

Quality of Graduate Experience in a Cross-Cultural Educational Environment

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Abstract

Based upon 28 semi-structured interviews of international graduate students and program directors in a Midwestern university, this study identified nine aspects of a master's program as important to the learning and development of international students: shared goals of the program, structure and content of the curriculum, class organization, graduate faculty, a diverse student body, graduate assistant work, material resources, department administration, and out-of-class activities. In terms of the master's programs under study, students and program directors generally agreed upon the strengths of these programs, but expressed different views of the weaknesses. A comparison and contrast of the current findings with previous research was provided, along with discussions of factors unique to learning in a cross-cultural context, discrepancies in students' versus directors' views, cultural bias, and implications of this study for program assessment.

Introduction

The large size of international student enrollment is a significant phenomenon of American higher education. According to the National Association of Foreign Student Affairs (NAFSA): Association of International Educators (2000), "the United States remains the leading destination" for students who study abroad (p. 11). Reports by the Institute of International Education (IIE, 1999) clearly show a dramatic growth over the past 50 years. In the academic year of 1954/55, there were 34,232 foreign students. The number multiplied 10 times 30 years later, and in 1998/99 it approximated 500,000.

The ratio of foreign undergraduate students is usually larger than that of graduate students, but the discrepancy has grown smaller since late 1980 (IIE, 1999). The two groups have become parallel in size in recent years (IIE). However, foreign students at the graduate level are increasing more rapidly. Since the mid-1980s, foreign graduate enrollment has nearly doubled (McCoy, 1996). According to IIE, while foreign nationals represent 3.6 percent of the student population in the U.S. higher education system, they take up 11.4 percent of graduate school enrollment. At some institutions and in certain academic fields, the proportion of such students is even larger (IIE).

The substantial foreign enrollment has stimulated concerns over how these students are served by U. S. colleges and universities, as shown by the extent to which their needs are met

and degrees of satisfaction with the educational experience. Rampasan (1987) raised questions regarding: (a) “the ability and willingness of educational institutions to address the varied educational expectations and needs of international students” (pp. 2-3), and (b) “the relevance of American education to their work in their own countries” (p. 2). According to Allamah (1989), “Much of the higher education community has historically shown little interest in accommodating the special needs of foreign students...” (p. 1). Most faculty members do not even acknowledge the existence of such needs (Kaplan, 1987). However, Lee, Abd-Ella, and Burks’s study (as cited in Timko, 1990) articulated for students from developing countries their unmet anticipation for more relevant education and application opportunities through practical training. Further, Tallman’s research (1990) identified problem areas in library and information science programs that enrolled foreign students, such as faculty’s low interest in international topics and lack of knowledge related to the students’ home countries.

The present study, through examining the learning environment within U. S. academic programs from a cross-cultural perspective, was an attempt to identify variables unique for fulfilling educational needs of foreign students and to seek means to maximize their learning. Participants of the study were asked to assess their academic programs and reflect upon their experiences therein. Program quality as perceived by the people involved thus became the central part of the present investigation. Findings shed light on teaching and learning processes in intercultural settings and have implications for university administrators and faculty with regard to the best practices in educating foreign students.

Quality Assessment in Graduate and Professional Education

The use of assessment to determine program quality in American higher education began in the 1960s, increased in the 1970s (Hartnett, 1976), and became prevalent in the 1980s (Bilder & Conrad, 1996) for “two distinct but related purposes: internal program improvement and external accountability” (Johnson, McCormick, Prus, & Rogers, 1993, p. 153). The proliferation of assessment activities, however, has basically been a phenomenon at the undergraduate level; graduate and professional education is often overlooked (Banta, Black, & Ward, 1999; Haworth, 1996). In recent years, due to public concern, requirements by accreditation agencies, and various other pressures, some universities have started to assess their graduate programs (Bilder & Conrad).

How program assessment is conducted depends on how program quality is perceived. The existent literature contains a variety of views of program quality, arising from three different emphases, the input, the process, or the outcome of the educational system.

Input Views

Traditional perspectives on program quality, also referred to as the quantitative study of quality, emphasize input such as size and scholarly activities of the faculty, quantity and selectivity of the students, as well as financial and physical resources (Conrad, Haworth, & Millar, 1993; Haworth & Conrad, 1996; Krueger, 1993). Such views have been criticized for

basing program quality upon reputational ranking and the resulting insufficient information on the program being assessed (Haworth & Conrad, 1997; Katz & Harnett, 1976).

Outcome Views

Another way to assess the quality of a program is to understand its impact—the learning and changes that have incurred to the students as a result of studying in the program. A multitude of outcomes have been identified as informative, mainly student learning and development, retention, degree completion, job placement, and professional success (Bilder & Conrad, 1996). While all these are relevant and important, Bilder and Conrad (1996) and Haworth (1996) advocate focusing on student learning as the major outcome.

