

# Factors Influencing Graduation of a Master's Program in Educational Administration in Southern Mexico

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This article presents the preliminary results of a study on the factors that influenced the graduation of students of a master's program in educational administration. The study involved interviews with graduates of the program, as part of a larger research that also included interviews with their advisors and program coordinators. Findings indicate that the main factors influencing student graduation are related to individual, university, and contextual factors. Among the main individual factors were motivation, prerequisite learning, and research skills. Among the university-related factors were the academic support provided by the thesis director and the thesis committee, as well as student interest in the thesis topic. Regarding the factors related to the context, it was found that these included the influence of the employment status, the facilities provided by the employer for completing the program, and the economic situation of the student that allowed him/her to cover the costs of the program.

*Keywords:* leadership, preparation of educational administrators, higher education

## Introduction

The preparation of human resources for conducting research leading to the improvement of professional work is an appropriate strategy in an era of digitalization and knowledge revolution; it allows for nations to count with human capital ready for the challenges in the 21st century (Jaramillo, 2009). Waldman and Gurovich (2005) believed that this century is characterized by new production models based on new ways of learning, so the richness of nations will be measured by their capacity to generate and apply knowledge in innovative ways.

In the World Conference on Higher Education (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 2009), the United Nations concluded that these changes demand universities to strengthen the relationship between teaching and research as a source for innovation, knowledge creation, and a better and faster dissemination of knowledge.

Tovar and Higuerey (2007) asserted that universities would be responsible for collaborating and finding solutions to current problems within nations. In addition, other initiatives, such as the Alpha Tuning Project (Tuning América Latina, 2007), empathize that universities will become the center of thought, debate, culture, and innovation, but in perfect harmony with the surrounding reality and consistent with the new paradigms of higher education.

To address these demands, graduate education is seen as necessary and essential for individual and

collective development. It becomes an instrument to respond to the social commitment of the university by training specialists, teachers, and researchers capable of facing social demands for innovation; hence, the university is responsible for participating in the transformation of society (Tovar & Higuerey, 2007).

Given its social relevance, graduate education is receiving increasing attention both by the educational and the scientific sectors; its growth and consolidation is seen as a strategic factor for national development. It is widely recognized that within the context of globalization and the gradual rise in global trade, knowledge becomes a key factor for economic competitiveness. In that sense, the importance of raising the educational preparation of the population is emphasized (Arredondo, Pérez, & Morán, 2006).

However, in recent years, graduate education has been experiencing low graduating rates, and consequently low productivity in the design, production, and publication of research. This is a situation even more serious in developing countries where low graduation and research production almost always emerges as justified by the very low budget for supporting this activity (Gascón, 2008).

In their research, Chirinos and Padrón (2011) found that Latin America has been characterized by low scientific production, in spite of universities' three specific functions: teaching, research, and extension.

Mexican universities are also facing a decrease in the percentage of graduates from master's and doctoral programs, which contrasts with the budget and the amount of support from the government for those acquiring this preparation. It has been found that the number of students who do not obtain the degree is not consistent with the number and amount of resources invested in scholarships to support from institutions, such as the National Council of Science and Technology (CONACYT), and federal programs like the Faculty Improvement Program (PROMEP), and the Secretariat of Public Education (SEP), which awarded grants intended to increase the completion rate with the intention of contributing to national development (González, 2006).

Program graduation is an indicator for measuring the quality of higher institutions in Mexico. Quantitative outcomes are taken into consideration to assess institution quality; this is hence the importance for universities to increase the percentage of their graduates as the main indicator of their quality and recognition (López, Salvo, & García, 1989).

According to Tovar and Higuerey (2007), master's programs require graduates to develop a thesis that enables them to demonstrate what they have learned during their preparation. Acosta (2013) indicated that this thesis is a major learning experience, and at the same time, represents an appropriate mechanism for universities to certify the skills of its graduates. It represents an excellent opportunity for a person to develop the ability to produce his/her own, original, and new knowledge; the student not only studies in depth an issue, but has a written document that describes the results of the investigation and serves as evidence of his/her professional competence.

