

Doing a Doctorate: Three Experiences

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Abstract

Language education at university has always required high-level qualifications. Whereas a master's degree is typically the entry level qualification for people working in language education, the number of people holding doctorates has been rising. An increased number of doctorates in the profession may lead someone to consider undertaking doctoral studies as a means of maintaining or advancing their career. As studying towards a doctorate is a large undertaking, it is one that should be considered at length. To assist this deliberation, this article presents the reasons, experiences, and outcomes of three teachers who completed doctoral studies.

Introduction

The decision concerning whether to undertake doctoral studies is one that should not be taken lightly. A legion of documents from books and magazine articles to internet memes highlight the large workloads, long hours and, as is often the case, high costs involved. However, unlike much of the information available, this article does not present the process of doing a doctorate in generic terms but gives it from the perspective of three teachers who undertook specific courses and who detail their own individual views. These views cover objective information such as the university and course of study, but also their subjective experiences, reasons for embarking on a doctorate and their assessment of the "value" it afforded them. Additionally, from these experiences will be drawn advice for those who may be considering doctoral studies.

Before detailing the three individual experiences, it is worth considering some broader facts about holding a doctorate. Arguably the most influential is that of compensation. People who hold a doctorate are paid more on average than those who do not. This would appear to be a global reality with data in the UK (Vitae, 2020), USA (Michigan State University, 2020), and Japan (Real Estate Japan, 2020), among others, all showing higher

yearly and lifetime earnings for doctorate holders. Although this should come as no great surprise given that each step up the education ladder typically brings higher financial rewards, it does confirm the monetary incentive for doing a doctorate and, implied within this, that the qualification is desired by employers.

Perhaps a consequence of the higher remuneration and access to higher level positions, the number of people doing a doctorate is growing in most countries, quite substantially in many. In the US, for example, the number of people holding a doctorate increased from 2 million in 2000 to 4.5 million in 2018 (Census, 2019). This is similar to the increases seen in many other countries such as France, Germany, China, and South Korea (Mainichi, 2018). However, this phenomenon is not entirely global. In Japan, although long-term statistics such as 5,576 doctorates awarded in 1989 vs 15,658 in 2018 (Japan Times, 2019) might suggest a steady increase over time, they hide the fact that 2006 represented the peak in the number of doctorates awarded and, since that time, there has been a decline (Japan Today, 2020; Mainichi, 2018). The reasons for this decline are beyond the scope of this article, though anecdotal evidence suggests that it may be influenced by the idiosyncrasies and recent changes within the employment system, particularly in the higher education employment sector.

Though the recent decline in the number of doctorates awarded in Japan is an anomaly when considering the global trend, the reality of increased remuneration and access to higher level positions is not. This is a universal reality and so is true for the higher education sector in Japan.

Doctorate Experience 1: Nicholas Bradley, PhD.

Background & Rationale

After teaching on the JET Programme for two years and an *eikaiwa* [English conversation school] for a few months after, I returned to the UK and worked for a prestige German car manufacturer. A lack of job satisfaction and a desire to have a more pleasant environment for my two young children made me once again consider teaching in Japan. Rather than return to pre-tertiary teaching, I undertook a TESOL MA at the University of Leeds to gain access to university level employment in Japan.

After achieving this and teaching for three years in a Japanese university, I once again wished to advance my career. There were several reasons for this, such as the desire to

teach more content courses or a wider variety of courses, and to gain an increased salary, but the most powerful motivator was to avoid the employment cycle faced by university teachers in Japan. This employment merry-go-round sees teachers hired by universities on fixed-term contracts of usually 4-5 years, though some universities have started to offer 10-year contracts. Holding a doctorate allows for a greater likelihood of moving into a permanent position as the qualification is usually either a prerequisite or a preferred qualification for most life-time posts both in Japan and overseas.

University & Course

The School of Education at the University of Leeds is staffed by extremely approachable and supportive academic staff who possess the wealth of knowledge and experience and the extremely positive experience of completing my TESOL MA at the University of Leeds led me to explore the possibility of undertaking a PhD there within the School of Education. Living and working in Japan, the doctorate option available to me was that of the Split-site PhD. The course has two models, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Two Split-site PhD Models

MODEL A: STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP WITH A COMMERCIAL/INDUSTRIAL ORGANISATION OR AN INTERNATIONAL ACADEMIC OR RESEARCH INSTITUTION

Provides opportunities for research project collaboration between the University and high quality commercial or industrial organisations with a research component and reputation. The collaboration may lead to further research collaboration between the institutions.

