

Factors influencing the ABT phenomenon among graduate students in a Master program in Mexico

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Abstract

This paper presents the findings of a study examining the factors that influence the ABT phenomenon (all but thesis) among graduate students of a Master in Education program in the Southeast of Mexico. Findings of the study identified individual and organizational factors influencing ABT. The study allowed for a better understanding about how these factors influence students in an individual way towards their graduation.

Objective or purpose

The purpose of this study was to determine the factors that influence the ABT phenomenon among graduate students at the Master in Education Program of a public university in the Southeast of Mexico.

Perspective(s) or theoretical framework

One indicator of the quality of educational programs is the graduation rate of the students who participated in the program. This indicator is not only taken into consideration in North America and Europe but also in Latin America. In the case of Mexico (CONACYT, 2005), the expected graduation rate for studying a Master degree is three years and four and a half years for a Doctorate.

Studies about student graduation in Mexico have been mainly follow-up surveys addressed to alumni or dropouts. Since most of the research has been about students who have not graduated, more research is needed about those students who after completed all their coursework and other requirements of their programs do not finish their thesis. As Sigafus (1998) asserts, even though many students are able to complete all the coursework during the expected time, many are not capable to finish their thesis. This phenomenon known in the literature as *All but dissertation (ABD)*, receives the name of *All but Thesis* in Latin America. Vallarino (1994), one of the main Latin American researchers who studied this phenomenon, asserts that this takes place when those students who have completed all the credits of their program are unable to carry out or finish their thesis.

Even though there are differences among countries where the research on ABT has taken place, the findings of these studies indicate that this problem is high both in developed and underdeveloped countries. In developed nations, such as the U.S, this phenomenon takes place mostly at the doctoral level. According to Dillon & Mallott (1981), the percentage of students with ABD in an American university was around 60% in 1980. Although these percentages can vary, Stenberg (1994) estimated that two thirds of the students who completed all the credits of their programs in that country did not complete their dissertations.

In Latin America, there are very few studies about this phenomenon. Among them is the work of Vallarino. In a study conducted in Venezuela in 1994, she found that 67.7% of the students who completed the coursework of their graduate programs did not graduate because they were not able to finish their thesis in the expected time, although over time several students were able to graduate. In further studies, Vallarino found that in spite of the differences among the characteristics of different graduate programs, the percentage of graduate students who experience ABT in Venezuela is around 63%-67%.

An analysis of the research examining the causes of the ABT phenomenon indicates that there are five main groups of factors influencing this phenomenon: (a) the institution (Bello, 1991; Marcano, 1995; Lenz, 1995; Hanson, 1992; Kerlin, 1997), (b) the program (Salcedo, 1992; Sigafus, 1998; Stenberg, (1994), Kluever, 1997; Leatherman, 2000). (c) advisors, mentors and teachers Phillips-Jones (1982, en LeCluyse, Tollefson and Borgers, 1985; Lipschutz (1993; Braun, 1990) (d) student (Bello, 1991; Marcano, 1995; Miller, 1995; Green & Klueger, 2000; Klueger, 1997; Sigafus, 1998), (e) the thesis topic (Lenz, 1995, Salcedo, 1992; Tluczek, 1995), and (f) other external factors (Vartulli, 1982; Gillingham, Seneca y Taussig,1991).

Since most of the research has been conducted under a positivistic paradigm of research, mostly by surveys addressed to former students, there is a need for more qualitative studies. Although quantitative results are valuable for studying tendencies among different generations of students, they are unable for understanding the reasons behind these tendencies (Kerlin, 1997). These studies do not allow us the opportunity for better understanding student experiences.

Methods, techniques, or modes of inquiry

The study was qualitative; the research design was one of case studies (Stake (1994). The cases were twelve students from the first eight generations of the program, their thesis advisors and four coordinators of the program. All the subjects participated voluntarily. Qualitative interviews with students, notes from open-ended interviews with faculty and coordinators were recorded and later transcribed. The researchers provided their notes to their participants to verify the interpretations and assertions made by the researchers.

Results and/or conclusions/point of view

The findings of the study indicate that there is a variety of factors influencing ABT, including both individual and organization related factors:

Individual		Organizational	
Internal	External	Academic	Administrative
- Lack of motivation for studying a graduate program	- Work related problems (working full time, lack of support from supervisors for studying the program)	- Curriculum flexibility, relevance, pertinence, relationship between theory and practice.	- Lack of clarity about the norms and academia process
- Lack of interest in research	- Family related	- Lack of	- Lack of library resources and access to research databases
- Close-minded, dependable personality with			

tendency to procrastination - Lack of prerequisite knowledge	problems	relationship between faculty research and student projects, - Lack of compatibility of the advisor and advisee personalities - Lack of availability of the thesis director, - Lack of expertise of the director or dissertation with student personality and learning style. - Paradigm conflicts between the advisor and other members of the thesis committee members	
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Although findings can be used for school administrators to be aware of all factors affecting student graduation, it is important to take into consideration that they can not be taken as causes of the ABT phenomenon because not all factors were present in all cases. For example, while for some students lacking release time from their work was a factor that affected graduation, for others having too much time available was a problem. The qualitative approach used for the researchers was especially useful for understanding how these factors affected students in a personal way.

Based on the findings, it is recommendable take into considerations the suggestions made by the participants in order to increase the number of students who graduated from the program. Some recommendations included are:

- Including within the curriculum the process of developing the thesis as students advance through the program
- Provide thesis workshops for students who haven't graduated to be taught by leading researchers
- Offer academic writing workshops among students
- Improve program selection process in order to select better and more qualified students interested in educational research
- Provide fellowships for students
- Require students to be involved a minimum of 10 hours working in a research project in addition to their coursework

Future studies could focus on examining how the planned curriculum is being implemented and how the factors identified in this study are similar or not with those affecting other generations of the program.

Educational significance of the study

This study about the factors influencing the ABT Phenomenon among graduate students from a Master in Education is relevant because of the limited research in Latin America about this phenomenon. The use of a qualitative research approach instead of the traditional follow-up survey adds to the understanding of how the factors influence students in each personal case. In addition, results from the study can be used for identifying strategies to increase graduation rate among students, and the establishment of policies to increase student possibilities of graduation.

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