Chapter 3:

Further Education
Going Back to School

From Teacher to Student: Making the Decision to Pursue an Advanced Degree

Contributed by Leah J. Gowron
ALT, Saitama Prefecture 1990-1991
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For most JETs, the question of “So, now what?” clouds their last months on the JET Programme. Leaving a familiar lifestyle, relocating to another part of Japan, returning to your home country, relocating to a new location, coupled with the potential loss of income if you are not immediately transitioning from JET to a new job, are all factors and concerns shared by departing JETs.

Some JETs address these challenges by reflecting on their time in Japan from an educational standpoint: Was there something unique and fascinating culturally/linguistically/historically that I want to continue to study? Have I discovered, through my teaching, language or management experiences, a possible new professional path to explore? Was JET a break between the completion of my first degree and the eventual continuation in that same path of study?

No one answer fits, but the idea of furthering your education after JET is one response to that “now what?” question. In the 2001 survey of non-renewing JETs, more than 32% of the 317 who responded made the decision to pursue further education. You are in good company if you spent part of your last year either researching university programmes, seeking higher education funding, and applying for programmes, or are planning to start the process once you are settled post-JET.

The real goal should be to make the best use of your time and energy to ensure two things: that the reason you have decided to pursue an advanced degree is based on facts and some personal reality checks; and that you feel as prepared as possible to offer the strongest application to a given programme/university as you can, including a thorough understanding of when and how to address your JET experiences.

The Value of an Advanced Degree: Myths and Realities

Making the decision to attend a graduate programme takes time – time to reflect on why you feel there is a need or desire to obtain that next level of education, and time to research the market – nationally and internationally – to understand not only why you want to study a particular topic, but also where.

Additionally, the “where” question may also have a significant impact on both being accepted (many universities place limits on the number of international students they accept per programme), and in receiving funding. You may or may not qualify for certain types of funding either as an international student at a university outside of your country of residence, or via loans and bursary programmes from your country of residence or the country you will be in while you study. The “where” part of this question could even impact your likelihood of being employed in the future. Finally, the timing of the “I am going to graduate school”, or “I plan to now study XX topic” may affect your ability to apply for national and international fellowship programmes, which have the potential to offer successful candidates significant funding, but only if you meet their application cycle.
Every year, a few months before my students complete their MA degrees, and are frantically working on their job search, I witness a sudden spurt of interest in students wanting to pursue another degree. I am a strong supporter of advanced degrees; I have two MA-level degrees myself, and work at a university that focuses on professional advanced degrees. But, education for the sake of avoiding the job search is not something I support! And, while I wish we were in an environment where we could all afford education for the simple pleasure of education itself, sadly that is seldom the case. Some examples of the questions I hear from my students, and have also heard over the years at a number of JET conferences I have spoken at, include:

- I am planning to get my Master’s/ Ph.D. because I know that with an advanced degree I am guaranteed to earn much more money;
- My family expects me to get another degree;
- The idea of searching for a job scares me, so going back to school postpones that concern;
- If I go to the “right” school, I will not have to search for a job upon graduating; the jobs will come to me;
- How long can a Ph.D. really take – you are just writing about something you like to study; and
- I cannot possibly get into XX field/career if I do not have an advanced degree.

Let’s bust some myths about what an advanced degree does and does not do. An advanced degree is not some miracle job-magnet. While our parents’ generation may have assumed that those with Master’s- or Ph.D.-level degrees automatically had a plethora of high paying jobs to choose from, that is no longer the case. In many professional fields, an advanced degree is an expectation, not something unique that makes you stand out. In fact, there is the reality of being “overeducated, yet underemployed” in specific fields. For some of my students, the “career kiss of death” would be completing their MA and Ph.D. by the time they are in their mid-late 20’s. Yes, they are highly educated, but they have not had the opportunity to actually work in their fields, and thus their “experience” is merely academically focused, and not applied. Imagine going through 7-10 years of university study to become a teacher (with a Ph.D. in linguistics perhaps), but having never spent even a few hours in front of a class of students? No amount of research will have prepared you for the workplace reality you are about to face, and few schools will take the risk to hire you.

