Graduate School Curriculum Inquiry from The Lens of the Graduates: A Single Intrinsic Case Study

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ABSTRACT: *The evaluation of the curriculum is a critical aspect of curriculum development as it allows the school administration to assess whether the curriculum has successfully achieved its objectives. This study aimed to identify the strengths and areas for improvement in a graduate school curriculum. To conduct this qualitative case study, the researchers utilized purposeful sampling, selecting graduate students in the thesis writing stage and recent graduates from various courses offered in the graduate school. A total of 10 participants willingly participated in the focus group discussion, while four took part in the exit interview. The researchers employed focus group discussions and exit interviews as data collection tools, focusing on the participants' experiences with the graduate school curriculum. The findings revealed three main themes: Advancing professional capability, empowering experiences, and overcoming research hurdles. These themes indicated that the Graduate School Curriculum had contributed to the development of the participants' research skills in their respective disciplines, ultimately empowering them to develop leadership skills in the workplace. This was largely facilitated by the professors' effective facilitation of the learning processes. While this study provides valuable insights into the strengths of the graduate school curriculum, the study points to the need to intensify its scaffolds on the area of research and of reflecting further on the sequence of curricular offerings tailored to fit the context of graduate students in an online environment. A further empirical investigation using quantitative methods is endorsed to obtain more robust information on the curriculum's best features and to enhance its overall effectiveness.*
KEYWORDS: Curriculum, Curriculum Inquiry, Curriculum Evaluation, Alumni, Case Study

INTRODUCTION

Promoting quality teaching necessitates that higher education institutions ensure that the education they provide meets the expectations of students and employers. The advantages of graduate

education extend beyond economic factors; it also plays a pivotal role in cultivating an educated citizenry capable of championing and defending democratic ideals (Alismail and Mcguire, 2015; Ritchhart, 2007; Tomlinson, 2015). Scholars who receive graduate-level education in fields such as science, mathematics, humanities, arts, and social sciences are crucial for improving their quality of life and enriching the cultural and social fabric of society (Barrett, 2015; Coe, Aloisi, Higgins, and Major, 2014; Wenglinsky, 2001). Therefore, periodic assessment of the curriculum's effectiveness at the graduate school level is essential to ensure that program goals are being met considering its crucial role in the development of students (Kumar & Rewari, 2022).

Curriculum and instruction form the core of the educational process (Barrett, 2015; Barrie & Ginns, 2007; Eid, 2014). Furthermore, curriculum, which is a purposefully designed plan for learning, requires intentional and proactive organization, sequencing, and management of interactions between teachers and students (Brown, 2018; Egan, 1978; Su, 2012; Treagust and Rennie, 1993), as well as alignment with the standards the school aims for students to achieve. Moreover, the curriculum must be re-oriented and re-purposed for a present-into-futures focus rather than tied only to past knowledge. A crucial challenge for educators is to identify and create spaces for curriculum inquiry as active knowledge practice that, with a future-problem focus, builds collaborative engagement with students who are living their present towards the future (Brennan, 2022).

The majority of the studies in the graduate school report quantitative results, and fewer studies have been conducted with graduate students as participants (Gaerlan, 2021). Additionally, there is scant data that provide robust information essential for the graduate school under review to utilize for a possible trajectory in its curricular reforms. Hence, in this case study, the graduates' perspectives are examined to describe the strengths and areas for improvement of the Graduate School Curriculum.

Each nation has a unique perspective for curricular reform that fits its surroundings. However, there have been some significant global trends in curriculum design; such as the shift from an emphasis on content to a competence-based curriculum (Wesselink et al., 2010; Bergsmann et al., 2015). Although there are various ideologies and philosophical approaches to the purpose of curriculum, as well as a variety of names for these ideologies (Schiro, 2013), this shift in curriculum vision emphasizes the significance of helping students develop a set of competencies that draw on multidisciplinary knowledge and skills.