Some studies have reported that a large number of individuals who successfully complete their coursework do not obtain the diploma or degree, not due to pedagogical reasons, but to bureaucratic difficulties and the length of the procedures for obtaining the degree (Pérez, 2011). According to López et al. (1989), it is necessary to review and challenge the academic aspects related to the preparation received by students during their program, that is, examine whether the preparation is strong enough for graduates to fulfill the academic requirements in order to obtain to graduate.

Other authors stated that the development of the thesis begins in the last year of graduate school, and it is very common for students to require processing skills that probably were not developed during the course of

the program (Valarino, Yáber, & Cemborain, 2011). Ferrer and Malaver (2000) reported that the number of students who do not meet these requirements has increased significantly in Venezuela and that this may be due to factors related to personal characteristics, such as age, sex, socioeconomic status, responsibility, workload, dedication, motivation, cognitive skills, and study habits, or institutional factors, such as those related to the program, degree requirements, orientation, limited availability of tutors, lack of clarity in the teacher's expectations about the thesis, bureaucracy and inflexibility, among others.

In another study, Gascón (2008) found that most students who do not graduate face the following problems: the difficulty in developing their ideas in writing, selecting a research methodology, choosing a tutor, and lack of interest for graduating. Other factors include lack of capacity for identifying a research topic and application of research techniques.

In the case of the Autonomous University of Yucatan, since 2002, the graduation rate has been low in all master's programs; the situation is more evident in programs for the social, natural, and mathematical sciences. González (2006) found that a variety of factors influence students' non-graduation from master's programs, such as organizational and institutional factors, factors linked to the program, teachers, counselors, or tutors, student, thesis topic, and other external factors. All these factors seem to influence whether students graduate or not and if they graduate in the time required by the graduate program.

### **Factors Influencing Graduation and Non-graduation**

There are many factors that influence a student graduates or not (University of Cincinnati, 2013). Valarino (2000) asserted that the phenomenon is multi-factorial and is caused by various reasons, such as the limited time allotted to complete the thesis and the poor research skills possessed by students; according to this author, students face impediments or obstacles related to cognitive, emotional, and social variables.

According to Baird (1990), the time of obtaining a degree is shorter in graduate programs in science, compared with those of social sciences, and the longest graduation period takes place in the humanities, with an average of four years between them. Acosta (2013) asserted that there are a high number of graduate students in the social sciences who have enormous fear to conduct their research thesis in order to graduate.

Ramírez (2012) stated that the topic of the factors that influence graduation or non-graduation of students is a subject that has not been researched enough in Latin American countries. In the case of Venezuela, where some research has taken place, the researchers found that the non-graduation of students has negative consequences for the individual and society.

Due to the relevance of the topic and the complexity of conducting a thesis, it is important to study the factors that affect this problem, because of the consequences and strong implication for student programs and universities, since low graduation rate implies inefficient use of human and financial resources. In addition, there is a loss of academic prestige as it is considered that a low number of graduates also indicate little ability of the graduate program to meet its objectives, and therefore, it is evidence of low efficiency and quality (Ferrer & Malaver, 2000).

In Mexico, for more than two decades, the interest in the ranking of graduate students and programs has been present as a major issue in several national meetings of the National Association of Universities and Institutions of Higher Education (ANUIES) and those meetings carried out in Villahermosa and Tepic, where authorities and researchers have stated the need to examine possible causes for no graduation (López et al., 1989).

### Methodology

The study was qualitative and developed under an interpretative paradigm (Erickson, 1986). Data collection involved semi-structured interviews with students of a master's program in educational administration that have successfully completed the program. The master's program was expected to develop graduates' competencies in school management, instructional and organizational leadership, organizational development, ethics, as well as curriculum design (use of technology, communication, internationalization, globalization, and enhancing relationship between theory and practice). The program was addressed to persons already working as school administrators from K-12 and higher education, who lacked preparation for the position. The purpose of the program was to develop students for effective management, supervision, leadership, and innovation of their organizations. The need for creating the program was based on a prior study that identified the lack of preparation of school administrators in all levels of education and the problems they faced in their practice (Cisneros-Cohernour, Barrera, & Aguilar, 2014).