Ph.D. programmes, depending on your dissertation topic, the Ph.D. programme format in your country of study (i.e.: PhDs in North American average 5-6 years, whereas in Europe they are often incorporated into a combined MA/Ph.D. format and can be completed in 4-5 years for both), and if you need to do field research/language acquisition as part of your dissertation, can take up to eight years to complete. That’s a long, long time to be in school, not earning income (or much income, as Teaching Assistants are seldom paid what they are worth!), simply to do something because you thought it was a good way to transition from JET, or because the idea of being unemployed scared you!

Individuals entering a graduate-level programme tend to fall into one of three categories:

- They have done extensive research, not only on the university programmes they are applying for, but also in the profession. These applicants are confident that there is both a need for a specific type of advanced education in their career plan, and that they are in a degree of study that “fits” that career field;
- They have a strong feeling that “now is the time to continue my studies”, and usually have some understanding within themselves of a particular interest, focus or direction, but not necessarily where that education will lead them professionally;
- They feel that so far they have not been able to “figure it out”, the “it” being what they want to do, but hopefully something will happen during the course of their studies where “it” will come together and viola…the answers to the questions they haven’t yet researched on what they want to do professionally will appear.

Hopefully, as you transition from JET to the next great adventure, you find yourself checking boxes #1 or #2; if not, then postponing a graduate programme may be a good investment of your time and money.
Making the Best Decision: Reflection and Research

Making the decision to enter a graduate or any type of additional education programme (you may be returning to complete another Bachelor’s level degree, or pursuing certification in a specific field) takes reflection and requires answering some potentially difficult questions:

● Do I have a particular passion for a certain issue, topic, or field? Am I willing to engage in academic research in this field? Will this issue still be as exciting if I am learning about it in a formal versus informal manner?

● Will I mind if my personal time and other interests (including employment and family) may end up coming in second to my studies?

● Can I afford the education I know I deserve and need? Are there alternative types of education that I can afford? Am I willing to enter into education debt? (fortunately not the case for many non-US JETs)

● What is the best place for me to study this topic? Why? Faculty? Reputation? Connections? Name recognition? Resources and services to students?

● Is there flexibility in the programme, i.e. will I be supported in inter-disciplinary studies, or must I take only what the programme requires?

● What results can I expect from this education? A specific career? Inroads to more educational opportunities? Greater professional and financial success?

Each person considering an advanced degree will have their own questions to address, but the questions of what will I do, where will I do it, what support is there for me as a student, and what are the potential results are all key issues. Often, reflection on these types of questions leads a prospective graduate student to a further definition of their interest areas(s) and their expectations of the programme and the university.

Research, research, research…that’s the key word when it comes to deciding where to go for the education you deserve. Fifteen years go, researching graduate programmes meant hours of discussion with professors, writing countless letters to schools asking for recruiting brochures, and significant time in the library reading from university guides. Today, there is no excuse other than slow dial-up speed! A wealth of Internet resources are available for the individual seeking basic information on advanced degrees. Other avenues to research university opportunities include professional association lists (if interested in a specific field, find the association to which those working in this field belong….there are networking opportunities or related ways to find out where individuals in this field get educated!), national and international education resources (the Japan Foundation’s education links, for example, or the Fulbright Fellowship information on the Institute for International Education’s website), and reviewing employment announcements to determine whether in XX field you seem to need YY degree(s). With the hard decisions made – understanding why it is time to get that advanced degree, and where – the next step is addressing how you will present yourself to an application selection committee.

Your Application is Your “Face” to the Selection Committee

It amazes me when I meet with prospective students on our campus and, when asked the questions, “What do you want to study, and why do you want to study here?” many cannot answer. It also makes me wonder what their applications must look like.

University applications, and the potential funding that a powerful application can lead to, are time-consuming processes for both the prospective student and the selection teams. All too often applicants assume that selection committees/scholarship committees will “read between the lines” and “get” why the applicant is a good fit for the programme. All too often, these are the candidates who are rejected.

