The Malari incident, often remembered as a moment of anti-Japanese sentiment, contrasts with the generally positive perceptions of Japan today, suggesting that institutionalized relations and long-term cooperation have successfully altered the trajectory of public opinion.



Source: KADKI, 2024

**Figure 8.** Awareness of Indonesian International Relations Students of the Malari Incident 1974 (K

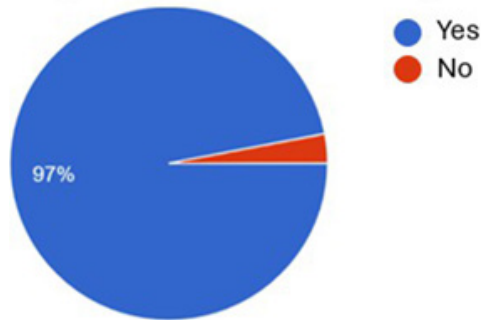
The evolution of perceptions is also linked to the way Japan has positioned itself within Indonesia's diplomatic and strategic discourse. As reflected in Figure 9, more than seventy percent of students surveyed agreed that Japan plays a significant role in shaping Indonesia's international outlook<sup>27</sup>. This indicates that Japan is no longer viewed merely as an economic partner but as a country that contributes to Indonesia's positioning in regional and global affairs. Such recognition underscores the effectiveness of Japan's institutional diplomacy, which includes bilateral strategic dialogues, economic partnerships, and joint participation in regional forums such as ASEAN Plus Three and the East Asia Summit.

<sup>26</sup> KADKI, *Survey on Perceptions*.

<sup>27</sup> KADKI, *Survey on Perceptions*.



Did you know about Indonesia-Japan Diplomatic Relationship?

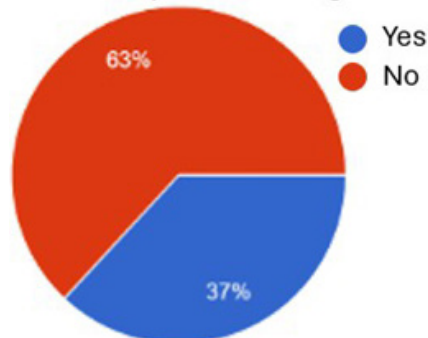


Source: KADKI, 2024

**Figure 9.** Perceptions of Indonesian Students on Japan's Role in Indonesia's International Outlook

In terms of image building, Figure 10 shows that more than sixty five percent of respondents consider Japan to have a positive international image.<sup>28</sup> Students consistently associate Japan with attributes such as technological advancement, discipline, and reliability. This positive image is not coincidental but the outcome of decades of institutionalized cooperation in fields such as development assistance, cultural exchange, and people to people programs. The cultivation of such an image reflects Joseph Nye's concept of soft power, where attraction and credibility are generated through culture, values, and policies that are perceived as legitimate.<sup>29</sup>

Does Japan have a negative image in Indonesia



Source: KADKI, 2024

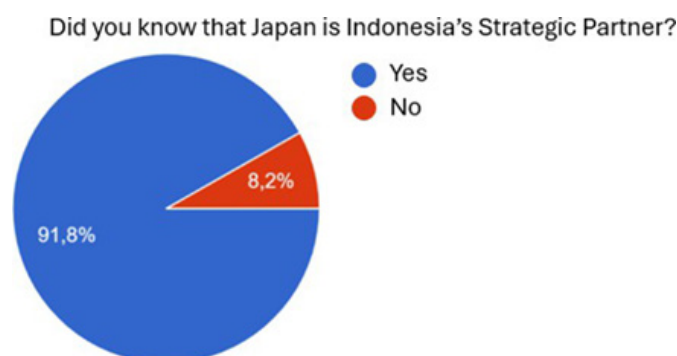
**Figure 10.** Perceptions of Indonesian Students on Japan's International Image

The notion of Japan as a strategic partner is further reinforced by Figure 11, where more than seventy five percent of students agreed that Indonesia benefits from treating Japan as a long term partner in diplomacy and development.<sup>30</sup> This figure illustrates how institutional cooperation has consolidated trust between the two nations. Students' recognition of Japan as a strategic partner highlights the success of bilateral frameworks such as the Indonesia-Japan Economic Partnership Agreement (IJEPA) and cooperation in infrastructure development, energy transition, and education. These frameworks provide not only economic benefits but also reinforce political and societal trust.

<sup>28</sup> KADKI, *Survey on Perceptions*.

<sup>29</sup> Nye, *Soft Power*, 5-11.

