



## WHAT ARE SUCCESSFUL, FAST-GRADUATING MASTERS MADE OF?

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Today, efficiency requirements and productivity expectations have a great influence on studies in colleges and universities. How to enhance the smoothness of university studies from the students' point of view? This study introduces the resources and study approaches that are needed in students when aiming at completing the Master's degree as described by Master students and alumni, who are people having graduated as Masters earlier. The data were collected in the fall of 2015 at the University of Lapland in Finland. The data collection took place during a so-called Master's workshop where 110 students from different colleges at the university performing Master's studies participated. Alumni presented their viewpoints and experiences of the knots of studies and about the different phases of studies and their coping strategies. What do Master's studies require? And what are successful Master graduates made of? The participants' viewpoints were analyzed through qualitative content analysis. The findings were divided into 12 themes. The findings illustrate the various dimensions of study processes at universities and form a useful presentation of the factors that should be considered when aiming at supporting students' smooth study processes.

**Keywords:** Study process, Master's degree, Master, Graduate.

### Introduction

Today, efficiency requirements and productivity expectations have a great influence on studies in colleges and universities. Basic degrees, such as the Master's degree, should be performed faster, and universities are expected to take action to enhance fast graduation (Carter & House II, 2010; Ensign, 2010). Especially, the governments would like to see the youth applying for studies fast, making their decisions about study places quickly, and performing their studies promptly and, thus, entering the work market as young as possible (Pennington, 2004).

On the other hand, requirements of more and more efficient use of teaching resources and large study groups can make university studies more difficult (Kokkelenberg, Dillon, & Christy, 2008). Resources should be secured and calculated so that students could design their individualized study plans. Or is the number of students the deciding factor (Bedard & Kuhn, 2008)?

How to enhance the smoothness of university studies from the students' point of view? University teachers and curricula have an important role in this process but, eventually, the demands are targeted on students themselves. They should be able to perform studies quickly, yet with high scores. This presentation introduces the resources and study approaches are needed in students when aiming at completing the Master's degree as described by Master students and alumni, who are former students having graduated as Masters earlier.

### **Study Progress from the Viewpoint of Teaching in Universities**

Universities have various programs to support students' progress (Glocker, 2011; Groen et al., 2008; Nutting, 2014). The efficiency of these programs has also been evaluated in studies (Ward & Vargas, 2011). Indeed, more attention has been paid on, for example, student tutoring (Elbaum et al., 2008; Graesser, Chipman, Hayner, & Olney, 2005; Määttä, 2012; 2015). Although university lecturers and professors work focuses on research, from the students' perspective, quality teaching that is based on research is fundamental to the success of their study paths (Parker, 2008). Likewise, teachers learn, too, constantly when teaching and lecturing, and supporting students' studies (Gibbs & Coffey, 2004). Actually, teachers may have the determining role in the smoothness of university studies (Bambrick-Santoya, 2014; Bell & Robinson, 2004; Lee & Cho, 2014; Uusiautti & Määttä, 2013a).

Numerous studies have outlined the features of teaching that enhances the smoothness of students' studies the best (De Pillis & Johnson, 2015; Uusiautti & Määttä, 2013b; Äärelä, Määttä, & Uusiautti, 2016). Research has focused on, for example, the importance of a positive study atmosphere (Shahidi & Sobhani, 2015), the level of face-to-face teaching (Symonds, 2014), the supervision of Master's theses (Chogyi, 2004), the significance of the first study year (Keup & Barefoot, 2005; Schellenberg, & Bailis, 2015), and the level of interaction between the teaching personnel and students (Bowman & Akcaoglu, 2014; Määttä, 2015). Study evaluation practices are also important and can promote learning and increase motivation if evaluations are constructive (González, Jareno, & Lopez, 2015). Furthermore, peer-evaluations and peer support can enhance studies (e.g. Hamer, Purchase, Luxton-Reilly, & Denny, 2015; Ludemann & McMakin, 2014; Wierstra, Kanselaar, Van Der Linden, & Lodeewijks, 1999; Topping, 1998), when we realize that the criticism and evaluations do not have to be crippling (Woodeard-Kron, 2002). Writing skills development is crucial for study success (Butler & Britt, 2011; Cho, Schunn, & Charney, 2006; Määttä, 2012). Naturally, multiform teaching and digitalization have provided new means to make studying even more efficient (e.g., Blocher, De Montes, Willis, & Tucker, 2002; Gillani & Eynon, 2014; Hannan, 2005; Howland & Wedman, 2004; Ramos et al., 2015). In all, it is important to make teaching more varied and multiform (Cheng, 2011).