Process Views

Scholars holding process views argue that program quality is learned through exploring what is going on inside a program, what students experience in pursuing their education, and what aspects of the program contribute to their learning and development (Conrad et al., 1993; Hartnett, 1976; Haworth, 1996). Examining the educational process is important because it leads to improvement of educational practices (Krueger, 1993). Astin (1993) recognized the necessity of conducting environmental assessments because environmental factors influence how students develop.

The educational process has been defined in terms of dimensions of departmental environment, attributes or characteristics of graduate programs, student experiences in graduate schools, environmental experiences, educational strategies, or conditions for student learning and development. While a considerable overlap exists among these concepts, they certainly all represent parts or components of the educational process. Quality assessment from such a perspective is typically conducted through identification and evaluation of the dimensions, features, or attributes of departments, programs, experiences, or conditions under study.

In an effort to evaluate the school administration program at Indiana University, Eger (1982) surveyed faculty, graduate students, and alumni through interviews and questionnaires. The results indicated an emphasis on technical and conceptual skills in the program, and a lack of individualization or flexibility. Dissatisfaction was found regarding the graduate assistantship, internship, qualifying examination, and dissertation procedures.

Hartnett's study (1976) identified five aspects of the graduate and professional school environment as important to student learning: the nature and quality of student relations with faculty, a sense of community in the department, faculty concern about teaching, evaluation of student performance, and course requirements that catered to the backgrounds of individual students and incorporated interdisciplinary study.

Aggregating information from interviews with nearly 800 people from 47 master's programs in 31 colleges and universities, Conrad et al. (1993) extracted four clusters of attributes of high-quality master's experiences: culture, referring to the unity of purpose among program

participants and a supportive learning environment; planned learning experiences brought about by core course work, immersion, doing-centered learning, individualization, tangible products such as thesis or project reports, and outside-of-class activities; resources, namely, institutional and departmental support in terms of financial resources, facilities, and reward policies; leadership and the human dimension, specifically, faculty involvement, faculty with non-university workplace experience, and committed students with diverse backgrounds and experiences.

Based on the above study, Haworth and Conrad (1997) developed an engagement theory of program quality. Adopting a learning-centered view, they defined high-quality programs as those that enriched student learning experiences and enhanced their growth and development. The pivotal idea of the theory was the engagement of students, faculty, and administrators in teaching and learning. Through analyzing interview data within individual programs and making systematic comparisons across, the researchers identified and integrated quality attributes of master's programs into five clusters: diverse and engaged faculty, students, and administrators; participatory cultures, as seen in a shared program direction, community of learners, and risk-taking environment; interactive teaching and learning through critical dialogue, integration of theory with practice, mentoring, cooperative peer learning, and out-of-class activities; connected program requirements comprising the planned breadth and depth of course work, professional residency, and tangible products; adequate resources, that is, the basic infrastructure and other support for students and faculty.

Input assessment, as discussed earlier, is basically reputation ranking. A major limitation of outcome assessment is its impotence in yielding information about what aspects of an educational program are needed to incur changes in order to produce better results (Krueger, 1993). Assessment with a focus on the educational process, however, can expose current programs' strengths and weaknesses, which makes improvement possible. This approach is more logical and legitimate to use for the purpose of enhancing student learning, and was therefore adopted in the current study.

Graduate and professional education has received a relatively small share of attention in higher education research (Bilder & Conrad, 1996; Haworth, 1996; Hill, 1981; Smart & Hagedorn, 1994). Little is known about the educational process of graduate programs (Conrad et al., 1993; Haworth, 1996; Smart & Hagedorn, 1994). A review of the extent literature has found a limited number of research studies yielding knowledge of graduate program processes and even fewer studies done from a cross-cultural perspective.

The Present Investigation

The purpose of this study was to investigate quality of experience of international students enrolled in master's programs, based on identification and evaluation of aspects of the programs significant to their learning and development. This study attempted to address:

1. What were the aspects or dimensions of master's programs important to the learning and development of international students?

2. What were the strengths and weaknesses of the programs under study?

Unit of Analysis

In undergraduate education, assessment-related activities and research are usually conducted institution wide. Perhaps due to the more specialized nature of graduate and professional education, the endeavor at this level typically focuses on academic departments or programs. It follows that the appropriate unit of analysis should be the department or program where students experience most of their graduate education (Gregg, 1972; Hill, 1981; Kolman, Gallagher, Hossler, & Catania, 1987). The analysis in this study was conducted in a corresponding way.

Method

Participants

Data relevant to this study came from a research project of a larger scope that was undertaken in the spring of 2001 at a Midwestern university consisting of 6 colleges and 36 departments. Out of the total 378 international students registered, 136 were undergraduates, 208 were graduate students at the master's level, and 34 were at the doctoral level. Students pursuing master's degrees were distributed over 20 departments in 5 colleges, and the distribution was extremely skewed. For instance, 41 such students were found in the Department of Computer Science and 28 in Business Administration, in contrast with 3 in Psychology and 1 in History.