This investigation is grounded in the connectivism theory of learning, which acknowledges the transformative impact of technology on various aspects of one's life, including communication, learning, and the overall social environment. In the past two decades, technology has fundamentally reshaped how one lives, communicates, and acquires knowledge. It is essential for learning theories and principles to reflect the evolving social context, including situations like the COVID-19 pandemic that have necessitated emergency remote teaching and learning. George Siemens (2004) asserts that this theory is specifically relevant to the digital age (Siemens, 2004).

Connectivism views learning as a dynamic process that emerges from the interactions among individuals and a network of continuously shifting elements. In this model, individuals contribute information to the network, which in turn provides feedback and new information back to the individuals, forming a cyclical process. While connectivism is considered a significant theory for networked learning in digital environments, it still builds upon constructivist foundations. Constructivist-related theories of learning find appropriate applications in the fields of educational technology and distance education (Mattar, 2018).

To ensure that curricular innovations are implemented with fidelity, instructional practices should be aligned with the specific learning goals provided in the curriculum (MacDonald, Barton, Baguley, & Hartwig, 2016; Phillips, Ingrole, Burris, & Tabulda, 2017). These instructional practices must align with the curriculum as well as support the individual needs of the students (Causarano, 2015). The indicators for effective curriculum development represent the working characteristics that any complex organization must have to be responsive and responsible to its stakeholders. Tyler's (Tyler, 1949 as cited in Glatthorn et al. (2018) objectives-centered model, one of the earliest curriculum evaluation models, continues to influence many assessment projects, moving rationally and systematically through several related steps: 1. Begin with the behavioral objectives that have been previously determined. Those objectives should specify both the content of learning and the expected student behavior; 2. Identify the situations that will allow the student to express the behavior embodied in the objective and that evoke or encourage this behavior; 3. Select, modify, or construct suitable evaluation instruments and check the instruments for objectivity, reliability, and validity; 4. Use the instruments to obtain summarized or appraised results; 5. Compare the results obtained from several instruments before and after given periods to estimate the amount of change taking place; 6. Analyze the results to determine the strengths and weaknesses of the curriculum and to identify possible explanations for this particular pattern of strengths and weaknesses; and 7. Use the results to make the necessary modifications to the curriculum.

The Tyler model has several advantages: It is relatively easy to understand and apply. It is rational and systematic. It focuses attention on curricular strengths and weaknesses rather than being concerned solely with the performance of individual students. It also emphasizes the importance of a continuing cycle of assessment, analysis, and improvement. As Guba and Lincoln (1981) pointed out, however, it suffers from several deficiencies. It does not suggest how the objectives themselves should be evaluated. It does not provide standards or suggest how standards should be developed.

Scriven (1973) extended such an approach to curriculum evaluation by offering his Goal-Free Model. This approach may use program goals or standards but the evaluation is not limited to just examining whether those goals were met. It goes beyond the goals and includes the unintended effects of the evaluation. Scriven also emphasizes the use of qualitative method. This current study uses qualitative data to assess the actual effects of the program.

While the models proposed by the experts (Tyler, Scriven, et al.) differed in many of their details, several common emphases emerged in their approaches: study the context, determine client concerns, use qualitative methods, assess opportunity cost (what other opportunities the student is missing by taking this course), be sensitive to unintended effects, and develop different reports for different audiences. By using these common emphases, along with insights generated from analyzing other models, it is possible to develop a list of criteria that can be used in both assessing and developing evaluation models. The criteria will result in an eclectic approach to evaluation, one that draws from the strengths of several different models. Arostequi (2022) supported this concept, and promotes a holistic approach to evaluation considering pertinent qualitative data.

In this study, we revisited the program outcomes of the Graduate School, which emphasized the development of leadership skills in their respective workplace, their research skills, as well as promoting and advancing their respective disciplines (Lourdes College Graduate School Student Handbook, 2022). This has become the focus of the inquiry to create opportunities for graduates to critically reflect on where they are in terms of the program outcomes set by the graduate school. These exploratory questions captured the intention of the study using the Focus Group Interviews guidelines (Patton, 2014). Analysis of the results leading to the generation of themes capturing the strengths as well as the opportunities for improvement of the curriculum as well as using the results for curriculum modifications were done.