PGRs are jointly supervised by experienced research degree supervisors from Leeds and similarly experienced researchers from the partner organisation.

MODEL B: INDIVIDUAL PGRS OF VERY HIGH QUALITY

The PGR is supervised by a research degree supervisor at the University of Leeds and a local adviser is appointed to provide day to day support. The adviser will be from a higher education institution, research institute, commercial or industrial organisation with a significant research component or reputation.

	Model A	Model B
Method of study	full-time	part-time
Standard period of study	3 years	5 years
Period of study required at Leeds	18 months	8 months
Timing of transfer	End of Year 1	End of Year 2
Maximum time limit for submission	4 years	7 years

Completion of the split-site PhD course requires the production and defence of a thesis containing robust independent research that is justified by the literature, attempts to make an original contribution to the field and is of publishable quality. The length of the final thesis is typically 100,000 words. To gain admittance to the course requires a research proposal that defines an area of inquiry that is feasible, relevant, and pressing, and which demonstrates academic ability and original thinking. These points will also be assessed in person by the potential supervisor who will speak to the candidate about the research proposal.

Once a research proposal is accepted by the supervisor, the candidate is able to formally begin work on the early stages of their doctoral work. From my own experience, I would present the PhD workflow as is shown in Figure 2; the items in **bold text** represent the stages that were the most demanding in terms of time, difficulty, or stress.

Figure 2: PhD Workflow

Extensive Reading	Substantial amount of reading around the subject and focusing on particular areas of interest.
Identify an area in which to contribute	Finding the “gap” in the field that can be filled through research.
Make a research plan	Creating specific research questions and identifying ways to answer them.
Pass the “transfer” stage	Creating a revised and substantive research proposal based on extensive reading and containing research questions, justification and proposed research methods. Approx. 10-15,000 words. Also includes gaining ethical approval.
Conduct the plan	One of the most enjoyable stages. Going out and collecting data.
Analyze data	Also very enjoyable to see data come alive.
Begin the drafting process	A huge task that cannot be overstated. Creation of many chapters and many thesis drafts that often change and need to

	be cross-referenced. A painstaking task of concentration and endurance.
Submit	Submit electronic and soft-bound paper copies of the thesis. Complete submission admin.
Defend (Mock & Real)	Practicing speaking about the main thesis of your research in clear and succinct ways. Practice answering questions both general and specifically related to the thesis. Mock defence with supervisors and later actual defence with examiners.

Outcomes

The value of the actual outcomes can only be assessed against the desired outcomes that provided the impetus for embarking on the PhD. In this instance, the actual and desired outcomes are congruent. At the midway point of my PhD, I was able to move into a permanent position that offered excellent job security. Being a PhD candidate and well on the path towards completion was a factor in gaining the position. Though job security was the primary goal, other positive outcomes are shown in Figure 3, which is not an exhaustive list.

Figure 3: Selected Positive Outcomes

- ✓ Development of my own personal educational philosophy and the ability to critically assess it
- ✓ Obtained a high level of expertise in research methodology and data analysis
- ✓ Gained substantial project management competency
- ✓ Greater ability to identify and critically analyze my own and others' beliefs and assumptions
- ✓ Greatly improved time management / organizational skills
- ✓ A feeling of achievement

Not all outcomes were positive, however. Although some negative outcomes were rather insubstantial, such as having a reduced interest in reading, others were not. The most significant was a strong feeling of burnout towards the end of my PhD. Adding PhD

studies to a schedule that is already heavy from a very busy full-time job and managing a family life with young children was extremely demanding both mentally and physically. While one may assume that the feelings of fatigue might subside with the end of the PhD, the reality was that several years of such an intense schedule resulted in the feeling lingering longer.

With both positive and negative outcomes, the ultimate question is “If I could go back, would I do it all again?” Without hesitation I would answer “Yes” and I would have said this at every stage of the PhD. Of course, if I were to go back, there are some things that I would do differently as well as questions I would ask myself, or any PhD candidate to consider.

Advice

Doing a doctorate in any form is a huge undertaking, but a PhD also represents an enormous project that has to be managed very carefully. The main advice I would give to myself at the start of the course would focus mostly on the endurance and management aspects of the course. These points are shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4: PhD Advice

Try to recognize when enough is enough.