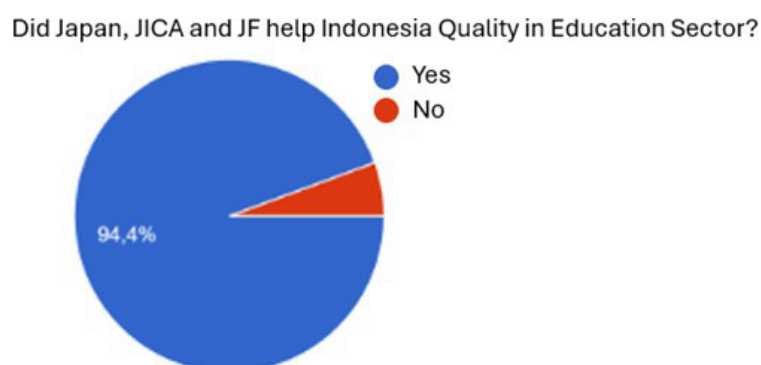
<sup>30</sup> KADKI, *Survey on Perceptions*.



Source: KADKI, 2024

**Figure 11.** Student Perceptions of Japan as a Strategic Partner of Indonesia

Lastly, Figure 12 shows that a majority of students believe that institutional relations between Indonesia and Japan will remain important in the future.<sup>31</sup> More than seventy percent of respondents indicated confidence in the sustainability of this partnership. This outlook is rooted in the predictability created by institutionalized relations, which ensures that cooperation is not dependent solely on the preferences of political leaders but embedded in broader structures such as joint commissions, academic exchanges, and business councils.



Source: KADKI, 2024

**Figure 12.** Perceptions of Indonesian Students on the Future of Indonesia-Japan Institutional Relations

The data from Figures 7 through 12 demonstrates that Indonesian International Relations students hold a nuanced but overall positive view of Japan. Historical awareness of colonialism and the Malari incident coexists with recognition of Japan as a credible and beneficial partner today. This suggests that institutional relations have functioned effectively to transform past tensions into present trust. The effectiveness of this transformation can be explained through liberal institutionalist theory, which argues that institutions reduce uncertainty, foster transparency, and encourage repeated interactions that over time reshape perceptions and preferences.<sup>32</sup>

In conclusion, institutional relations in Indonesia-Japan diplomacy have not only facilitated practical cooperation but also reshaped societal perceptions among the younger generation. The high levels of positive recognition recorded in the survey suggest that Japan has successfully leveraged both its economic capacity and cultural diplomacy to establish itself as a strategic partner. These relations demonstrate the importance of institutions in maintaining stability,

<sup>31</sup> KADKI, *Survey on Perceptions*.

<sup>32</sup> Robert Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 85-109.

building legitimacy, and ensuring that bilateral cooperation remains resilient in the face of historical legacies and future uncertainties.

## **Conclusion**

This study has examined the bilateral relationship between Indonesia and Japan with a particular focus on education, cultural diplomacy, and student perceptions. The findings show that since 2015 Japan has made consistent and significant contributions to Indonesia's educational development through scholarships, institutional partnerships, and technical cooperation. Programs supported by MEXT and JICA have provided Indonesian students with access to advanced training in various disciplines while also strengthening institutional capacity through joint research, curriculum reform, and faculty development. These efforts have addressed systemic challenges in Indonesian education, such as high illiteracy rates and low performance in international assessments, thereby reinforcing Japan's role as a reliable partner.

The Japan Foundation has complemented these governmental initiatives by promoting Japanese language education, organizing cultural events, and fostering academic collaboration. Through its activities, the Foundation has created pathways for Indonesian students to engage with Japanese culture and values. These initiatives demonstrate the role of non-state actors in advancing soft power, as they cultivate familiarity and trust that formal agreements alone cannot secure. By combining education, culture, and intellectual exchange, the Japan Foundation has ensured that Japan's influence in Indonesia is both broad and sustainable.

Institutional relations have also been shaped by perceptions at the societal level. The survey conducted among International Relations students across Indonesian universities revealed that students possess high awareness of Japan's history, recognize its institutional contributions, and view it as a strategic partner. While knowledge of past controversies such as the Malari Crisis is limited, students emphasize Japan's present role and future potential. More than eighty percent expressed positive views of Japan's image, associating it with innovation, discipline, and technological advancement. These perceptions confirm that Japan's educational and cultural diplomacy has been successful in fostering goodwill among the younger generation.

In conclusion, the bilateral relationship between Indonesia and Japan is reinforced by strong institutional cooperation and favorable societal perceptions. Education and cultural exchange have emerged as central pillars of this partnership, serving both developmental and diplomatic purposes. Japan's investment in scholarships, language promotion, and cultural programs has not only enhanced Indonesia's human resource capacity but also strengthened Japan's soft power. The combination of formal institutional frameworks and positive public perception ensures that Indonesia-Japan relations will continue to be resilient, mutually beneficial, and strategically significant in the years to come.

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