With tuition and personal expenses increasing, and the number of slots for applicants at top universities not equal to the number of potentially qualified applicants, the application is often all that a committee has to go on when making admissions decisions. Portions of the application are static data – your GPA (Grade Point Average), scores for standardised tests (for the US and Canada, to include GMAT for business schools, LSAT for law schools, and the GRE for many graduate programmes), and other basic information. And while these scores and grades do tell a
committee something about you, they often do not tell the “interesting” story….that part is left up to you.

The Story of You
Consider the letters of recommendation, the personal statement and often a few, modest, sections of the application form as the places to paint the picture of you…why entering this programme, at this school, is the next logical step for you professionally, what you bring to the programme in the way of experience and understanding of the world, and what you hope to achieve (every school likes successful alumni) because of the opportunities you will pursue while completing your degree.

Most applicants make the mistake of repeating their resume/C.V. in the personal statement. If someone on the committee really wants to read again when you graduated from XX university and what you did next, it’s in the application and on the enclosed resume. Quit wasting the time of the committee and space on the statement page. Use this space instead to demonstrate to the committee that you are the kind of individual who has done the reflection mentioned earlier, who is committed to making every opportunity count, and who will take a proactive, creative, and positive approach to their education.

You can also use this as a place to define any issues or questions that you know the committee may have. “Why is it that Brian thinks that he’s qualified to become an engineer, when he failed every science class he ever took?” will be asked. Trust me, these committees expect to hear how you were working four part-time jobs to help support you and your family while going through your first degree, and thus your GPA is not quite what it could have been, etc. However, do not try to play on the emotions of the committee. State your case, explain how you learned from that experience, and how “life” since then has also prepared you for academic success in ways that cannot be readily evaluated by grades or test scores.

Letters of recommendation may, depending on the type of degree field you are pursuing, have enormous impact on a selection committee. Applicants often make the mistake of including a letter because of the prestige of the writer or the organisation to which they are affiliated. Selection committees read thousands of letters of recommendation each application cycle, and can tell a generic letter from someone saying very little about you as a qualified candidate for a specific field of study, within 5 seconds of reading it. A great letter of recommendation addresses specifically (based on the writer’s qualifications on both knowing you and possibly because of them knowing your field of interest/having a reputation in that same field) how you are guaranteed to be successful, hard-working, and inspiring to those around you, and thus a great addition to a school’s incoming class. Take time educating your referees in what they should address in these letters…it’s time well spent. Recycling is a great thing to save the environment, it should never be done with letters of recommendation, that’s enough said about using past letters for current applications!

Funding: So How Do You Pay for Graduate School?
Making the decision to take the next few years of your life and enter an academic programme is one thing, finding the cash to actually get to the school, and stay there, can be another. Taking a small amount of time, well in advance of when you need the funding, to research and prepare can make all the difference to your long-term education debt.

Most JETs come from countries where education is at least partially subsidised. Cost is still a factor (living expenses, books, etc), and can be significant if entering programmes in another country. For US JETs, and to some extent Canadian JETs, private university tuition for 2-7 years of graduate study can run upwards of $US 200,000, with most MA-level students entering into $US50,000-$US75,000 of debt for a two year programme. Yes, your dattai ichijkin (Lump-Sum Withdrawal Payment) can help defray costs, but it will not be enough to make a significant difference. As the section on reflection mentioned, taking some time to think seriously about the realities of developing and maintaining a level of education debt is an important part of the “prep” for graduate study.
Which leads me to my next point: when in doubt, try to get someone else to pay for your education. This makes sense, and yet many potential students fail to consider funding beyond traditional student loans, and hopefully some much-needed scholarship allocation from the university. Looking beyond these basic funding resources often means that you will need to expend time and energy in researching additional fellowship opportunities, completing lengthy applications (and being observant of deadlines!), and talking to a range of people to find “hidden money”.

Hidden money is not raiding your young niece’s piggybank, or selling your miscellaneous Japanese gifts and trinkets at a yard sale….it is about researching who has funding and if you realistically qualify. For example, if you are a new American (i.e. a naturalised citizen), then you potentially qualify for the Paul and Daisy Soros fellowship for New Americans—including tens of thousands of dollars towards graduate tuition. If you completed an internship at certain US government organisations, you may qualify for scholarship and internship funding as a graduate student. For those who have an interest in Germany, the Carl Duisberg Society (www.cdsintl.org) has a variety of educational funding experiences and related scholarships and fellowships.