Seven departments from three colleges, Applied Science and Technology, Arts and Science, and Business, were selected to participate, representing diverse fields of study within the limitations of the student distribution. A pool of 21 students was taken, with 3 from each department, based on the best possible balance of gender, age, and country of origin, and the length of stay in their programs (minimum 2 semesters by the time of the study).

The 21 international students consisted of 11 males and 10 females, and aged from 23 to 34 years with an average age of 27.6 years. They came from 12 countries: Bangladesh, China, Cyprus, India, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Nigeria, Norway, Saudi Arabia, and Thailand. Other participants were six graduate directors and one graduate advisor of the corresponding departments, which are all referred to as program representatives in this report. They included one female and five males and had served in their positions from one to six years. For the purposes of anonymity, each student was named by a number from 1 to 21, and each representative was referred to by a letter from A to G, in correspondence with the letter assigned to their department.

Instrument and Procedure

Data were collected through qualitative semi-structured interviews and document analysis. The researcher interviewed the 28 participants individually. Except for one student,

who happened to share the same native language with the researcher and indicated the preference of speaking the language, the conversations proceeded in English. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. In addition, university, college, and departmental documents were collected and reviewed for relevant information. The data obtained were analyzed, using the tools of open coding, axial coding, and serial coding suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1998).

Results

Aspects of Master's Programs Important to the Learning and Development of International Students

Altogether, the students and program representatives identified nine such aspects or dimensions: shared program goals, curriculum structure and content, class organization, graduate faculty, a diverse student body, graduate assistant work, material resources, department administration, and out-of-class activities.

Shared Program Goals

The interviews conveyed a clear message that students who were satisfied with their programs and had a high-quality learning experience were those whose goals, interest, or needs were matched by the direction of the programs. The degree of "fit" between what students tried to achieve through graduate education and what the program intended to prepare them for could significantly affect their learning.

Student 8's negative feelings about her program permeated the entire interview. After two years of study, she lamented about her unaccomplished goals and invested time. Being on a contract with her home university, she came with little knowledge about the host university. While her goal was to study linguistics at an advanced level, the university did not have a program with a focus on this particular field. Unlike Student 8, several other students chose their programs because what the programs offered matched their goals or interest.

The degree to which a program catered to students' needs or background was also critical. Student 14 was quite happy with her program:

The department itself is kind of good for me because I am from an education background in my bachelor's. Then I switched....The program really caters to the needs of these kind of students, and they develop these students' basic fundamentals very nicely.

Curriculum Structure and Content

Breadth and depth of the curriculum. A well designed curriculum provided general as well as specialized knowledge in the field of study through an integration of its sub-disciplines, a combination of courses with an in-depth focus, and the flexibility for cross-disciplinary study. Student 2 recalled:

First thing that gave me a deep impression was the structure of the courses. They are complete. It covered the major aspects and gave you a broad view. It gave you a lot of chances to see business as a whole thing.

A number of students articulated concerns about the limited courses offered in their specializations.

Student 5 perceived the negative side of a cross-disciplinary study:

You end up learning a little about this and a little about that. There's a lack of depth. It is too general....An advantage for people studying in a cross-disciplinary field is that they know different fields so they can take different jobs. The problem is they don't know much about any of the fields.

On the other hand, there was an expressed anticipation for a curriculum across disciplines as a way to gain multiple perspectives and integrated views of problems under study. It could best fulfill students' goals especially if the goals were interdisciplinary in nature. Student 19, studying literature and planning on a teaching career, commented:

I would really like to get a sense of how [what] I am learning here is applied to elementary education and elementary teaching. And there are not any courses that do that. I have to do some research on my own, find the courses in other departments...and take those. In this master's program, I really don't have chance to do that because the requirements are so strict that I don't have time to take additional courses from other departments.

Connection of learning to practice and workplace expectations. A carefully designed curriculum was also one that connected theories to application and learning to practice by providing course work of real world relevance and practical value, and by prescribing an internship or field trips. Such a curriculum should be career-oriented, responsive to job market demands for new graduates to successfully undertake a career. Student 2 remarked:

We did a lot of presentations in the class and also paper, and based on the requirement for the program, we need sometimes to write something very professional.... That kind of thing, if you find a job in this industry, you have to do that, to communicate either with the customer or with the government agency. That's the most important thing I have learned from the classroom.

Thus we can see that an important aspect of a high-quality master's program was a carefully designed curriculum in both its structure and content.

Class Organization

In a high-quality master's program, the classes were organized in such a way that teaching was effectively conducted, the class size was small, and the assignments were of appropriate type and amount.

Effective teaching. Effective teaching utilized instructional activities that involved active student participation such as discussions, presentations, and case analysis, and were well organized and appropriately monitored by the instructor. Student 19 commented:

I especially like the fact that we have more discussion type of classes instead of lecturing all the time. I especially like the classes where we sit around a table and create a circle, talking about issues. In each class there are students who present so it's not just all the work from the teachers.