Between the period of 2004-2012, 120 students enrolled in the program. Of these students, only 49 graduated (41%). All 49 graduates were invited to participate in the study, with a participation of 11 graduates (22.4%), their advisors, and the program coordinators. In this paper, we present the preliminary findings from student graduates.

Data analysis was thematic by each and all cases. All information was analyzed, and confidentiality and data fidelity were protected. According to Stake (2004), "The analysis of qualitative information involves making a thorough examination of all relevant factors and considers putting all the pieces back in order to get the fullest possible meaning".

### Results

All respondents claimed that the program met their expectations, although the level of demand was high. Program participants also indicated that there were several factors influencing their graduation. They identified their motivation for obtaining a better job, a promotion, for improving their performance or a means for keeping their current job, as the main factors for graduating. As one respondent commented:

I came from the computer field but had to work on school management. I looked for other programs as options for acquiring preparation in this area, but someone told me about this master's program, and when I got the information, I liked it. I just wanted to learn because I had problems with my subordinates, I was stressed out because I did not know what I was doing, my expectation was that the program taught me how to plan and solve conflicts.

Other students affirmed that their main motivation was to obtain the degree, which was one of their goals for personal development. They enrolled for the program because they wanted to learn and gain knowledge to apply to their current employment. As another student added:

I always had the desire to graduate from a master program as part of my preparation. In my family, everybody is very studious but I always was a little behind them. For me, it was difficult to get into the program because there were many years without me studying. It was difficult, but I really wanted to acquire the preparation. I wanted to obtain the degree as a personal matter; I wanted more for myself, to become better prepared, to be current in my field.

When asked about their theses, most participants said that they felt identified with the thesis topic, because the topic was related to their work or it was of great interest for them:

It was the subject that I felt identified because I was working in the area of human resources and I felt comfortable

working with this topic. My advisor told me that I needed to choose something that was important or hurt me, something I care enough, so I choose to work in the topic of human resources because it was interesting and feasible.

The graduates indicated the dissertation directors played a key role in their graduation. They claimed that the relationship with directors was respectful, collaborative, and responsible. The graduates also referred to their directors as experts in their field, one of the main reasons for which they decided to work with them. Only in one case, there was a conflict between the student and her director, which ended with a change of adviser because there was not reached an agreement in relation to the thesis topic:

I always had a very cordial relationship (with my dissertation director). She was always available but most of the time was very busy. My expectation was to graduate as soon as possible. I trusted her, so I followed what she said; I knew everything will be fine.

The relationship with the dissertation director was fundamental in the completion of the thesis; each dissertation director was in charge of encouraging and guiding the work of the student. The thesis committee also influenced student graduation because it was responsible for providing feedback and suggestions for thesis improvement. The graduates reported that the thesis committee positively contributed to their advance by maintaining good communication with students and by being flexible through the process. Only one graduate student stated that his thesis committee did not conduct a great contribution to the thesis, because he focused more on issues about format and spelling.

I had a good relationship with my thesis advisor and other members of my thesis committee (the review committee), they took care of me, and they supported me.

The graduates said that during the development of their thesis, they received different types of support. First, there was the thesis director, the institutions and individuals involved in the process of data collection, their own supervisors authorized them a flexible work schedule to complete their data collection, as well as their families, especially their spouse and older children. Most graduates said that they also received economic support for completing their thesis. Only one of them said that he did not receive a scholarship:

My family, their constant support and motivation helped me to complete my thesis. My work supervisor provided opportunities and the needed time for graduating.

The graduates expressed that upon entering the master's program, they had little or none research skills, however during the program, they acquired these and other abilities that were necessary for the completion of their thesis. They claimed that because they did not have a social science background, they lacked some skills, such as writing skills, knowledge about how to develop a research instrument, and verbal communication skills. They also needed to learn more about education and pedagogy:

I was lost. I did not know where to go; I only knew what courses I wanted to register. I was so fortunate that my advisor and my thesis committee guided me. Now, I am no expert, but I learned what I needed.