The study intended to describe the experiences of senior graduate school students and graduates on the Graduate School curriculum. The curriculum refers to the program of students and the process of implementing a program that facilitates the learning process of the participants. To explore the experiences of the participants, the researchers in this case study were guided by the research question, "How do the participants experience the curriculum of the graduate school?"

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Design. This study used a qualitative case study research design. Qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world, implying that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011 as cited in Creswell and Poth, 2018). Because the researchers wanted to learn about the particular case (Stake, 1995), this research is called an intrinsic case study. According to Yin (2014), an effective case study requires more than one source of evidence to substantiate the data. In his study, focus group discussion and exit interviews were employed as sources of data; hence the design was deemed appropriate for the study.

Participants. The study employed purposeful sampling involving graduate students who were in their thesis writing stage and graduates who just finished their course. They represented various courses offered in graduate school. A total of ten (10) participants coming from the education, social work, business administration, and library science masters' degrees joined the focus group discussion, and four graduate students (4) participated in the exit interview.

Data Collection. Data were collected through focus group discussions done with 2 groups of participants. The first group was participated by six (6) participants, and the second batch with 4 participants. Another set of data was collected through an exit interview done by the Graduate School Director among the graduating students.

Data Analysis. The responses were coded and analyzed using HyperResearch software. The process of coding was guided by the coding framework of Saldaña (2018). The codes were clustered into categories, and from these categories, themes were generated.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Three themes emerged from the narratives of the participants. These themes are Advancing Professional Capability, Empowering Experiences, and Overcoming Research Hurdles.

Theme No. 1. Advancing Professional Capability

Participants looked at their experience in the curricular offerings in the graduate school as a means of advancing their professional capability. For the participants, this experience enabled them to develop their research capability, formed them as leaders, and allowed them to transfer the knowledge that they had acquired.

Category No. 1. Developing Research Capability. Participants found the curriculum as a means of developing their research capability. They became good and competitive researchers as they improved their research skills. As they described, most of their subjects have an embedded research component that allows them to imbibe the culture of research. This finding is also corroborated by the disclosures of the participants in the exit interview when two of them cited that there was a marked improvement in their research skills after going through the rigors of research (Exit Interview, April 29, 2023, 5:00 p.m). For example, Kelvin narrated that:

Very competitive when it comes to doing research work. And at the same time, also, it's like the skill in working. Also, for work habits, the ability to teach and everything also is developed, of course, because I am an RVM graduate in college for education. So we, we do have the same curriculum and our approaches at teaching education. But the point is the best thing that I have noticed is that we really are competitive when it comes to our research work (Kelvin, FGD 1, Transcript 1, p. 9)

He also added that:

it's not every day that you find schools that are really serious, when it comes to providing a good program for research work, especially for the graduate school. There are schools with, you know, many issues now, they are not very strict with their research work and students there can do under the table transactions when it comes to research work, that has been an issue. Because in the past I have heard for about other institutions, but what comes to us, I really know that when it comes

to our research program, it's really awesome. You develop the necessary skills to become very good in research. (Kelvin, FGD 1, Transcript 1, p. 10)

Category No. 2. Forming Leaders. Leaders naturally emerged. The Philippine Qualifications Framework clearly articulates "a substantially high degree of independence that involves the exercise of leadership and initiative individual work or in teams in a multi-disciplinary field" (PQF-NCC Resolution No.2114-01, July 2014), which forms part of the trajectory of the Graduate School curriculum.   From the participants' disclosures, they claimed that the curriculum formed them as leaders. The curriculum was able to inculcate leadership values and create a venue to develop critical thinking. They further narrated that they were given ample opportunities to experience leadership in the classroom, such as learning organizing skills, managing a team, facilitating and conducting seminars, decision-making, and understanding management processes. This finding resonated with the result of the exit interview when three of the participants revealed that they usually had been appointed as presenters and/or leaders in professional interventions/seminars conducted in their respective institutions (Exit interview, April 29, 2023). During the FGD, one of the participants expressed that:

