An overview of the deliveries of a postgraduate program

Sehnaz Sahinkarakas¹

Abstract – The report entitled ‘Quality Assurance in Postgraduate Education’ by European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) in 2010 points out that the development of the Knowledge Society led to the massification of Master’s and Doctoral studies. With this massification and increasing number of research students, there is a need to conduct numerous studies on the main objectives and contents of postgraduate education. With this in mind, limiting the scope to language teaching programs, I have reviewed the objectives of over 100 postgraduate institutions all over the world and generated four major categories: knowledge of the field, professional attainment, research skills, and personal attainment. This case study aimed at exploring whether and to what extent an English Language Teaching Master’s program achieves these objectives. I asked 176 graduates who have completed or are still in the Master’s program to answer three open-ended questions related to the program and its outcomes. The responses of 112 participants who returned the questionnaire were subjected to a priori coding by two researchers. The findings highlighted the expectations of the participants and possible outcomes of a Master’s program.

Keywords - postgraduate education, English language teaching, knowledge society.

1. Introduction

Massification is one of the biggest changes that higher education has gone through in the last three decades. The number of students enrolled in universities has increased significantly since 1970 and it is anticipated that it will rise from almost 100 million in 2000 to over 400 million in 2030, which is an increase of over 300% (Calderon, 2012). This means that higher education serves not only to the elite but also to any member of society who would like to have access to education (Urs and Ivan, 2011; Von Prondzynski, 2013). Is this a problem that our era is facing, or is this an indication of the development of the Knowledge Society?

It may be a problem when the nature of academic qualifications is taken into consideration. Although globalization has brought countries closer to each other, which gives access to exchange information more easily, it is not possible to give the same or similar chances to all educational institutions throughout the world. The funding, the number of academics, the resources, the facilities, and many other issues are to be considered to meet the needs of this huge number of students. Even if we assume that all the funding has been found for the facilities and the resources, we may still have the problem of finding enough number of academics, even in some highly developed countries. As it is pointed out in the report of UNESCO Forum for Higher Education by Kearney (2010, p. 14), there is a need for newly qualified faculty in OECD countries as 20-33% of the faculty in these countries has approached to retirement age. Replacing them necessitates not only funding but also well-planned programs and a long period of time.

The situation is not different in Turkey. The number of students enrolled in higher education institutions in the last two decade increased from 500,000 to over 2,500,000. In parallel to this increase, the number of universities rose from 60 to about 180 (Gümüş and Gökbay, 2011). Unfortunately, that increase is not the same rate as the number of academics; at the moment the number of students per academic is over forty (Günay and Günay). It is clear that like other OECD countries, Turkey needs more and more academics to give better education. This need was also pronounced by the head of the Inter-University Council in Turkey when he announced in many national newspapers on March 9th, 2013 that Turkey would need about 100,000 academics until 2023.

On the other hand, we are in the era of the Knowledge Society. Knowledge Society is generally defined as societies that are well educated, and who therefore rely on the knowledge of their citizens to drive the innovation, entrepreneurship and dynamism of that society’s economy. In other words, it refers to the production and dissemination of knowledge, namely more and more educated people (ENQA, 2010). Research universities have an important mission in building this knowledge society. Kearney explains this importance as follows:

Countries across all regions are facing increased demands to strengthen their capacities for research and knowledge production—hence, the demand for postgraduate education….This demand has also given new importance to national knowledge-oriented institutions and often necessitates renewal of the systems and structures of higher education so that these countries can take their place in the Knowledge Society which is an ever-changing and volatile global environment. (Kearney, 2010: 10)

The increase in the need for postgraduate education makes it necessary to review more closely the objectives and contents of these programs. For that reason, I reviewed the objectives of over 100 postgraduate institutions all over the world and generated four major categories: knowledge of the field, professional attainment, research skills, and personal attainment. The aim of this study is to examine the deliveries of a Master’s program and see whether and to what extent these objectives have been met.

¹Associate Professor in the Department of English Language Teaching, Cag University, Turkey – sehnazsahin@gmail.com.
2. Methodology

This case study took place at a higher education institution which offers undergraduate and postgraduate programs in different fields. The main research context of the study was the English Language Teaching M.A. program which started in 2010-2011 Academic Year. The duration of the program is four semesters with two extra semesters of extension. The students are required to successfully complete eight courses (56 ECTS) before they start writing their theses.