It is quite possible to engage in an endless literature review. There is always something that leads to something else, which leads to something else. Knowing when you have enough to make your point, justify your methods or challenge an idea is very important.

Data management is extremely important (backing up, file organizing and storage).

With masses of data, chapter drafts, articles and much more, effectively organizing and backing up data not only saves time when it comes to using the data, it prevents tragic losses and setbacks.

Isolation makes you second guess. Contact reassures.

Doing a PhD at distance can be quite lonely and can leave you wondering (often quite pessimistically) about your progress. Connecting with other doctoral students and maintaining regular communication with supervisors reassures and keeps your mind on target.

Hit the ground running and make hay while the sun shines.

It is a good idea to have a lot of reading done before the PhD starts. Life and

work can throw up challenges that take your time away from your PhD. Being a little ahead of the game allows the flexibility to compensate for these. Additionally, any slow/easy times in work/life should be taken advantage of by spending extra time on doctoral work.

Although the above are mostly for PhD candidates, the questions below should be considered by anyone considering doctoral studies.

- ✓ Do you prefer extensive focus on one subject or examination of many? (PhD / EdD)
- ✓ Is your interest in the subject(s) strong enough to maintain focus on them for several years?
- ✓ Are you able to manage your time well and work at length in isolation?
- ✓ Will a doctorate give you value for your investment in time and money?
- ✓ Will the investment in time/money negatively impact life?

Doctorate Experience 2: Kevin Ottoson, EdD.

Background & Rationale

After teaching on the JET Programme in central Japan for three years, I experienced a growing dissatisfaction with the lack of development as an instructor. As an undergraduate student in a teachers' college, I enjoyed using the concepts and skills in numerous practicum assignments in American middle schools and high schools. Reflecting upon this time of satisfaction, I decided to enroll in the MA TESOL program at Nagoya University of Foreign Studies (NUFS). During my time as an MA student at NUFS, I continued to develop as a teacher and better understand the EFL classroom as an assistant language teacher on the JET programme.

After graduating with an MA, I was able to gain employment at the university level as a foreign language instructor. With growing responsibilities, I felt that I lacked the necessary leadership skills to carry out my duties inside and outside the classroom at the university. Again, I started to look for professional development opportunities. After completing the Quantitative Research Training Project coordinated by Gregory Sholdt, I felt it extremely satisfying to take part in online professional development with a team of researchers. Soon I began to search for online doctorate in education programs that would

provide a structured environment for me to continue developing as a scholar practitioner.

University & Course

In 2014, there were fewer completely online doctorates in Education programs to consider. The University of New England (UNE) in Biddeford, Maine, USA, was one such program that provided a 100% online doctorate in education focusing on educational leadership. In addition to the institution's regional accreditation, the flexibility and structure of the program made the Doctorate in Education in Educational Leadership at UNE an attractive place to further my education. The 51-credit hour Doctor of Education program at UNE (see Figure 5) has multiple start dates and can be completed in three years.