Often, students are expected to perform more and better, which means that the idea of good learning can be shadowed by criticism (Stellmack et al., 2012). Students' motivation becomes tested (Reiss, 2012) which can result in dropping out from education (Cortes, Mostert, & Els, 2014; Stratton, O'Toole, & Wetzel, 2008) or in fatigue (Galbraith & Merrill, 2015; Olwage & Mostert, 2014).

Indeed, good teaching and ways of developing teaching have been studied widely. Still, one may ask whether good teaching is the precondition of good learning. Is good teaching enough (Helmke & Schrader, 1988)? Or is it more important to know how students perceive their studies and education and how they understand the goals and reality of their own studies?

### **Study Progress and Hindrances from a Student's Point of View**

Students want to gather study points and grades and advance in their studies. Good study success reflects to students' well-being and health, too (Eide & Showalter, 2011; Uusiautti & Määttä, 2015; 2016). Well-being makes study processes smoother (Rauscher & Elliott III, 2014), and, on the other hand, if studies become prolonged or overwhelming, students' quality of life decreases (Cowan, 2011; Hansen & Lang, 2011). Thus, everyone dealing with university teaching shares the goal of performing studies and graduating promptly. And yet, study processes can become long and graduation postponed.

One reason for prolonged studies is that students want to study extensively and thus guarantee their employment (Dolton & Sillos, 2008; Hartog, 2000). The reasons for and attitudes to over-education have also been studied from numerous viewpoints (Budriá & Moro-Egido, 2014; Sánchez-Sánchez & McGuinness, 2015; Tarvid, 2013).

It is not rare that study progress becomes hindered by financial problems (Reed & Hurd, 2014), and parents cannot always help students financially (Dockery, Seymour, & Koshy, 2015). And again, students may have other priorities in life, too, than studies and graduation (Chesser, 2015).

It is obvious that students' study skills and attitudes influence on their way of studying and opportunities of succeeding (Määttä, Uusiautti, & Määttä, 2016). Personality features have their own influence (Duff, Boyle, Dunleavy, & Ferguson, 2004). Previous study success (Busato, Prins, Elshout, & Hamaker, 2000), even experiences in elementary school, have their own influence on university studies (Hébert, 1993). Students' expectations and understanding about the length and demands of studies can be too high or unrealistic (Brunello & Winter-Ebmer, 2003). In all, the smoothness of study processes is a sum of several factors (Määttä, Uusiautti, & Määttä, 2016).

## Method

The smoothness of university studies and its hindrances have been widely studied in Finland and abroad. Every university collects feedback from their students about how their studies have progressed and how satisfied they are with teaching at their university. The purpose of this study is to describe what kind of study attitude is needed for the successful completion of a Master's degree as described by graduated Masters and students studying in the Master's level. Hardly anyone's study process is straight and lacks adversities. Overcoming difficulties and hindrances is part of the completion of an academic degree.

The research questions are as follows: What do Master's studies require from students? And what are successful Master graduates made of?

The data were collected in the fall of 2015 at the University of Lapland in Finland. The data collection took place during a so-called Master's workshop where 110 students from different colleges performing Master's studies participated. Alumni presented their viewpoints and experiences of the knots of studies and about the different phases of studies and their coping strategies.

The participants' viewpoints were analyzed through qualitative content analysis (see e.g., Mayring 2000) by categorizing the participants' answers into data-based themes and categories. Eventually, 12 different themes were found that formed the results. The themes describe the participants' viewpoints of what the necessary elements of successful Masters and graduation processes are.