In the study, 176 students who had completed the program or were in the process of writing their theses were asked to answer the following three open-ended questions:

a) How has the postgraduate program (M.A.) influenced your life?

b) Have you made any changes in your plans because of the M.A. program? If yes, what was it and why did you change it?

c) Please assess yourself reflecting on the following: What was I before the M.A. program?, What am I now? What am I planning to be in the future?

Only 112 participants returned the questionnaire and their responses were content analyzed using two different ways of coding: a priori and emergent coding. Initially, a priori coding was applied to observe whether and to what extent the four objectives identified earlier have been met in the program. Emergent coding was also employed to see whether any other categories would emerge. The trustworthiness of the coding was ensured by agreeing on the categories and the codes in these categories with another researcher. We discussed the codes and their placement in the categories until we reached a consensus.

3. Findings

The findings of this study were primarily analysed according to the aforementioned four objectives: knowledge of the field, professional attainment, research skills, and personal attainment. After this analysis, the emergent objective, social life, was presented.

3.1. Knowledge of the field

The first category, knowledge of the field, deals with developing advanced and specialized knowledge in the field. More specifically, one of the objectives of postgraduate programs is to prepare the participants for their career in the future with sophisticated theoretical and practical knowledge and to improve their competence in their subject fields. Under this category, two sub-categories emerged: teaching practice and teaching theory (Figure 1). As seen in the figure, teaching theory was mentioned by only five participants, so it still formed a category but a weak one. Most of the themes were related to teaching practice (76). In fact, this was the delivery that was stated most among all the others in all categories. This shows that the program contributed most to the participants’ content knowledge.
Mc Alpine and Asghar (2010: 169) point out that on the way to become an academic, a person constructs an academic identity by participating in established but changing collective practices and “it is through engaging in academic world that one learns the tacit knowledge –the invisible curriculum—of disciplinary work.” A thorough analysis of the data related to the knowledge of the field revealed that a great number of participants expanded their tacit knowledge about the field of language teaching. Some realized that they did not know enough and some indicated that they refreshed their knowledge and learned new trends in their fields. Following excerpts illustrate this issue:

- First I thought I knew everything about teaching then I realized what I knew was only a little more than zilch.
- I had the chance of being aware of and following new trends in my field.
- I realized that I had refreshed my knowledge and added much more of it into my experience. It changed some of my fossilized beliefs about teaching.
- The program showed me that “know”ing and “do”ing are different from each other. I have realized that I know many things in ELT but I haven’t used them in my classes at all.

It was also evident that some of the tacit knowledge was made explicit. They started to identify what they were doing explicitly and why they were doing it. Some of them mentioned the changes they made in their teaching:

- I realized that I have been observing learners more carefully, while teaching.
- I am searching for a more efficient method of teaching in my classroom. For example I integrated multimodal teaching in my teaching practice. I am more flexible in modifying my teaching.

Some stated how they started to understand their students:

- It has also helped me relate to my students on a deeper level. I truly realized how easy it is for a student to gauge a teacher’s mood when they walk into the classroom (it’d always been a mystery to me why no one dared say a word whenever I felt grumpy) and how greatly the teacher’s attitudes to teaching and learning can affect the students. I never knew motivation mattered that much.
- I am trying to motivate my students to remove the barrier on learning English.

Some even talked about their attitudes towards the course-books they were using:

- I was finally able to pinpoint the reason why I had mixed feelings about the course-book that I was teaching: There was nothing (terribly) wrong with the book! It fulfilled most of its promises.
- Before MA program, I was heavily dependent on textbooks and used traditional teaching methods, which did not work much. After the MA program I have realized how important it is to adapt materials, make alternative assessments, and read articles on English language teaching.

Analysis of the data related to this category showed that one of the objectives of postgraduate education has been met as the participants gained some advanced theoretical and practical knowledge in their fields.

3.2. Professional attainment

The second category, professional attainment, revealed three sub-categories (Figure 2): further studies (pursuing doctoral degrees or academic careers at universities), professional improvement (providing a link for development, innovation and sharing of expertise), and attitudes (developing positive attitudes towards their profession). As seen in the figure, further studies was the ones that was stated most of the time (35), which shows that these participants are looking for chances to be involved in Ph.D. programs. Although five of the participants did not explicitly state further studies, they mentioned their academic improvement as the following quotations illustrate:

- I started to feel like a teacher in the academic world and I will improve myself accordingly.
- Before the program, I was just a teacher, but now I know how to read academic texts and will keep improving myself in this.