Figure 5: UNE Doctor of Education Course

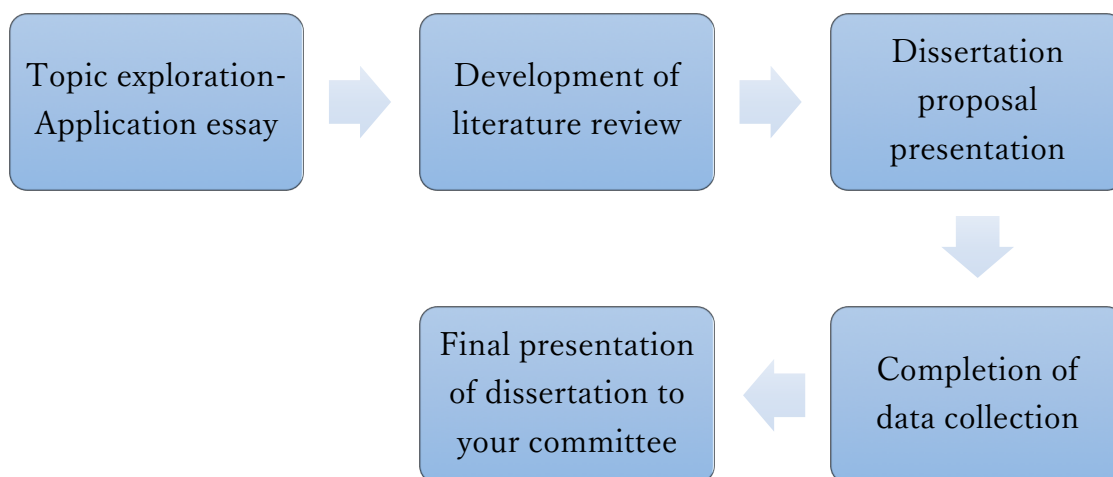
EDU 801	Preparation for Transformative Leadership (Credits:3)
EDU 802	Qualitative Research Methods (Credits:3)
EDU 803	Interpreting Empirical Data (Credits:3)
EDU 804	Technology & Organizational Transformation (Credits:3)
EDU 805	Managing Change (Credits:3)
EDU 806	Policy Analysis (Credits:3)
EDU 807	Enacting Transformative Leadership (Credits:3)
EDU 808	Using Theory to Guide Research (Credits:3)
EDU 809	Conceptualizing Applied Research (Credits:3)
EDU 810	Ethical Leadership (Credits:3)
EDU 811	Diagnosing Organizational Dynamics (Credits:3)
EDU 812	Dissertation Seminar I (Credits:3)
EDU 813	Dissertation Seminar II (Credits:3)
EDU 814-817	Dissertation (Credits: 12)

Note: Each course is eight weeks in duration. There are two courses per 16-week semester.

At UNE, doctoral students work on their dissertation throughout the 51-credit hour program. The five-stage dissertation process (see Figure 6) begins with the application essay where students explore their dissertation topic. This exploration continues in the first year of the program. Into the second year, students refine their research topic. By the time students enter their third year of the program, they will have completed a first draft of the first three chapters of their dissertation. The rationale for integrating the dissertation throughout the program rather than just at the end is to avoid the “all but dissertation”

(ABD) status and maintain a high retention and graduation rate.

Figure 6: Dissertation development-5 stages



Outcomes

The EdD program at UNE enabled me to develop research skills and education leadership skills. Thus, I have a better understanding of my students and colleagues though part of me feels that I have not fully utilized the knowledge and skills I have learned due to the nature of my current teaching position. However, at the time of writing this paper, I have been able to secure a tenure-track position at a university where I will teach students who are studying childhood education. As my main goal of development as a scholar practitioner has been achieved, I feel a deep sense of accomplishment. Completing a terminal degree program while working full-time and raising two children under six definitely was a taxing experience. Being able to make it through this program helped develop resilience and grit to help me work through other turbulence in life. Additionally, this program enabled me to land several interviews for permanent positions at the university level. Thus, my chances for career advancement increased due to the completion of the EdD program at UNE.

The outcomes of this EdD program at UNE were mostly positive, but there were some negative outcomes during and after the program. First, I suffered from a severe lack of sleep. Being the primary caregiver of my children only allowed me to focus on my studies from 10pm - 2am. Routinely, I would have to pull all-nighters on the weekends. This lack

of sleep caused my teaching and personal relationships to suffer. Additionally, I felt like I was missing out on important events and time with friends and family. Due to time and financial constraints, I was unable to take part in numerous activities. Finally, while I felt a wonderful sense of accomplishment, my salary and responsibilities at work remained unchanged. At times, I still find myself asking myself, “Was it worth it?” At this point, I would say, “Yes and no.” Perhaps, I can better answer this ten years later.

Advice

Before I chose to enroll in the EdD program at UNE, I frequently sought out advice from those who either completed a doctorate, were currently enrolled in a doctoral program, or had chosen not to do a doctorate. Now I find myself the one who is asked about my experience and any advice I can give. The following pieces of advice (see Figure 7) are what I typically offer.

Figure 7: EdD Advice

Talk to current and former participants

Seeking out advice and perspectives will help you make a better-informed decision on enrolling in a doctoral program. Additionally, once registered, talking with others will be a source of mentorship and support. Doing a doctorate can be a lonely experience at times. Reach out to others as much as you can.

Communicate clearly to those around you about deadlines

Your friends and family will likely not be aware of important deadlines coming up. Communicating to people around you about upcoming tasks and deadlines will help them understand times when you may be busier than normal. Hopefully, this knowledge of your schedule will help them provide the needed support during stressful times.