In qualitative studies like this one, reliability can be evaluated by assessing the quality of data and its truthfulness (e.g., Creswell, 2009). This data were obtained in a workshop-like event where soon-to-be Masters and already graduated Masters, alumni, were gathered to discuss their study processes—the hindrances, adversities, and the positive experiences during them. The purpose was to bring out the students' voices and let them describe their experiences openly so that the data would serve not only to support the development of a caring university community (Uusiautti & Määttä, 2016) but also to support students' fluent study paths (Määttä, Uusiautti, & Määttä, 2016). The data were rich and abundant. The participants described openly their experiences and draw a multidimensional picture of what is required from students aiming at the completion of a Master's degree. When evaluating the analysis, it is worth noticing that the researchers in this study both teach at the university and, therefore, it was important to make sure that the interpretations would not be skewed by the teaching experiences or even stubborn ideas of good teaching and good university students (see also Uusiautti & Määttä, 2015). Researchers' careful self-reflection was in a big part in this study because interpreting the results is the researchers' privilege and responsibility (Fontana & Frey, 2005). Sticking to the students' descriptions and voices and genuinely wishing to bring out viewpoints that might help developing university education were considered to enhance the reliability of interpretations in this study.

## Results

The research participants' descriptions of the demands of Master's degree were categorized into 12 themes. They are based on their views presented at the Master's workshop when they were discussing the most common means of completing the Master's degree. Their descriptions draw a general picture of the demands related to studies.

What are successful Masters made of?

(1) Self-confidence and self-respect

*"I will survive and I can do it"*

Students have to be certain of and trust in their abilities to perform Master's studies. Their previous study experiences may not necessarily have supported or strengthened their learning skills and experiences of failure can haunt in their minds. Hardly anyone finds studying or learning new just easy. If students have doubts about their ability to perform or cope with studies, it is important to turn to teacher students and talk about these issues.

Likewise, it is crucial to reflect the state of one's self-respect. Everyone performing a Master's degree has experiences that strengthen their skills and their self-efficacy beliefs. Self-esteem and self-respect tell about the students' own beliefs and expectations of their abilities to perform well studies included in the Master's degree. This understanding about oneself as a student develops alongside studies.

(2) The decision to start studies and go on with them

*"I roll up my sleeves and start working."*

The first study points should be completed as quickly as possible at the start of education. It can ignite the desire to graduate promptly and to pass also those courses that seem difficult or otherwise unpleasing. Some students find it better to first take those courses that match their skills and interests the best. Some others like to complete the difficult phases at once because they become convinced of their ability to perform studies efficiently and with good results. Easy courses and phases may follow along by themselves.

Especially, in the phase of doing an academic thesis, the student's own decision of starting the work is the most crucial one. It is not very difficult to find reasons to postpone this demanding part of studies. Therefore, it is important to be aware of possible excuses and to control them.

(3) Appreciation of the privilege of being able to study

*"I am granted with the privilege to study a Master's degree."*

In Finland, university education is free. Therefore, parents' or one's own wealth does not determine the opportunity to study. The intellectual capital and development of learning and expertise can be a reason for a great respect. Many students can be thankful for becoming accepted as a student, for having a chance to progress in life to one's fullest potential, and for being able to see the world from the various viewpoints provided during the education. A Master's degree is appreciated by others, too, and the completion of the degree tells about one's capabilities and talent. Not everyone can become masters.

(4) Courage

*"I enter the new world with a positive and open-minded curiosity."*

The world of university studies is new and different from earlier study experiences. Sometimes, hard work is not enough and sometimes wish to learn is not enough. One's skills are tested and the

forthcoming study years include plenty of unknown. Trust in one's enormous potential can help one seize tasks that are outside from one's comfort zone but that can introduce new dimensions and show ways of understanding the reality better.

(5) Patience

*"I tolerate it that sometimes studies go on easily, sometimes they tangle, and there is no free ride to a Master's degree."*

Studies do not always go on as wished and hindrances are not always the student's fault. However, the study processes involve situations that the student can have an influence. For example, long waiting time of examination scores or criteria for evaluations can be found out by asking, being active, and making sure that you have done your best to ensure fluent studies. Actually, there have been and will be plenty of reforms that originate in students' ability to call for better solutions. For example, flexible online examinations, various forms of online teaching, or online textbooks have been included in studies based on students' suggestions.

(6) Enthusiasm

*"I can do something new and significant."*

University studies offer chances of creating new. When performing Master's studies, students can come up with innovative viewpoints and new, creative solutions to traditional ways of acting. In the academic world, strong expertise and traditions can become a burden and make people blind to see new solutions. Students can break the limits. Students' doors are open to many directions and the ability to question their own and others' stubborn opinions can promote enthusiasm and increase creativity. Many graduates remember occasions that let them test their own limits, become inspired and succeed and strengthen their sense of being able make a difference.