Another example is seeking funding from community service programmes, usually because of a family member who is a member. Groups (USA and Canada) can include Kinsmen, Lion’s Club, Kiwanis, and religious-based organisations. Perhaps you participated in a high school exchange programme – there could be funding for additional education as an alumnus. Finally, take advantage of the outstanding scholarship funding available at more than twenty universities around the world for JET alumni.

For JET alumni attending Ph.D. programmes in North America, if you are paying for your education, then it is the wrong education. A “good” Ph.D. candidate will be offered either a full tuition waiver, a teaching assistantship during their Ph.D. programme, or, ideally, both. If you are accepted into a Ph.D. programme without any funding, then a larger question needs to be asked…are you at the right school, in the right programme? It is likely the case that the university doesn’t think so, otherwise they would have offered you financial support.

Saving the Best for Last: Linking the JET Experience with Your Interests in Higher Education

You’ve made the decision, done the research and are ready to move on professionally, including some period of time in an educational setting. Now you are wondering how JET plays a role in this. When speaking with JETs, I often hear them dismiss their experiences as they are not interested in being a teacher, or dealing with issues related to Japan. Is that really all you think you acquired during your years on the Programme? What about the project and event management experience CIRs obtain? What about the communication skills (multi-lingual for many) ALTs acquire? Mediation and negotiation techniques, translation, interpretation, writing and editing skills, leadership talents, story-telling, travel…these are all skills and experiences that can move a JET forward to a range of exciting and rewarding careers that are not specific to Japan, Japanese, or teaching.

At the Monterey Institute we have, on average, 25-40 JET alumni on campus pursuing a range of MA degrees. While a small number of these JET alumni are in the MA TESOL programme, a far greater number are pursuing degrees in policy, management, business, and translation and interpretation. Most made those degree decisions based on some experience, or series of experiences through JET. If you see yourself as a manager in an international company, working with underprivileged youth in a community-based non-profit, acting as an education administrator for international students, or working for a government’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs or Foreign Service, chances are your experience on JET offers transferable skills and experiences, especially when (and often required) coupled with an advanced degree.

Making the decision to go back to school after JET should happen once you have done a level of research and reflection to determine the professional value of that education, by knowing what you hope to acquire through that education, and treating the application process and funding search with the commitment and attention you deserve to get the funding you need.

Go out and take the next step…you were a great teacher, now it is your turn to be a great student!
The Adventures of Going Back to School after JET

Contributed by Micah Cousins
ALT, Shiga Prefecture 2002-2004
JETAA Great Lakes (Detroit) Chapter

While I was in Japan as an ALT, I finally realised after all my experiences in life that teaching was my calling. I began to think about what qualifications might be required for teaching, and pursuing a master’s degree at first seemed like the right thing to do. After you get an undergraduate degree, the traditional next step is to get an MA. But I benefited from the expertise and advice of my parents, who are both in higher education, and I learned that it is more important to get a teachers certification before pursuing a masters. If you want to become an elementary, secondary or even K-12 educator, an undergraduate degree and certification should normally be sufficient to find employment at a good school. Some schools will pay towards further education, and I recommend you find a school that offers this.

Whatever subject you wish to pursue, if you are considering going back to college or university, it is important to start your search early. Make sure you give yourself time to take the GRE, GMAT, LSAT, or any other exams needed. Most institutions require GRE or GMAT scores but there are many testing centres in Japan, so it would be a good head start to take your exams there if you have the opportunity. Another thing is making sure when applications need to be turned in, as deadlines are early if you are hoping to apply for the fall semester. Don’t procrastinate and wait for the last minute; remember if you are applying from abroad, the application process can take much longer than you might expect. If you are late in your application, either you will be charged a fee or you will have to wait for the next term, or even longer.

Even though I wasn’t able to visit colleges/universities while I was in Japan, I was able to search through the web. Additionally, I had my family and friends visit the schools I was interested in and gather information for me. I felt comfortable having my friends and family visit campuses; since they know me well, they know what schools would be a good fit for me. However, I did take the winter vacation to go home and visit some schools and advisors personally and I highly recommend doing this.