Anticipate turbulence and be flexible

Most likely, you have an area of research that you would like to explore more in detail. When you begin the program, you would likely have a good idea of what you would like to research. However, situations can change. Your position, place of work, or personal life may likely change over the next several years. Furthermore, a global pandemic might put your research plans on hold. Thus, your original research plan may need to be altered. Consider possible alternative research plans should you encounter unforeseeable changes to your personal or professional life.

Don't neglect both your professional life and personal life

Taking on a doctorate can cause you to neglect other important areas of your life. You will often hear about the importance of maintaining a work-life balance. However;

consider how to maintain a balance within your work. Focusing on your dissertation can cause you to neglect other areas of your professional life. As a foreign-language lecturer in Japan, I neglected teacher development, language learning, and publications. All of these can carry importance in your current work situation and securing future employment. Of course, if in Japan, your prospective employer will be interested in your doctoral research, but they will also know about your Japanese language ability. Every interview I have had has either been partially in Japanese or entirely in Japanese.

In sum, these are some of the pieces of advice that I often find myself giving to others. Of course, everyone's situation or motivation for doing a doctorate is different. Thus, I tailor my advice accordingly. Pursuing a doctorate will not be right for everyone. Even at this time, I am not sure if it was right for me. However, in 2015, it seemed like the right decision. In the end, I completed my doctorate in education, and it has helped me achieve some of my goals. Consider your goals and how a doctorate might help you achieve them. At the same time, consider other avenues to achieve those goals.

Doctorate Experience 3: Andrew D. Tweed, EdD

Background & Rationale

I first started working as an EFL teacher in 2000, in a rural area of Japan near Mount Fuji. After working at an *eikaiwa* for a couple years there, followed by teaching English at a vocational college in Tokyo for three years, I returned to the US to do a MATESOL in 2006. After I completed my MA, I thought about doing a doctorate, but I instead decided to go to Southeast Asia, where I worked mostly as a manager and a teacher trainer. The six-plus years in Vietnam and Cambodia involved really rewarding and enjoyable work, but after a while I started to feel complacent professionally, and I wanted to be exposed to fresh ideas, which were backed by research. I therefore decided to undertake a doctorate, and I believed this would help me with university positions once my wife and I returned to Japan.

After considering a number of other universities, for various reasons, I decided to apply to the Doctor of Education in TESOL program at Anaheim University (AU) in California. One reason I chose AU was that I liked that I could take it online, and so it did not matter if I was in Cambodia or Japan. In addition, while it was online, their program included both synchronous and asynchronous coursework, as well as two residential sessions, which helped reduce feelings of isolation. I also decided on AU because it offered a nice

balance between the practical and theoretical. For example, while it offered highly useful courses in curriculum design and materials development, it also included more theory-based ones in research methods, instructed second language acquisition (SLA), and pragmatics. One other reason I opted for Anaheim's doctorate was because of its esteemed faculty. David Nunan started Anaheim's Graduate TESOL program, and the professors who teach the courses are generally regarded as experts in those particular areas. Thus, for example, Rod Ellis taught instructed SLA, Brian Tomlinson taught materials development, and Kathleen Bailey taught teacher education. This was different from my MA where only a relatively small number of professors taught all of our courses, and they frequently taught outside of their areas of expertise.

University & Course

Figure 8 presents an overview of the coursework, which in my case, took me two and half years to complete.

Figure 8: Coursework for Anaheim Univ.'s EdD Program

- Synchronous online lectures every Saturday morning
 - Lectures followed by discussions with classmates
 - Moodle for weekly tasks, e.g., discussion forum
 - Two residential sessions, in Tokyo or southern California
 - Generally, two papers for each course
 - Qualifying and comprehensive exams
-

I would like to highlight the fact that the course has been designed in a way that provides a lot of interaction with the professors and between classmates. The synchronous classes and discussion forums facilitated various modes of interaction. Furthermore, the residential sessions, which were about three days each and alternated between Tokyo and southern California, were helpful in fostering stronger bonds with others in the program.

For me, the most difficult aspect of the course work was writing two papers for each course. However, I also feel like this made me a much better writer. By the end of the EdD I had written about thirty papers. Also rather challenging were the qualifying and

comprehensive exams, as these required periods of intense study sessions of previous material in order to pass.