(7) Tolerance of insecurity and criticism

*"Nothing great can be achieved easily."*

Uncertainty and even disappointments are part of study processes that aim at great achievements. The ability to be happy of successes has to be consciously practiced, in addition to the ability of surpassing obstacles.

It is important to notice and focus on successes and accomplishments, and to realize that they also include errors, mistakes, and nodes. One can learn from them and progress to new achievements. Therefore, it is also important to thank oneself for good results instead of thinking or worrying about hindrances or adversities.

(8) Good reading and writing skills

*"I develop as a writer by writing, and as a reader by reading."*

Writing increases one's capacity, and simultaneously one's learning abilities and skills develop. This happens phase by phase when moving on from one course to another with the help of guidance, feedback, and self-evaluation.

(9) Normalizing overwhelming expectations

*"Learning new is based on the previously learned."*

A Master's degree is a natural continuum to a candidate's degree. It does not demand any new, superficial skills, and therefore, its demandingness should not be overestimated. The intellectual capital is gathered little by little by increasing earlier knowledge—perhaps by revising, molding, and complementing it, too.

(10) Good scheduling

*"I set numeric goals and a plan of progress to my studies."*

Students who can set goals and plan a study schedule that is not too tight and not too loose are the most successful. A careful study plan should be done so that it lists all required studies, estimations of time needed to complete them, and their chronological sequence. It is also good to think which studies are mandatory, which studies are options, and what other choices there are. In Finnish universities, students can include such studies in their degree that correspond to their own interests and promote their special expertise.

(11) Taking care of one's well-being

*"I enjoy what life offers."*

Student life should include hobbies and relaxing free-time that support coping with studies, even though studies include many pressures and obligations that have to be fulfilled. Still, studying does not prevent from joy and opportunities to do things that are pleasing. At its best, studies offer positive experiences and not just toil. Also other areas of life provide sources of well-being that students have to take care of. In this study, many students mentioned physical exercising as a free time activity that improved their mood and prevented fatigue during demanding study processes.

(12) Good social relationships

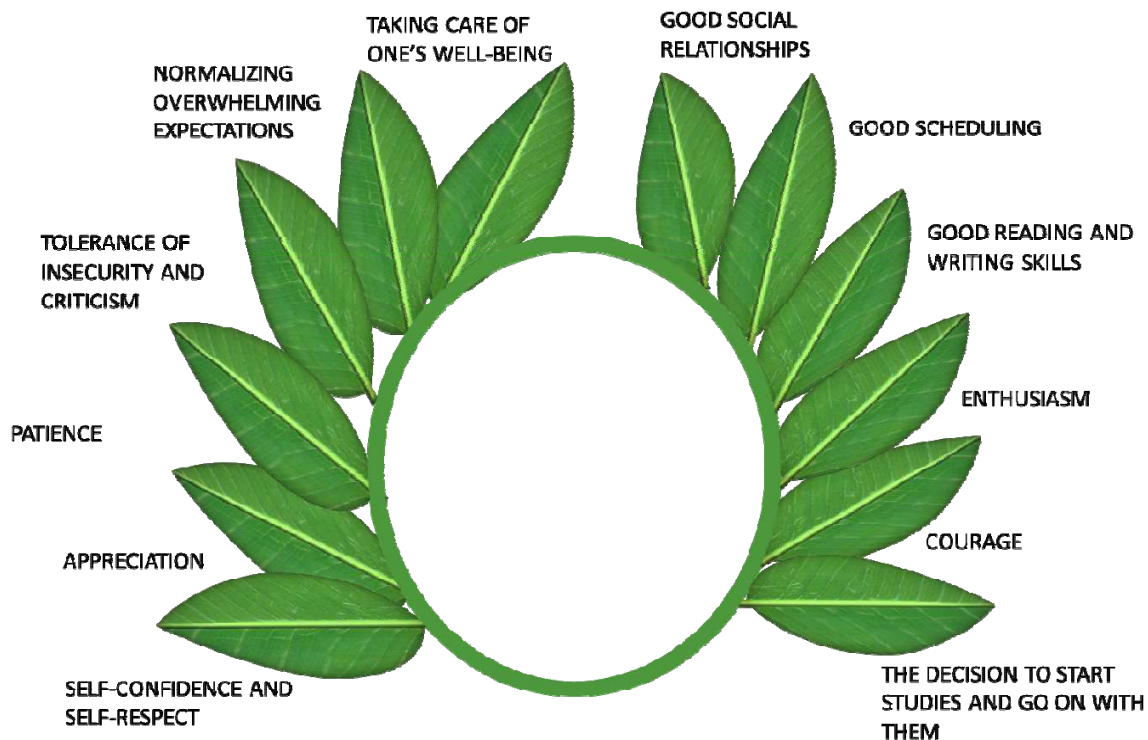
*"I take care of my family relationships and friendships."*

A balanced study life means that students arrange time for their families and friends too. Good, positive relationships are the support and secure in good and in bad. Social support and encouragement, and just being together and in a good company are extremely important supporters of learning. And even one good friend is enough.