For Student 16 as well as most other students, doing presentations was a new experience, "Another thing I like is the presentation thing, we didn't have a lot of presentations back home. The idea was not there. The students should talk in the classroom."

However, to what extent these instructional activities benefited student learning was determined by how they were structured and organized. Several students expressed concerns over discussions digressing from the topic. Student 21 recalled, "I remember, when I first started, there was a professor who just got his Ph.D. We never really discussed anything about the topic until one student or two talked to the chairman of the department and complained about it..."

Some students believed that lack of appropriate monitoring by the instructor caused discussions to digress. According to student 17, "The professor should have more control of the class. You just can't let the discussion go away from...you just have to have more control so to make sure it stays on the track."

Furthermore, effective teaching had to be carried out in a healthy classroom atmosphere, in which students felt safe to question and free to speak. Student 1 talked about his experience, "The class atmosphere to participate democratically. You feel equal. If you equal, if you free, the atmosphere is wonderful for you to give any questions for your inquiries."

In some classes, the atmosphere was different. According to student 20:
Some professors don't even care about what their students think or if they have any questions. Of course, you are free to ask questions to clarify your doubts, but they don't go deep into it and basically make the atmosphere less friendly.

Relevance of teaching to the subject matter was another perceived contributor to effective teaching. Student 10 complained about some of the classes he had taken:

At the time when he come to class, he just say about his daughter, his wife, going here, going there. When we ask, "Professor, how about this methodology?" He say, "OK! So the method is like this this," and then he try to give an example and then going to his wife....Everyday is like this.

Effective teaching was also characterized by a manner of communication promoting two-way interactions and critical thinking, and use of accessible language. Student 3 seemed to enjoy most of her classes:

Our instructors are very qualified. We have other instructors who have from different styles. They are very active in the classroom, and they can chat with you, not in nonsense sense. They can make the classroom very active, and you have a lot of interaction there. I like that very much.

Student 16 had a somewhat mixed experience, “Some instructors are real good. They know what they are talking about. Some instructors are very mechanical. They just follow some rules. They don't care sometimes if you really understand or not.”

Student 20 described some of her professors as:

They are very very bright and very knowledgeable....They just know too much about their subject so it becomes a problem since they can't communicate it to their students. I've experienced that quite a bit. All of us in the department experienced that. Their communication abilities are not very good.

Student 9, coming from Japan, was impressed by the way students were challenged in class:

When I was in Japan, just to get the degree, just study and study only from the book, and just answer the questions. So you don't need to do critical analysis, but here the professors challenge you. They want to know what you think, not what the books say. Based on what you learned from the book or classes, what is your opinion? So you have to have a very critical analysis skill.

A few students brought up a concern over the use of language. Colloquial English or fast-paced speaking made class instruction less accessible. Student 4 recalled, “I remember the first day I have to get into one of my class.... She speak pretty fast. After the first class, I said I couldn't study here.”

Student 16 shared his experience:

Sometimes, some instructors, I found, when they are talking in the class, as an international student, you expect them to speak formally, formal language so we can....Sometimes I found they speak really colloquial type. They use their slangs. When I first came, sometimes I could not understand what they are talking about. I used to miss some words. So it's like sometimes I guess they are too informal. They don't think that, OK, some internationals are here. We are trained for formal English not for slangs or colloquial. I found sometimes it's very uneasy for me.

Small class size. Several participants commented on the positive influence of small class size or low student-faculty ratio on student learning. Student 7 stated:

Some class I like. Some class I don't like. Some class I like is small because it's more personal attention, more easy atmosphere for everybody to express their thought or opinion. Those big class, the instructor have hard time to manage. The same person express their thought. The rest of them don't express their thought. So, I prefer small class. That's probably more teamwork. The classmates, it's like a small group. They cooperate and they help each other in those class.

Assignments. Assignments which brought about the maximum quality of learning were those that involved research, independent work, team work, and learning from doing. They were intensive within an appropriate limit of quantity and distributed throughout the entire semester.

Through conducting research, students obtained a more thorough and deeper understanding of a topic. Student 5 put it this way:

If you write a paper or do a presentation, you spend a lot of time searching for information, preparing. During this process you remember the subject and you gain more complete understanding. It's not like taking an exam.

Student 7 made a similar comment, "If you do research, you go so deep, deep...you dig, dig, and dig so you can learn a lot of things from the research."

Through such assignments, students learned independent working skills and a sense of responsibility. According to student 3:

From studying point of view, the biggest thing, it's like more independent. It's not like in China at all. In China it's the instructor's job to feed you, not the student job to learn something. That's a big difference here. As a student you have the full responsibility to get the knowledge. You can't just play around and don't study at all.

Projects that emphasized learning from doing strengthened learners' mastery of certain knowledge and skills. Student 4 benefited from this kind of projects. She said:

[In my country] we learned some theories about how to retrieve information from the database, but we didn't do it. Here every week we have to submit our workshops so that means we need to practice and we know how to do it.