Figure 9 shows an overview of the dissertation process. While the dissertation for AU's EdD in TESOL can be done in as short as one year, mine, being qualitative, took approximately two and half years. I wrote the dissertation proposal while taking a general course on dissertation proposal writing and the professor of that course, while not my advisor, gave me some helpful guidance. Particularly in the early stages of working with my advisor, I also made some significant changes to the original proposal, which required more time. Furthermore, as my study involved a grounded, bottom-up approach to analyzing the data, I experienced some difficulty settling on an appropriate theoretical lens with which to make sense of my data.

Figure 9: Anaheim Univ. EdD in TESOL Dissertation Process

- Write dissertation proposal
 - Formally request to work with an advisor
 - Write the dissertation with ongoing support from advisor
 - Send completed dissertation to one external examiner, one internal examiner
 - Carry out defense to one external examiner, one internal examiner and advisor
 - Address any required or suggested revisions and then re-submit
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In addition to academic challenges, I dealt with a number of more general obstacles to completing the dissertation. Some of my most significant problems were health related: worsening eyesight, tooth aches, back pains, shoulder pains, and the most disruptive of all, chronic headaches. This was also happening amidst a very stressful work situation, where there was frequent turmoil among members of our small self-access center team.

Dealing with AU's administration also caused me a good deal of frustration. I was pushed to take double course loads, I had to argue with them to take a term off when my health was in poor condition, and added to that, I had to keep paying for each additional term of my dissertation. While academically, I had an excellent experience with Anaheim, their administration left me ultimately feel somewhat negative about the university.

Outcomes

Finally, I would like to briefly discuss the positive and negative outcomes of doing a doctorate. Regarding the former, I am now much more focused in terms of my research interests. Both the coursework and my dissertation helped me to narrow in on learner autonomy and psychology in language learning as my primary areas of interest. I am also more confident in both the practical and theoretical domains of TESOL. Last but certainly not least, I am more competitive in the job market. I have landed two university positions in the past five years directly linked to my professional interest in self-access centers.

At the same time, there have been some negative outcomes. The cost of my doctorate was about \$60,000 US. Hopefully, this investment pays off in the long run. In addition, I have experienced what might be called a doctoral hangover. I still feel somewhat run-down by the whole process and I have only recently submitted the paper based on my dissertation to a journal. Finally, I have some lingering health issues which took root during my doctoral studies, most notably, poor eyesight and back pain. Anyone considering doing a doctorate should be aware of these potential payoffs and pitfalls.

Advice

I started my doctorate while working in Cambodia. A colleague of mine there from England used to say, “I would like to have done one, but I don’t actually want to do a doctorate.” In my case, I am glad that this experience is over, and I am pleased that I have got my doctorate. However, I would not put myself through that process again. Especially at my age, it would not make sense from a cost-benefit perspective.

Related to the financial benefits of doing a doctorate, I do believe teachers thinking about doing one should be aware that it may not actually pay off. Doctorates are expensive and time consuming. Teachers in our field should consider other things that they can do to advance their careers to provide themselves with a financial boost. For example, they can take on more classes, teach privately, open a business, become an examiner, or work for a publisher. Now with the widespread use of video conferencing applications, they could try online teaching as well. Of course, there are other things not directly related to English teaching that they can do. I have worked as a music teacher in Japan. Some people get paid for writing and copywriting, while others translate. In sum, I would suggest that TESOL professionals consider the reasons for doing a doctorate and what they would hope to get out of it, and they should compare that with what they could get from putting

their time elsewhere. I am happy that I did a doctorate. It has helped me in a number of ways. But it is certainly not the best option for everyone.

BIO DATA

Nicholas Bradley is an associate professor at NUFSS and holds MAs in TESOL and History, and a PhD in Applied Linguistics. He has taught at university in Japan for 10 years and is currently the Director of multiple courses within the Core English Program.

Kevin J. Ottoson is a language instructor at Nanzan University in Nagoya, Japan. He holds an Ed.D from the University of New England. His research interests include study abroad and the development and assessment of intercultural competence.

Andrew D. Tweed holds an Ed.D. in TESOL from Anaheim University. He is a lecturer in the World Language Center and coordinator of the Self-Access Center at Soka University in Tokyo. Andrew's research interests include learner autonomy and psychology in language learning.

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DOING A DOCTORATE: THREE EXPERIENCES

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