Oh, in terms of … decision making or situation analysis. For example, the head is not in the office and we got to decide what to do on that certain situation. Um, you get to assess. Will it be good for the school or will it be not? .. you have to consult the higher admins for your decision go. So, you've got to understand, you have two weigh things before you make the final decision. (Cristina, FGD 2, Transcript 1, p. 6)

Then, another participant added that:

Uh, of course, the best part of developing leadership in large colleges are providing us with the opportunity of experiencing what leadership roles in class. So, as I can recall some of my subjects where such activities were done (Kelvin, FGD 1, Transcript 1, p.16)

Category No. 3. Transferring Acquired Knowledge. After taking the different courses, the participants disclosed that they were able to apply their acquired knowledge, especially the teaching strategies. They were able to share what they had learned with their students in research. Some of them were able to integrate their learning into their lessons. Knowledge transfer is very important because it enables knowledge to flow from the professor to the students and to the students' students. One of the participants expressed how she was able to transfer her knowledge to her students. She said:

> …also integrate the technology in physical education, instruction. So, it also provides the opportunities for hands-on learning and experiences. We have experienced man during the time by…that about the sports massage and how to administer really hands-on even… (Ruth, FGD 2, Transcript 1, p. 10)

Another participant expressed how he was able to transfer his knowledge. He said:

> I was able to apply all of the techniques that my teachers used in their graduate school like access a technique in doing a breakout rooms, using all the different technologies, really very much helpful because I was able to use those techniques in my classes because especially during that time … the pandemic that… learning was purely online. I was teaching college so I was able to do that with my English majors as well, everything that I learned from him (Kelvin, FGD 1, Transcript 1, p. 14)

The participants put premium as to how the curriculum in the graduate school was implemented. Basically, it enabled them to acquire capability in their professional advancement. This experience of the participants regarding their curriculum is supported by the results of an empirical study among Pakistani students who developed their skills professionally and personally after being exposed to an educational program (Anjum, 2020). It is very important then that the students are introduced into hands-on and engaging educational program. It can be observed in the way they have developed their capability in doing research through the support of their professors. Picard et al., (2020) suggested that if students are just taught and supported effectively, then they develop their professional skills. Hughes (2019) also found that research capability must be built upon a program that requires research skills development. Furthermore, through the curriculum, the participants' leadership capability emerged and honed as they were exposed to experiential learning (Corriveau, 2020). Aside from being formed as a leader, the participants were able to transfer their knowledge to their students and to the workplace whatever learning they have acquired while they were in the school.

Theme No. 2. Empowering Experiences

From the narratives of the participants, the curriculum was able to empower them through facilitative learning processes and enabling professors. Empowering learners is not automatic (Tsai, Perrotta & Gaševićlearner (2020) empowerment should not be automatically assumed to have taken place as part of the adoption of learning analytics.

Category No. 1 Experiencing Facilitative Learning Processes. Facilitative learning processes, according to the participants, include their experience of the integration of RVM pedagogy in the lessons. They were also given learning opportunities. They found the curriculum effective and so with the teaching practices of the professors. They also experienced immediate feedback from their professors as they were guided in learning. This mode of learning enables the students to become flexible, creative, and independent (Hardika & Aisyah, 2018). In her narration, Rhea expressed that:

> I am grateful for all our professors for the opportunity to learn especially in clinical practice kasi yong sa undergrad namin dili sya clinical, it's more of direct non-clinical sya nga practice so by introducing us they gave us a lot of in-depth knowledge when it comes to clinical practice and also they gave us opportunity to apply that into actual clients despite sa pandemic and pandemic was never a hindrance sa amoa to be able to execute and apply what we have learned sa amoang lessons, sa subject.. and during sa amoang classes, we

came from different fields, so like we say for example there are students who are working or affiliated in the rehabilitation center, naay sa senior citizerns naay sa BJMP so we really learn a lot from them through sharings, and it updates my knowledge when it comes to the terms nga ginagamit sa mga clients… so we were able to learn not only fro our instructors but as well as sa amoang classmates. (I am grateful for all our professors for the opportunity to learn especially in clinical practice because it is not clinical in our undergrad , it's more of direct non-clinical practice so by introducing us they gave us a lot of in-depth knowledge when it comes to clinical practice and also they gave us opportunity to apply that into actual clients despite of the pandemic and pandemic was never a hindrance because we were able to execute and apply what we have learned from our lessons, in the subject.. and during our classes, we came from different fields, so like we say for example there are students who are working or affiliated in the rehabilitation center, there were those who came from the senior citizens from the BJMP so we really learn a lot from them through sharings, and it updates my knowledge when it comes to the terms that they were using in their clients… so we were able to learn not only from our instructors but as well as from our classmates (Rhea, FGD 1, Transcript 1, p. 20)

Category No. 2 Enabling Professors.   The participants in the exit interview unanimously praised their professors, emphasizing the invaluable support and inspiration they received. They felt a strong sense of comfort and belonging in their professors' presence, perceiving them as compassionate, understanding, and approachable individuals. The professors played a crucial role in creating a supportive learning environment, fostering positive relationships with the students, and leaving a lasting impact on their educational journey. Enabling teachers are those who know the subject, methodology, and also, they know their students especially their physical, cognitive and affective necessities (Farsani, 2017). Sally said:

I owe that one from all my instructors sa grad school kay especially sa HM po I really appreciate mga case study nga mga activities then sa case study man gud diha namo makuha ang authentic nga way nga mga mga answers nila based from the experience sa field and then kana nga skill mao na akong na acquire kay during man gud kau labi na sa ako nga this time I am teaching subjects in college usually we deal with case analysis and then I could really integrate my knowledge especially sa mga situation and other things. I owe that one from all my instructors in the graduate school especially in HM. I really appreciate case studies activities then in the case study, we get the authentic answers of the participants based on their field experience. Then you will acquire skills especially for me that I am teaching in college and usually we deal with case study, I can integrate my knowledge especially on different situations (Sally, FGD 1, Transcript 1, p. 14).

Another participant added that:

> I did that. I almost gave up. Ma'am …was there. Don't do that. I almost cried. I felt like I was good. I wasn't gonna make it, but I did. And the sense of fulfillment once you have your thesis (Bel, FGD 1, Transcript 1, p. 10)

Participants' experiences of empowerment are very evident in the learning process and professors. For the social work students, they recalled how the clinical experience enabled them to understand the actual practice in dealing with clients as compared to their undergraduate years. The professors were also very generous to share their knowledge and to really guide to efficiently do an action.

Theme no. 3: Overcoming Research Hurdles

While the students in the graduate program expressed their enthusiasm for navigating research, they also shared the challenges they faced during the research process. Participants specifically highlighted the difficulties encountered in qualitative research due to the constantly changing formats. They further discussed the unique challenges of balancing fieldwork responsibilities with thesis writing, particularly within the Social Work Program.

> When I was a student in MLIS that was before the pandemic. So, every subject was face to face. I can say was that in all of my subjects, we were required to conduct research, so, it helped me develop my skills. (Ella, FGD 1, Transcript 1, p. 13)