She went on saying:

If you want them to show how to retrieve data in this server and you ask the same question in the U. S., the student here, they can answer your question and they can explain why. But [in my country] maybe they can tell you some concept.

In addition, the amount and frequency of assignments had a bearing on the quality of learning. Many students made favorable remarks on the intense workload required in their programs. Student 9 said, "They give you so many assignments, which I think very good, challenging, and encouraging me to study."

Student 14, coming from India, compared two different ways students were evaluated: We have exams only at the end of the academic year. So it's kind of different. Here it's like every week an assignment and so many exams. I find it very beneficial because that makes us work through the year. Back home it's like the last one month of the exams, you get all the books and sit down to study and do everything a lot during the preparation holidays before the exams. Here it's not like that. If I don't do one day's work, then I am doomed.

While an intensive workload was beneficial in general, the quantity of work would be at the expense of quality when it was beyond a certain level. Student 3 commented:

Sometimes I feel we did too many papers. It's not because I am lazy. I think we did too much writing. Sometimes in one week you are supposed to fulfill a 10 to 12 page paper. I mean, for one semester if you have a couple of them, it's OK. You pay a lot of attention

on them. But every week you have one. You kind of feel like, "What is all this about?" I am kind of tired.... Sometimes you just feel they don't make a lot of sense there, and you'll just do it one day before it's due.

Student 17 made a similar point:

Writing, sometimes it becomes a problem when you write too much. You just want to finish your paper without real organizing your paper.... You just want to meet the requirement of writing a paper but not to study deeply in your course requirement.

Graduate Faculty

Faculty treatment of students. The kind of treatment facilitative of student learning was marked by friendliness, accessibility, caring, lack of bias or prejudice, and willingness to provide advice and guidance. Such treatment also encompassed cross-cultural understanding—an awareness of possible impacts that a cross-cultural context might have on teaching and learning. Student 6 said, “When we speak the language, some sentences or some words may not be suitable.... You [some instructors] point it out, ‘Why do you use that?’ It's kind of discouraging.... The basic need is just for them to understand the difference.”

Program Representative B commented, “I see a need for faculty training, faculty understanding or whatever. It is probably the most important thing, the difference in learning style and language barrier, that sort of thing.”

Some students suggested accommodations in or alternative means of evaluation. Student 21 suggested:

If, somehow hypothetically speaking, give some kind of consideration, international students be given a bit more time so that they can cover because it takes me and most of my international friends almost like two or three times the time it takes American friends of ours to finish a chapter.

Student 6 said:

Then maybe when you [instructors] grade, you grade something totally on participation but realize that some people don't want to talk. It's not they don't have ideas. They don't feel like talking. Yeah, your way of doing things is good. You encourage them to talk, talk, but maybe you can email him...give him a question and ask him to answer by email to see his point of view.

Faculty professional competence. A high quality master's program was one staffed by highly competent faculty, who held a doctoral degree, were knowledgeable about their major field, actively engaged in research, and had at least some workplace experience outside academia. Student 17 shared his view on instructors' role in student learning, “Instructors probably the most important part.... They know their knowledge. They know how to teach.”

Student 20 observed:

I have had a couple of professors who just don't know much about their subject. You can easily make out because like I've had classmates asking questions and they are totally stunned. They don't know the answer or, if they answer, that answer is not satisfactory. You can definitely tell that they are not very comfortable with what they are doing.

Continuous engagement in research brought benefits to the classroom and kept the faculty in the front line of their major field. Student 8 showed concerns about the lack of research activities in his department:

In some other schools they have faculty who is doing research for the government or a company, maybe Microsoft.... If the faculty has this kind of research to do, it may affect the content of the course as well....His experience of doing the research is reflected in the course work.

Student 17's department was somewhat different:

They write papers, present papers. They write books. They publish books. I guess this is one of the strengths because this shows the professor they keep improving their knowledge in their field. They can say the research results to us and update our knowledge.

Faculty's experiences outside academia served to connect classrooms to the real world and shed insights beyond books. Student 21 enjoyed classes taught by such professors:

What helps is that they offer courses such as... by someone who actually has been there.... So, if we don't have people like that, then we will end up with just typical intellectual professors for our...just too much in theory, nothing to do with the reality. The good thing about that professor, for example, is that the text book says bla, bla, bla, he would say, "You know what, in the reality it isn't like this."

Program Representative F spoke of his program, "We have individuals that have done things that they are educating people on, and they continue to stay current by working in...organizations."

Diverse Student Body

Diversity in student body made it possible for students to exchange different cultural perspectives and share life and working experiences on issues both inside and beyond their academic study, through formal and informal discussions, personal contact, and other means of interactions. Student 21 said:

The other thing that helps is international students in the program or international students from different departments. And then we would discuss things, like to know about China by just talking to Chinese students. The international atmosphere really helps a lot to broaden your horizon.

