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Factors Influencing the Academic Progress of Master's Students. (0331)

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Access to education supports social innovation and competitiveness and, just as importantly, societies should be able to offer attractive and diverse job options, or an environment and conditions which engender a variety of professional opportunities. (Icelandic Regional Development Institute, 2013). In the case of Iceland, course offerings at university level were restricted to the capital well into the 1980s. In 1987 the University of Akureyri (UNAK) was established, resulting in greater availability of university education. Today, those who decide to embark on programmes of academic study in Iceland have a choice of seven universities, four of which are outside the area of the capital (Ólafsdóttir & Jónasson, 2017). This situation goes hand in hand with a constantly growing emphasis on the accessibility of a university education, seeing this as a significant aspect of the development of viable communities and sustainable economies in the Nordic regions (Johnsen, Torjesen & Ennals, 2015, p.10).

A significant difference is revealed when examining the proportion of those who have completed a university education at basic and postgraduate level in the capital area, on the one hand, and in the outlying regions, on the other. This ratio is highest in the area of the capital; 44% among women and 37% among men. The national average for women is 38% and 29% for men. North-East Iceland has the ratio of 31% for women and 20% for men; In North-West Iceland the ratio is even lower, or 27% for women and 15% for men and in West Iceland the downward trend continues; here 23% of women and 13% of men have completed university study at basic or postgraduate level (Rannís, 2014).

During the past few decades three main trends have characterised the development of university studies. Firstly, the main growth in student numbers has been at postgraduate level (Sigbórsson, 2011). This has largely been assigned to what is known as “student drift”; that is, the more students that complete their first degree, the more feel the need to add another qualification, or a master’s degree. This trend both relates to notions regarding general respect for the degree and their own opportunities on the labour market (Jóhannsdóttir & Jónasson 2013; Kyvik, 2009). Secondly, a significantly larger number of women than men now embark on university studies and, finally, one should note the wide-ranging age of students at Icelandic universities. Probably both the latter trends have been largely caused by rapid progress in information technology which has enabled universities to offer study programmes which do not require students to reside locally. There is no doubt that the incentive to use information technology for more flexible course offerings relates to the residential patterns outlined above. Besides, the universities have seen this added flexibility as a response to growing competition due to the increased number of academic institutions (Ólafsdóttir, 2004; 2007). At the same time, however, attention has become more focused on how well students are prepared to embark on academic study with regard to family circumstances, work and financial situation (Ólafsdóttir & Jónasson, 2017).

Thus, it is a significant challenge for those who organise academic study programmes to create circumstances which enable the students to complete their studies and to ensure that the education they have invested in is relevant to their professional fields.

The aim of the research discussed here was to identify factors which either help or hinder the academic progress of students at the University of Akureyri, which was chosen because the authors hold academic positions at this particular establishment and anticipate that the results of the research could constitute a useful contribution to quality improvement work at UNAK as well as to the field in general. The focus was on various aspects of master's programmes such as organisation of study, geographical and establishment-related factors, as well as personal circumstances. The above factors of influence were, among other things, investigated with the possibility of gender distinctions in mind.

Individual interviews were conducted with 13 students who had graduated during the period 2010-2016 and whose number was relatively evenly distributed between academic fields at UNAK. Besides, residence was taken into account in order to ensure the most even geographical spread that could be achieved. The interviews were mostly face-to-face, but where this arrangement was not viable the Skype communication software was used. The interviews were recorded and took 45-60 minutes each. Subsequently the interviews were transcribed and uploaded into the software NVivo for further processing. When analysing the data, attempts were made to discover patterns and main themes which might indicate factors influencing the interviewees' study progress.

The following principal themes from the results will be discussed:

Geographical factors: Although the students reside in different regions of the country, sometimes at a considerable distance from the University of Akureyri, geographical factors did not appear of high significance regarding the students' academic progress. Such considerations could, however impact the studies in various ways, for example if the students were prevented from attending sessions due to inclement weather, travelling could be costly; in addition, being held up by weather conditions or having to leave early due to bad weather forecasts could incur significant extra expense. The students living furthest away, for example those in the West Fjords, appeared to include this factor in their organisation, making timely adjustments such as rearranging schedules due to bad weather forecasts.

Organisation of study: Most of the students chose a particular study path because it had an interrupted time series design; dividing the course into local study phases, or blocks, at certain intervals. Sometimes this was the decisive element in their choice. Most were in employment or had family obligations, for example children, and thus could not attend daily academic sessions. They were attracted to the concentrated study phases because these enabled them to disengage from work or home and focus on their academic studies in Akureyri. This was particularly in evidence among the female interviewees.

Network of contact and communication: The research revealed that the network of links the students developed during their course of study appeared to strongly influence their study progress. All the participants mentioned that the study and its organisation encouraged them to communicate with their peers. Thus, they formed a network of contact and communication which supported them in their academic work. In this regard, no difference was noted between local and distance students.

Personal circumstances and their impact on study progress: Most of the students expressed the view that support from spouse and parents had been a conclusive factor in the successful completion of their

academic programme. It was particularly noted that women were more likely than men to refer to special measures they had to take because of periods of absence from their families during the concentrated study phases in Akureyri. The women also made long-term plans; they even booked all flights and accommodation well in advance and made sure that family members understood the situation.

Teaching and study assessment. Most of the students suggest that probably the lecture form is the dominant method of instruction, although discussion also plays a significant part. Some mentioned workshops as examples of diversity and innovation and the students were also of the opinion that methods of assessment could be better adjusted to students' creative abilities. A large majority of participants made special mention of the fact that they much preferred assessment by practical projects as compared to examinations.

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