While looking for a university, I found several that would allow me to transfer my undergraduate credits and therefore make it easier for me to pursue a teacher’s certification. I chose Eastern Michigan University which produces the largest number of educational educators in the nation and which has a good reputation due to the numerous awards these teachers win. This school also offers certification in a wide range of areas, including Japanese Language and Culture. Furthermore, the Michigan teacher’s certification is very reputable throughout the United States. I knew that with my accreditations I would not have any problems being certified to teach in other states. In making your own choice, while the stature and name of the school is important, you have to consider the programme and whether it is a comfortable fit for you and your interests and aspirations.
As an alternative to returning to my home country to study, I also considered studying in Japan, so that I could learn more of the Japanese language while pursuing a degree. Sometimes you can find Japanese universities and branches affiliated with institutions from your home country.

I thought I would not have any problems coming home and starting my life as a student again, but I was wrong. It took me a good two months to reacclimatise to life in America. I started school a month after I came back while still working out the kinks, especially realising I didn't need to take a train everywhere I went. I remember going into class my first day and the professor had everyone introduce themselves to the class. I bowed, began my introduction and bowed at the end. Just like any typical introduction in Japan. My classmates thought I was weird or perhaps had back problems. I remember chuckling and having to hit myself over the head to remind myself I was home. Cultural habits you learned in Japan will stay with you when you arrive back in your home country and you may find yourself in similar situations.

I was able to use the money I saved while working in Japan and use it towards my studies. Try to save as much money for school as possible! A strict budget will help here. Many of us still have to get loans for tuition, but having that extra money really helps in the long run. For me, it helped pay for books, rent, and even utility costs.

Finding a place to rent was not too difficult, since I could happily live in any type of accommodation after living in a cubicle apartment in Japan. I was fortunate to find a house in walking distance of campus, but had to live with three other roommates. I didn’t mind sharing a kitchen and bathroom, plus it was nice meeting new people. I was lucky to find three great roommates to share a house with and we have all become good friends. You get those days when you have a conflict over something stupid, and sometimes not so stupid, but most of the time we enjoy each other’s company. Sometimes you hear dreadful stories about going in blind with strangers, but it worked out well for me. It would be nice living alone because of privacy and having your own space, but it can get really pricey living in a college town.

Living the college life again, things have not changed much since we were all undergrads: still trying to do all-nighters for exams and papers, still struggling to make money as a student and still trying to strike the difficult balance between study and socialising. However, as we get older and become more focused on our career goals, our motivation to study increases accordingly. Looking back on my time in Japan, I feel that it has made me more independent and has given me the motivation to look to the future and concentrate on my career. Don’t get me wrong though, I still love student life and having fun!

I am so grateful for having had the opportunity to teach in Japan as an ALT, because in my future profession I will be able to share my Japanese experiences with my students and teach a wonderful language. Working, studying and teaching in Japan has helped me attain a high level of proficiency in Japanese language and culture, which will be essential during my remaining time at the university and for my future teaching career.
JET is Only Part of the Puzzle
(or why going back to school isn’t for everyone)

Contributed by Gwyneth Hall
ALT, Tokushima Prefecture 1992-1994

Let me start by telling you how passionate I am on this topic – that going back to school isn’t the answer for every ex-JET. As I write this article, my spouse is renovating our bathroom thereby rendering our only shower out of commission. We are currently starting week two of showering outside under a hose. With my help I am sure that the renovations would proceed a little more quickly, however, I am taking time to share my thoughts because I clearly remember the difficulty of returning home after JET.

Going back to school post-JET may be a great career move for those of you who know what it is that you want to do with the rest of your life. If you’re that lucky, then you might as well stop reading here. But many of us went to Japan on JET because we had no idea what we wanted to do and when our tenure was over our career aspirations weren’t any clearer. So what did I do and what did I learn along the way that will hopefully help you to find your optimal career path?

1. Go with your gut

After two years as an ALT I knew I wanted to stay in Japan and study Japanese. Many of my family and friends were confused and dismayed by this decision. I hadn’t studied Japanese before going to Japan so my knowledge of the language was rudimentary at best. And no one, including me, could foresee how this would lead to a respectable and well-paying job.