Student 6 shared her understanding of diversity:

In our program there are a lot of people from Caterpillar, from State Farm. They are part time students. They have working experience, so they can bring to the classroom their

working experience, real world problems. So when they say something, you listen to them, you get something.

Graduate Assistant Work

At least eight students in this study worked in their departments as research or teaching assistants, which brought them professional and personal growth, serving as a good preparation for their future career development. Student 2 described what he did, "If they have a survey, we have to type the letter and send the letter. For the experiment... we go there to get the first-handed or second-handed data and come back and analyze with some software." Student 19 was planning on a teaching career. He said, "As what helps me in the program to achieve my goals, first one is I am already teaching, practicing teaching, coaching students." Student 8 became more self-confident because of the teaching experience, "I teach labs, and I grade assignments and exams. That's what I haven't done before. I used to be uneasy standing in front of [the students]. I have learned to. I now can talk easily without feeling so nervous."

Material Resources

Another dimension of a master's program benefiting student learning and development was adequate material resources possessed by the department, mainly, physical facilities in terms of equipment, technology, and related services, and financial assistance such as graduate assistantships and tuition waivers. When asked how the department helped him to achieve his goals, Student 8 responded:

The department provides access to computers and the internet as well. They also have software on the computers so you can just go there and use them. If you want to learn something on your own, the software is there. The resources are there.

Department Administration

Department administrators could make a positive impact on student learning by being helpful and responsive to their students, establishing cooperation with other departments, and making links with outside institutions. Student 19, studying literature and planning to teach in the future, said:

I would like [the department] to have more connections to education, especially the Education Department.... Apart from the Education Department...like the Art Department. You have all these great art picture books and you don't know how to talk about it because you don't have the language. The Art Department would teach you how to talk about art.

Student 11 said, "[They] may need to develop connections with some companies, not necessarily big company like Microsoft, maybe smaller companies. The students can be sent there and do a project."

Out-of-Class Activities

A high-quality master's program was also one that provided students with opportunities for various out-of class activities, either organized by the department or outside institutions. Through attending extra-curricular seminars, participating in conferences, and holding membership in academic or professional associations, students could listen to lectures, engage in discussions, and make contact with experts or professionals in their fields, which would serve to broaden their knowledge and views and to strengthen their professional identities. For student 19, attending conferences helped to shape his future career, "The other thing is that we are encouraged to participate in conferences, so I've already produced scholarly work that goes outside the classroom. I am going to try to get some of the stuff published." Student 12 appreciated the opportunity to meet "big names" of her field:

What I really like is that they give us an opportunity to actually go to conventions, academic conventions, and meet the people that have written the books we are reading or articles, and have that opportunity get into the professional yet academic part. That I will remember for the rest of my life, the feeling of mingling with the big names.

Strengths and Weaknesses of the Programs under Study

Both the students and program representatives were asked to identify strengths and weaknesses of their programs. In addition, comments on program overall quality were elicited from the students.

Overall Quality

A majority of the students evaluated their programs favorably. Although different wordings were used, the overall quality was rated mostly from medium to superior.

Of four programs, Program B, C, D, and G, evaluations ranged from "all right" and "good" to "very good" and "excellent". With another program, Program A, the students indicated a positive experience through a different set of comments. One student said, "I think I am pretty much satisfied. I would rank it somewhere between 80 and 90 in a scale of 100." Another student perceived the same program as qualified for offering a master's degree.

A relatively large discrepancy was noted in quality ratings of Program E. Two students evaluated it as "good" and "close to excellent" respectively, and one student "acceptable". As reported in the previous section, Student 18 was the most dissatisfied among all the students. Her negative tone permeated the entire interview. A major factor leading to her negative experience was the mismatch between her goals for the master's education and the direction set by the program, resulting in her expectations not being fulfilled.

Evaluative statements about Program F tended to be negative. The overall quality was perceived to be low. Student 6 said, "From the point of view of the quality of the materials or

teaching, I don't think I get a good quality here." Dissatisfaction was also noted in statements made by the other two students with regard to teaching and curriculum.

Strengths

Students and program representatives generally agreed on the areas of strengths of these programs. They both identified the breadth of the curriculum as an outstanding feature across the programs. Through a combination of courses from multiple sub-discipline areas or across disciplines, the students were equipped with broad knowledge and versatile preparation for future development. Student 13 said, "The master's program provide students broad knowledge and then give students a lot of opportunity, what they want to study and what they want to research."

Another strength possessed by most programs was the connection of courses to the real world. Some programs were characterized by the applied nature of the curriculum, real world relevance of the courses, and integration of theories with practical application. Others received favorable evaluations because of their career orientation—the preparedness of their graduates for undertaking a career and the intimate connection established between learning and workplace expectations. Some programs were viewed positively because of instructional activities emphasized in their class organization—mainly discussions and case analysis.