> When it comes to the process of research, actually the curriculum na akoa jud na experience, the research was embedded in all of the subjects. It paved the way for me to be open but I realize nga ang research nga subject dapat kuhaon ang jud siya at the very start kay para ma guide jud ka kay embedded man gyud sa in every subject. By that na guide gyud ko. I acutally don't like research, I don't like gyud sya kay grabe gyud sya ka kote. But by experiencing in every subject that I had medyo na open gyud akong heart nga dapat gyud nako sya i-learn to love since it's part of the curriculum. (When it comes to the research process, actually the curriculum that I experienced, research was embedded in all of the subjects. It paved the way for me to be open. But I realized that the research subject should be taken from the very beginning to guide you because it is embedded in the subject. By that, I was really guided. I actually don't like research. I don't like it because of its nitty-gritty. However, I became open to it as I experienced it in every subject. I learn to love it since it's part of the curriculum.) (Cristina, FGD 1, Transcript 1, p. 2)

Category No.1: Unstable guide format in qualitative research. The participants highlighted the challenges they faced with the constantly changing format, particularly within the realm of Qualitative research design. One participant, in particular, expressed confusion when encountering new elements within this design, as it was relatively new to her. These disclosures shed light on the participant's struggle to navigate and adapt to the evolving landscape of qualitative research, necessitating a deeper understanding and adjustment to accommodate any new elements that may arise. Such claim is supported by these disclosures:

I am confused at times because when I refer to the old thesis, I cannot find this part. It would be better if the school has to disseminate this format for our guide. (Jane, Exit interview)

The two participants present in the interview echoed a similar experience as they also pursued studies using a qualitative research design. They shared the challenges they encountered due to the changes in the format of the qualitative research. This commonality further emphasizes the difficulties associated with navigating the nuances and evolving aspects of qualitative research, underscoring the need for adaptability and flexibility in their studies.

Category No. 2: Simultaneous taking of research and fieldwork. One of the participants shared the challenges they encountered while researching two subjects simultaneously, particularly in the field of Social Sciences. According to Linda (Exit Interview), the nature of their research required hands-on experience and actual exposure through fieldwork. As a result, they found it challenging to balance their research responsibilities with their practicum work. Another participant also expressed that:

> Sa among time ang field practice man gud ang practicum ug ang internship actually sabay as we experienced man gud during our time galisud jud kayo mi despite the fact nga full time student ko galisud jud kayo ko kay 300 hours 300 hours man gud tapos lisud kayo ba lisud kayo to sya nga time gyud if ever lang nga mag change mog curriculum basi ma separate unta nato ang SW309 and 310. (During our time, the field practice and the practicum and internship were offered simultaneously. It was really difficult based on what we have experience despite the fact that I was a full-time student. I foud it difficult because of the required number of hours 300 hrs, 300 hours. If ever there are changes in the curriculum, perhaps SW 309 and SW 310 will be offered separately.) (Rovin, FGD 2, Transcript 1, p 9)

Graduate students should hurdle the demands of research in almost all of the courses in the graduate school. In their narratives, the students revealed that one of their difficulties is the unstable thesis format specifically the format of the qualitative research. Moreover, they complained about the simultaneous offerings of both research and fieldwork. For the participants, these experiences really mean struggles. According Akyürek & Afacan (2018), these challenges in conducting research can be lessen when the topic of the research is aligned with the interest of the students.

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Graduate School Curriculum under study has demonstrated clear evidence of its effectiveness. It has consistently showcased its strengths while also identifying opportunities for further-curricular and instructional enhancements. The presence of dedicated professors has significantly contributed to the participants' research skills, the advancement of their respective disciplines, and

the development of their leadership abilities. Despite the participants expressing overall satisfaction with their improved research skills, they have also emphasized the importance of reinforcing the school's support structures in this area. It is crucial to continuously evaluate the curriculum to ensure that it aligns with contemporary needs, involving all stakeholders in the process.

However, it should be noted that the study has limitations as it solely relied on the perspectives of the graduates. Expanding the scope to include feedback from their current employers could provide valuable insights and a more comprehensive understanding of the program's impact.

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Evaluating the Curriculum and Instruction in One Private Graduate School Towards Continuous Improvement David Cababaro Bueno https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0072-0326 Dean, Graduate School for Professional Advancement and Continuing Education (G-SPACE) Director, Research, Innovation, and Knowledge Development Office (RIKDO)

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