Time was not a factor influencing degree completion. Most students graduated just a few months after completing their coursework. Only two graduates indicated that time was an influencing factor for completing their thesis, this was due to difficulties identifying a research problem or because they failed to pass a course.

Most participants believed that the economic factor negatively influenced their graduation, most of them acquired loans or required a made major adjustments in their personal budget to cover tuition and other

expenses involved in the development of their thesis and for covering the administrative procedures required for obtaining the degree.

The costs of the graduation process forced me to apply for a bank loan with high interest rates, so I could pay for royalties, printing, bound, etc..

Only two participants stated that they did not face any economic pressures during the program.

Students indicated that the program met their expectations, but some believe that not obtaining their degree in the expected time was the only aspect they wish they could have achieved. They suggested that their experience in the program would have been more significant, if program developers include in the curriculum related to management practice in schools, including more research topics, that the professors who participated in the program had the same quality teaching, an improvement in the relations between program participants and faculty and that all students received more support in order to receive a second international degree.

Looking back, the graduates believed that it is of great help to have certain knowledge preparation before studying the program in the following areas:

- (a) Scientific writing;
- (b) Knowledge of the American Psychological Association (APA) publication style;
- (c) Critical issues on curriculum (implementation).

Students also made recommendations for future students of the program. They recommended that students start working on their thesis from the beginning of the program read a lot, take the program seriously, and be prepared for classes. They believe that students should be more persistent and flexible. They also recommended for program administrators to have strong monitoring and supervision on students advance towards graduation, as well as to consider including other graduation processes different from the thesis.

Students added that they would have liked to know more ahead of time about the total cost of the program. If they could start the master's program again, they would like to be better prepared in the English language and research methodology. They also stated that they wish they were more engaged and involved in the program activities.

After graduating, the participants see themselves as different, they see themselves as more prepared and receiving more recognition from their peers. They said that they learned a lot from their thesis directors and from their experience with the program.

### **Conclusion and Future Work**

In relation to the factors influencing student graduation at the master's program in educational administration at a university in Southern Mexico, we can conclude that these factors can be classified into three groups: individual, factors related to the university, and the context. Among individual factors, motivation was one of the most influential factors in student graduation; obtaining the degree and the lessons learned from the program were perceived as of great value to student personal and professional life. Likewise, the lack of prior learning requirements influenced negatively graduation as it was the lack of research skills, fortunately, the program provided students with these requirements that allowed them to complete their thesis and graduate.

Regarding the factors related to the university, it was found that providing academic support is essential, which involves the support provided by the advisor and the thesis committee. It was also important to find an

advisor with the same interest in the topic than the student. The conjunction of all these factors was of great importance for the conclusion of the thesis.

In relation to the context, the main factors influencing student graduation were student job conditions, the facilities provided by their employer for the conclusion of the program, and having enough economic resources for paying for the costs of the program. Work conditions affected students as they were an additional source of motivation for graduation, given the promise of a promotion, salary raise, or as requirement to keep the job. Student family also played an important role in providing emotional and motivational support to complete the thesis.

The results of this study are consistent with those conducted by Vigil (2002) and González (2006) in relation to the need of providing students with academic support and creating meaningful relationships between students and their thesis committee. The findings also support prior research stating that the role of the thesis director, his/her knowledge of the subject matter, and time availability are crucial to the graduation. The findings also support prior studies indicating that student knowledge or skills influenced their process of obtaining the degree, since the lack of research knowledge and skills can be a problem for completing the thesis and graduating.

Future research is being conducted involving other sources of information about the factors influencing student graduation, such as student thesis directors and program coordinators. Further research could also involve other actors, such as members of the thesis committee and program instructors. In addition, other studies could look at the differences between graduate and non-graduate students, this could allow for identifying critical issues as well as strategies for increasing student graduation.

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