Professional competence of faculty was identified as a positive feature of some programs. With regard to the faculty, students in general focused their attention on how they were treated by them, whereas the program representatives emphasized the faculty's commitment to educating students.

Weaknesses

In terms of weaknesses, students' perceptions were expressed in contrast with program representatives'. Whereas the curriculum and class organization constituted major concerns for students, department administration appeared to be the focus of attention for program representatives. Another contrast was that students perceived more weaknesses than program representatives did.

Students' perspectives. Students in most of the programs complained about a lack of depth in the curriculum—mainly the limited number of courses offered in their areas of specialization. While acknowledging benefits of a broad curriculum, they expressed a need to gain more expertise in a sub-discipline area. Student 19 said, "I would like to have more specialized courses [in my area]. Now I am graduating with only 4 [of these courses] out of 11 [total courses]. So I would like to have five or six, at least half." Student 5 pointed to a drawback of an interdisciplinary curriculum—lack of systematic and in-depth study in each of the fields involved.

A few students also complained about the structure and content of some individual courses. The coverage of course content in either breadth or depth was considered problematic. Student 4 said:

Some core courses, that's some class I think not necessary for me. Like some class that I think it's just a small part, but they set it to be one course.... It should be just a part of one course. You can learn these things maybe four weeks, but I spent semester to learn these things.

Student 16 revealed disappointment:

The theories they are teaching here, some of them I was exposed to before I came here. I thought they would go further, dig in deep but not deep enough. As far as the quantitative issues are concerned, again they are not that deep but very general type.

In two programs where an interdisciplinary curriculum was adopted, the students identified weaknesses associated with registering for courses from outside their departments such as the complicated procedures involved and a lack of certainty in getting into those classes, in addition to a lack of depth in the curriculum. Student 2 complained:

We take a lot of courses from [another college]....Actually we should not get some override or permission from them first. Actually we have to submit that form each semester if you want to take their courses....They first check if their students got satisfied and if there is any empty seat for you.... Every time they block us. You have to submit the form. They check, and until last few minutes, "Oh! There is an available seat for you." I don't like that way. Some of the core courses are even offered by [another college]. If we don't get chance to take those courses, we can't graduate.

Students in some programs perceived a lack of internship opportunities as a weakness of their programs. With regard to class organization, quality of teaching in some programs was pinpointed as a problem. Materials and examples provided were out of date. Instructors' lack of preparation and irrelevant talking wasted students' time. Student 10 made such a comment on quality of teaching, "What I dislike is, I think, the percentage of good teacher compared to bad teacher 50-50. It's not like 70 percent is good, no."

Furthermore, students perceived a lack of appropriate monitoring in class discussions as a weakness of their program in which it was employed as a major instructional activity. Student 17 expressed his concern:

American students, sometimes they are talking about something, which has nothing to do with our class. They just bring out some issues not related to the topic. Sometimes I just feel frustrated because in the class you are supposed to touch on the issues related to the course, but sometimes it's OK. If you do it time and time again, you are not supposed to do that.

He went on saying, "Usually you find out that most classes, most courses, they can't follow the schedule, but I think it is usual. But sometimes you just have to have more control so to make sure it stays on the track."

Program representatives' perspectives. The program representatives reported very few weaknesses. The negative side that they identified was mainly associated with department administration. Most of them perceived a major weakness across the programs as insufficient support or services provided to international students. Program Representative B stated:

More time for the department to do maybe social type of things or do more informational type, meetings or that sort of thing, or help the students to know more. I think they learn a lot from each other. I quite often, they come here with a lot of information they got from their peers, and sometimes they get off on the wrong direction.

Program Representative C admitted:

The weaknesses of the program, I would probably say, after having talked with you, we may not be doing enough in terms of having formal mechanism in the department, formal programs to socialize students to, record their special needs and concerns, that kind of thing.

Most of the representatives reported that their programs had limited resources in terms of funding, supply of faculty, or both, which they regarded as a leading cause for the lack of support to international students, and for another identified weakness of some programs—the limited number of courses offered. Program Representative G told the researcher:

I think probably the biggest single weakness is really not our program. That's really the university and the state. We don't have enough money to support international students as much as we would like, which means we can't provide tuition; we can't provide graduate assistantship as much as we would like.

Program Representative D said, “If resources allow, we could have offered more courses. We don't have resources to offer more graduate courses. We don't have enough faculty.”

Discussions

This Study and the Assessment Literature

This study corresponds with the assessment literature. The major categories emerged from the data, for instance—content and structure of the curriculum, faculty treatment of students, effective teaching, a diverse student body, and adequate material resources, which represented major aspects of a graduate program important to student learning and development—are also indicated by findings from previous studies.

With a closer look, however, this study yielded refreshing insights on certain specific attributes of the major categories, which are not reflected in the extant literature. For instance, with respect to the curriculum structure, the impact of cross-disciplinary studies appeared to be more complex than what would be projected from previous research. Since both advantages and disadvantages were pinpointed, a simplistic conclusion on the very existence of such a curriculum as a quality feature, as unanimously agreed upon by other studies, could not possibly be drawn. In addition, department administration has to incur corresponding changes in order for students to benefit from such a curriculum structure. Communication and cooperation across the

departments involved should be established and maintained so that students would not encounter registration-related problems.