Some of the participants also stressed that the program helped them feel like more professional as they were encouraged to attend conferences and read various articles related to their fields. Following are some of the quotations that were stated on this issue:

--I have attended many conferences since I entered this program so I have met academicians as well as I have studied in M.A. who inspired me to become academian.
--Now I prefer to read articles and thesis that would make contributions to the development of my profession.
--The program has affected my professional development. I become more aware of the academic world. I read a lot of thesis and articles. I am thinking of participating in an academic conference.

One participant stated that not only the course content but also observing the teachers helped her improve professionally as seen in the following excerpt:

--I can say that it really affected my professional development. I began to realize many aspects of teaching. My first approach was observing lecturers. From the very first time I observed my lecturers and tried to understand their ways of teaching. I observed everything about them— their acts, speeches, gestures— most importantly their attitudes towards the students. I imagined as if they were mirrors. I am a lecturer at a university for five years. I can say that I could not have the chance to observe a teacher teaching in the class for many years. I have learnt many other details from my observations.

The feeling of professional improvement most probably helped some of the participants develop positive attitudes towards their profession. Following two excerpts can illustrate this:

--My attitudes and beliefs about teaching and learning English changed in a positive way – Teaching a language is not just giving rules. It was a step for me to develop myself professionally.
--Now I understand that we – as teachers – can do a lot of things with some small changes in our attitudes. It changed my teaching and beliefs on teaching.
As Egan (1989) mentions, postgraduate training is different from the educations students receive earlier because one of the main goals of postgraduate programs is professionalization. Thus, it is possible to assert that our program has achieved this goal.

3.3. Research skills

Research skills, the third category, aims at offering the participants an environment in which they can improve their research skills and be competent in designing effective research models. This category also involves the development of rigorous writing skills which is vital in well-written research papers. As seen in Figure 3, there were 17 participants who stated that they learned how to do research, which is one of the aims of postgraduate education.
Besides, thirty-two of the participants pointed out that their attitudes towards research changed to some extent. Some mentioned that they started to enjoy doing research and that they would keep doing it in the future:

--I did not like research before this program now I realized how important it is.
--My perception of the need for research has drastically changed.
--I become more motivated to learn and research and I noticed that I have an ability to create and compose original writings.
--After I complete the program, I will keep carrying out research because I realized that reading articles and doing some research is really fun.

One participant started to value the research as she realized how difficult it was to conduct research:

--Now I know that, let alone writing, even reading an academic article deliberatively is not as easy as it seems to be. Now I have more respect for every single word in an article, seeing that sometimes I can search for a single appropriate word for days.

One noteworthy finding for research skills came from three participants. They highlighted that research was not just the work of scientists; even an ordinary teacher can conduct research. Following quotation illustrates this:

--The best part of MA is that it provides you with a vision: Research is not only limited to the universities.

The data analysis for this category revealed positive outcomes as some of the participants’ negative attitudes towards research turned into positive. Most importantly, they learned major features of research, which they can use in their fields.

3.4. Personal attainment

The fourth and the last category, personal attainment, is mainly related with self-fulfillment and self-confidence, which would result in taking more responsibility and performing better in their lives and careers. Analysis of data revealed two sub-categories: fulfillment and awareness (Figure 4). The most stated deliveries for this category were self-awareness (27) and self-confidence (24). When the participants started to experience new accomplishments, they reached self-fulfillment which helped them be more self-confident and motivated or take more responsibilities as the following quotations reflect:

--It has boosted my self-confidence in different areas and in different ways. First of all, it was a very welcome surprise to find out that as a teacher who did not study ELT at university, I was already doing a lot of things the right way.
--It means constructing my self confidence and motivation towards my occupation. I believe in myself more as I could make room for it among many responsibilities.
--I can take more responsibility in my institution and put forward more because of my M.A. In the future.
--I feel I shoulder the responsibility of not only mine, but also my associates. I help them as much as I can, even if they didn’t ask for it, and share as much as possible what I have learnt so far.