## Conclusions

The Finnish universities have a festive tradition, in which masters', doctors', and honorary doctors' degrees are conferred. The conferment is aimed at everyone who has graduated as a master or doctor and whose degree is approved before the conferment. As a symbol of the conferment, Masters get garlands. It is adopted from the ancient Greek Apollo, who was the god of singing, poetry, and light and who was wearing a garland in his head after the father of his loved one Dafne turned his daughter into a laurel tree because he did not approve Apollo as her suitor. A laurel tree became a symbol of peace and immortality. In the conferment ceremony, the garland made of laurel leaves, symbolizes knowledge, education, and free arts. It is a mark of a significant achievement.

The requirements of a Master's degree can be illustrated as a garland figure (see Figure 1). Each laurel leaf represents one of the themes introduced as results. The findings illustrate the various dimensions of study processes at universities and form a useful presentation of the factors that should be considered when aiming at supporting students' smooth study paths.



**Figure 1.** A Master's garland (designed by Määttä)

## Conclusions

Push for the renewal of university teaching has been great for a long time already (Ebert-May et al., 2015), but the change is slow and traditions stuck hard (Brownell & Tanner, 2012; Ebert-May et al., 2011). Despite the long call for reforms (Frayer, 1999), it is strange that new ideas and methods are put in practice this slowly (Tagg, 2012). Perhaps, one of the reasons is that students do not require changes too actively. Students can blame themselves or consider themselves as different from others when they wonder why their studies have not progressed as expected (Pifer & Baker, 2014).

On the other hand, there are also finding that suggest that universities have renewed considerably (Gormally, Evans, & Brickman, 2014). But the pressure is great and not all changes can be realized at once and quickly (Gregory & Lodge, 2015). In the middle of efficiency and quality pressures, resources for teaching and research are limited (Xuereb, 2015). New suggestions for the development of university teaching and university culture, too, have been created and are under development constantly, and they aim at providing meaningful studies for a variety of students (Anderson et al., 2011; Austin, 2002; Lumpkin, 2014; Hoessler, Godden, & Hoessler, 2015; Romsdahl & Hill, 2012; Uusiautti & Määttä, 2013c). Actually, the diversity of students is perceived as a richness in the current debates (Griffin, Muniz, & Smith, 2016).

Perhaps, one promising solution to enhance the smoothness of university studies is the strengthening positive thinking and emotions that improve study motivation and attitudes (Beard, Humberstone, & Clayton, 2014; Rowe, Fitness, & Wood, 2015). The difference between positive and negative study attitudes has been show in studies (Segal, Tucker, & Coolidge, 2009), and luckily, positivity can be learned and practiced consciously (Williams, Childers, & Kemp, 2013).

While obstacles and hindrances of fluent study processes have been studied and discovered widely (Salanova, Schaufeli, Martínez, & Bresó, 2010), new positive psychological viewpoints have given a new direction to view university study processes. Instead of or as a counterbalance to students' difficulties,

positive psychology emphasizes students' strengths and their role in fluent, meaningful studies (Van Niekerk, Mostert, & de Beer, 2016). Furthermore, success in studies boosts engagement and efficiency (Mesurado, Richaud, & Mateo, 2015) and prevent burnout (Stoerber, Childs, Hayward, & Feast, 2011).

Indeed, university teaching and education should, first and foremost, aim at flourishing students (Ouweneel, Le Blanc, & Schaufeli, 2011). Students enter the university with high hopes and expectations (Rosenstreich et al., 2015), and their dreams can be fulfilled if they are given opportunities to succeed in their studies. It is important to understand that this flourishing reflects on their vitality (Jones, You, & Furlong, 2013) and well-being (Howell, 2009). It is worth remembering that student well-being means the well-being of the university and even the whole society.

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