Another attribute overlooked in the literature is depth of the curriculum. This study suggests that master's level education should provide not only an extensive exposure to all areas of a discipline but also highly developed specialties in a chosen area. A well-designed curriculum representing a high-quality master's program is balanced in terms of its breadth and depth.

Furthermore, this study disclosed indicators of effective teaching untapped in other assessment research. Discussion as a type of instructional activity highly advocated for its effectiveness in engaging students was not found beneficial to learning if not appropriately monitored by the instructor. Discussion by itself does not enhance learning unless it is structured and organized for doing so. The researcher has witnessed in education literature and practices a mentality that equates discussion for its very form with effective teaching. Students in this study told us from their experiences that this conception was not born out in reality. Relevance of teaching to the subject matter, another indicator of effective teaching revealed by this study, sounds like a simple and commonsense notion; yet we all know in college classrooms how often it happens that teaching is not relevant in any meaningful way. The amount of assigned work is another seemingly self-evident yet easily overlooked issue. Good teachers take into account this factor, and make systematic plans on not only types of work but also appropriate amount to make it challenging and purposeful. Such an approach is different from one that is haphazard or one that exercises "the more, the better" ideology.

Quality of Education in a Cross-Cultural Context

Results of the present study comply with previous research findings concerned mostly with domestic students' needs, suggesting that major aspects of a graduate program contributing to learning and development of these students hold true for their international counterparts. For instance, both groups perceived faculty commitment to teaching as critical to their learning; for both groups, the fit of a program's direction with students' goals and interests was imperative to their successful educational attainment, which was also affected by department administration. It appears that an environment that nourishes the intellectual growth and professional advancement of domestic students does more or less the same thing for international students. The two groups share common features of a high-quality experience of graduate education.

Additionally, this study discovered things affecting learning in a cross-cultural context, such as use of accessible language in the classroom, faculty's cross-cultural awareness, and alternative means of evaluation. It is a misconception that the needs of international students are indistinguishable from those of domestic ones. Although sharing common attributes, a high-quality master's program for American students may not hold the same degree of quality in educating international ones, during the process of which extra factors get played out. Due to language, culture, and previous education, the needs of these students are somewhat special.

Program Assessment

With respect to program assessment, it appears necessary to seek perspectives from different parties involved in graduate education. As shown by this study, the program representatives and the students assumed different positions, statuses, roles, and responsibilities, resulting in views from different angles. For instance, when remarking on strengths and weaknesses of the programs, the representatives focused their attention on the managerial level such as the curriculum structure, the support system for foreign students, and departmental funding; whereas the students narrated their classroom experiences such as the classroom atmosphere and quality of teaching, as well as their relationships with the faculty. With different perspectives complementing one another comes an integrative understanding of a program under study.

Discrepancies in Students' Versus Program Representatives' Perspectives and Cultural Bias

This study dealt with both students' and program representatives' perceptions, which showed more consensus than disagreement. Notable disagreements pivoted around program weaknesses, for instance, while the students reported a number of problems or weaknesses regarding certain aspects of the programs, the representatives depicted their programs as perfect or nearly so. They saw very few weaknesses, if any, and the weaknesses they did see were largely attributable to a lack of funding over which the departments had no control. Thus, the representatives did not consider them real problems of the programs. The researcher had an impression when interviewing the representatives that they acted defensively about their programs, which could be surmised from their tone and wording. Although assured of the anonymity of them and their programs, as administrators, they consciously or unconsciously tried to protect their programs from any bad images.

This discrepancy might be a manifestation of different positions and status in which the students and program representatives were situated in the programs, and the resulting different perspectives. The other possibility was cultural biases inevitable in a study that involves participants from different cultures. Students interviewed might make judgments about program quality based, to some extent, on criteria stemming from their own cultures. Although multiple cultures were represented in the study, the students came predominantly from Asian countries, which could bring an Asian outlook into the present research.

Limitations of the Present Study and Future Inquiries

In addition to the cultural bias mentioned above, other identified quality indicators might be affected by the fact that the study was based upon interviews with participants on one campus, a significant number of whom came from Asian countries. How would the findings apply to other institutions and students from other countries and regions? The rich descriptions provided in this report of the students' and program representatives' present situations would enable readers to make comparisons with their own situations. On the other hand, future studies may

still need to look at other campuses that represent multiple world regions in order to see how these indicators generalize.

Furthermore, the present study suggests a necessity of accommodating the special needs of international students, such as using alternative evaluations. A question to be addressed by future research is how graduate programs could make adjustments for international students without compromising the integrity of the discipline. For instance, how might faculty provide alternative means of evaluating students while holding the same standard and quality for all?

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