The participants developed an awareness of themselves as a teacher, as a researcher, and as a person. They believed they started to realize their own abilities and the things they can/cannot do which was reflected in their teaching. Following excerpts are some examples related to this:

--I also found out that trying to keep up with the field that I was interested in made me feel a kind of freshness about teaching, which also made me think about what is correct and what is not, and if I have been doing certain things in a way that they are supposed to be done or not.
--I am now much more interrogating what I have been doing and how that can be more useful both for my students and for academic world.
--I began to consider the questions such as why I teach, how I teach and whether I am good enough at my career and so on.

One of the participants even criticized herself severely:

--Contrary to what I had been thinking, I saw that I’m “nothing” in teaching yet.

![Figure 4. Program’s deliveries related to personal attainment](image-url)
The deliveries that have emerged under this category mainly indicate personal qualities, which I believe can be reflected in people’s professions. For example, developing an awareness of oneself and thinking critically may suggest that person’s development in his/her analytical skills. In other words, it is possible to argue that personal attainment is very strongly associated with professional attainment.

3.5. Social life

Emergent coding of data revealed one more category --social life (Figure 5). The participants expressed that the postgraduate program changed their social life to some extent. Some of them had to make some amendments in their social and private life as can be understood in the following quotations:

--I left the chamber choir I had been attending for a year.
--I was an active member of the union ... but I gave up this plan because I don’t have time for it.
--I postponed my second pregnancy and I requested help from my mum to live with us to look after my daughter.

Some had to limit their expenses:

--I would buy a car and give private courses, but now I have changed my plans.

Many of them believed that they gained prestige at school or in their social lives because of doing an M.A. Following are two examples that reflect their beliefs.

--The M.A. program creates an important place in the eyes of other people especially for my teachers and friends. Their perception about my academic career has changed.
--Everybody in my school began to ask me about M.A. They also began to respect me much more and admire me very much.

It was clear in this category that being involved in such programs affects not only academic and professional lives of the participants but also their social lives. Some had to endure some difficulties and make some changes in their routines; some enjoyed the pleasure of gaining a high status.

4. Conclusion and Discussion

As mentioned in the introduction of this study, the globalization and knowledge society have resulted in massification in higher education. Urs and Ivan (2011: 13) argue that although these two terms look contradictory, they “do not exclude each other, but require, as complementary terms, as two instances of a big complexity phenomenon, with outstanding stake: higher education.” They emphasize how these two concepts complete each other:

The metamorphosis of higher education in the Knowledge Society and in the age of globalization is not a paradoxical and contradictory one, as it might seem. It affirms a new model, possible and necessary: the massified higher education, following high quality and exigency standards, developed in a reformed society, adapted to the challenges and needs of today's society and economy, globally competitive. (Urs and Ivan, 2011: 13)

In the process of this transformation, I agree with Adams (2002: 19) that we “need to be aware that to succeed, the next generation of faculty needs more than research skills and an in-depth knowledge about a narrow specialty in their field.” At first glance, it seems that the most obvious two competencies that the participants of this case study gained were the ones that Adams considers not enough for the next generation. The first one is job-related competency as the biggest number of the participants referred to teaching as the delivery they gained from the program. Most probably, refreshing the theories they learned in their undergraduate education and identifying new routes to the way they teach will motivate them in their careers.

The second mostly cited gain was research skills. This is another significant skill that a teacher should have, and probably a skill that is difficult to gain in undergraduate programs. Having research skills helps teachers see “what actually goes on, as opposed to what they might think goes on or might believe should go on” (Long, 1983: 288). Thus, they can assess their classroom environments continuously and understand their students and the
teaching/learning process better.

However, the gains were not limited to these two competencies. It was obvious that the participants would like to further their studies either by pursuing Ph.D. programs or by getting involved in some different certificate programs. Considering the current need for more academics, this delivery can be considered promising. The gains of awareness and fulfillment also indicate that the deliveries of the program were not limited to research skills and field knowledge, which is again promising.

Having a look at the results of this study, is it possible to claim that, in our context, we are “following high quality and exigency standards” that can meet the needs of today’s Knowledge Society as Urs and Ivan (2011) bring about? Only to some extent. To succeed in this competitive world, one needs to have well-developed personal traits by taking initiatives and co-operating with others in various disciplines. Being in the optimistic side, I should admit that there were some implicit indicators, like self-awareness, self-fulfillment, and critical thinking, which show that the participants are on the way to develop these traits as well. However, they were only implicit and based on the participants’ own statements. Follow-up studies are needed to explore whether such gains were made explicit.

5. References