But I knew that was what I wanted to do and so I did it. After a year of studying Japanese at Keio University and living with a wonderful Japanese family I still wasn’t ready to leave. I went on to organise weddings at a hotel in Karuizawa so I could practice my new Japanese language skills. Following a year in that position I knew I was ready to come home and find something to do back in Canada.

2. Take stock of your skills. Think of what you have learned. Make a list of what you DON’T want to do with your life

Upon my return to Canada I had a slightly better idea of what I didn’t want to do. Teaching was out and I hoped I would never see another wedding for the rest of my life! My experiences prior to JET had helped me to eliminate blue-collar labour and I didn’t have the resources or drive to start my own company. Furthermore, without a clear idea of a future career path I couldn’t justify spending my meager resources to go back to school.

So I took a low-paying, Japan-related job. I filled in for a maternity leave at the Japan External Trade Organisation (JETRO). This gave me funds to sustain existence over the short-term and a chance to take stock of the skills I had learned in Japan.

Probably the most valuable skill that all JETs have learned is networking. Networking upon my return to Toronto allowed me to meet other ex-JETs and learn what jobs were available in the area. I also began to think about what I had learned in Japan and how that could translate into a career. When I asked my friends how they thought I had changed as a result of my experience in Japan they were quick to point out that my self-confidence and public speaking skills had greatly improved. I am always surprised by what you can learn when you ask for direct feedback.

A few books that helped me with this step along my path to career enlightenment include: “What Color is Your Parachute?”, “Wishcraft: How to Get What You Really Want” and “Jumping Ship”.

3. Go out on a limb

When you left for Japan you didn’t know where you would be living, with whom you would be spending your time or what you would be eating, but you went anyway. Taking chances also applies to the real world.
The first full-time job opportunity that came my way in Canada was as an interpreter for a Japanese automotive plant that was starting up business in Stratford, Ontario. I went to the interview as a favour to a head-hunter and came home with a job offer. Did I want to be an interpreter? I hadn’t a clue but I was certainly willing to give it a try. In addition, the Human Resources Manager who hired me suggested I would be able to assist him with Human Resources in my spare time. Now this sounded interesting...

4. Keep learning and evaluating
I hated interpreting; although it took me more than two years to figure that out! I thought I should like it so I kept ignoring my daily dissatisfaction with that aspect of my job. Meanwhile I was spending more and more time on the Human Resources functions which I thoroughly enjoyed. Finally, I went to a counsellor who took only a few sessions to help me conclude that the interpreting aspect of my job was making me miserable.

I quit my job to complete the Human Resources training that I had started at night school and I have never looked back. But wait – didn’t I just suggest that not everyone should go back to university upon their return from JET? Yes, but no one should ever stop expanding their knowledge. In addition to full-time formal schooling you can learn through on-the-job training opportunities, part-time courses at community college and even volunteer positions.

Eventually, I did go on to full-time formal schooling but up to that point my employer had paid for the night school courses and on-the-job training that helped me decide what I really wanted to do. Not to mention that I was making money along the way!

5. Be patient
I am sure you have acquired some measure of patience in Japan?! Don’t lose it. It will be an invaluable asset along whatever career path you eventually choose.

2007 marks the tenth year of my return from Japan and the thirteenth since I finished JET. I can finally say that I have found a career in Human Resources that I enjoy. It wasn’t easy but all the effort definitely paid off.

And like networking, patience is a skill that can also be beneficial in your personal life. I would explain this to my spouse but I sense through my well-honed skill of “wa” that it would be better just to go to Canadian Tire and pick up the paint roller he is currently requesting.

I hope that the points I have outlined above will help you find your optimum post-JET career. Either way, I would love to hear your feedback and experiences. Feel free to visit us in St. Mary’s – we should even have a functional shower in the near future!

Results from the 2010 JETAA Survey*
For those who are students

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*The JETAA Survey asks former JET participants questions about their life after completing the JET Programme. 269 former JET participants responded to the 2010 online survey, which was accessible on the JET Programme website from 15 October 2010 to 15 January 2011.