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Student Experiences: Traditional Face-to-Face Full-Time Studying at NUGSE

MARIYA IPPOLITOVA, FARIZA BAIDALY, LENERA MEMETOVA, AND ASSEL TEMIRBEKOVA

The choice of a learning mode is very important for a student applying to the Master's program. But when the choice is made students face other challenges they could not anticipate. Brochures and websites can tell a lot about the courses, teaching staff, and different requirements, but usually it is not enough for the first-year student who has a thousand questions about small but troubling details of the studying process. In this way, the experience of the current students is invaluable as they know what kind of concerns new students may have and how to deal with them. In this work, four second-year Master's students share some insights about the full-time learning mode at Nazarbayev University, its peculiarities, benefits and drawbacks, and suggest some pieces of advice for those who struggle with the studying.

First of all, we would like to describe what it is like to be in the full-time program and why we chose it. Unanimously, the main reason for our choice was the opportunity to be immersed into the academic environment and get more interaction with English speaking teaching staff, which was lacking in their previous educational institutions. Not only studying but "living" in an academic environment helps us to stay highly motivated, invest more time and effort in studying, and develop our cognitive skills day by day as we have plenty of time for discussions, debates, and group assignments. Moreover, we have access to all the resources we need whether is the newest books in the library or research seminars conducted by our professors. The interaction with GSE professors is one especially beneficial aspect of the full-time program. Through our extensive communication we are able to increase our English language proficiency, receive detailed formal and informal feedback on our performance, get support and the feeling of importance as beginner-scholars, and strengthen our networking skills. These are some aspects of the two-year full-time program which make it so desirable for us and why we appreciate this choice so much.

Each of the authors had different experiences studying at the Bachelor's level in terms of content and program mode. Assel got her Bachelors in linguistics, Mariya in foreign languages, Lenera spent a year in the USA college being the only one completely immersed into English speaking academic environment, and Fariza was lucky to try both full-time and part-time studying modes because she went to college before her university studies. All these differences were reflected in our expectations of the Master's program at Nazarbayev University. We knew that Master's program is about conducting a research but were a little surprised by certain aspects of academic life: the amount of work, assignments, learning, and teaching.

First of all, the workload was heavy, especially during the first months. It is still very high but in the fall semester it was more difficult because we lacked knowledge of coping with the extensive amount of readings and writings. Secondly, as Lenera pointed out, in full-time program instructor's qualification is extremely important as we learn with professors the whole semesters and expect the courses to be engaging and challenging. Not all teaching strategies were effective and not all assignments were cognitively challenging. We were introduced to a variety of assignments, and while some of them were related to research, others were aimed at developing our creativity, self-reflection and communicative skills. Thirdly, we constructed our knowledge through discussions, oral presentations, poster projects, and other kinds of group work. Compared to our previous institutions where we got many lectures and little interaction it was something different. Moreover, in the GSE community we appreciate the way all professors, even if they are not our course instructors, also communicate with us and are ready to help.

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MA students have two years devoted completely to studying and even though it sounds like it is much easier than the experience of our working MSc colleagues, we have some challenges connected to our time

management, communication, and expectations too. Assel suggests that the hardest thing about learning in this full-time program is attending all three-hour classes, completing assignments and writing final papers simultaneously. She admits that the process of writing finals is usually left to the end of the semester because it is difficult to even choose the paper's topic unless you have the appropriate knowledge about the issues in the discipline, which you only get in the second half of the course.

Also, unlike the students from the blended model, we have more group assignments, which can be writing, presenting, creating a project, or solving a problem. So, for us group work is not only a part of in-class work but very often our home task. Mariya identifies two challenges in the group work assignments. The first one is time management. It is quite hard to get 3-5 people together several times within one-two weeks to discuss the project and plan the actions. Another difficulty is compromising different views on the issue to produce a single work with the natural flow of ideas which would satisfy all the members of the group.

Finally, when we discussed the enjoyable moments of studying full-time and the challenges of it, we can transform what we learned into practical advice and share it with other students who are pursuing academic success in Master's program. Of many guiding principles these are the most important ones we would like to pass on to you:

“The hardest thing about learning in this full-time program is attending all three-hour classes, completing assignments and writing final papers simultaneously.”

Communicate with faculty and peers if you have any personal or academic issues which distract you from studying. The Graduate School of Education is constantly working on enhancing the quality of its programs, which is why the faculty is likely to help you overcome some issues. And communication with peers can be very supportive as you know you are not alone with your problems.

Be smart in dealing with deadlines and complete assignments in time. The hardest part is usually just to start working especially if you stuck with the topic. But once you started brainstorming and looking for sources, ideas will follow. An early start prevents stress because you write in a comfortable pace and when it is the time to submit a work you just have to revise what you already have.

Obtain the maximum you can from this program: use library resources, attend interesting events and lectures, and communicate with peers. Being on campus during the whole program is a huge benefit for students. Do not miss the opportunity to learn something that you will not be able to find online.

“Prior work experience is not required from students, but it will help you to be more certain about your preferences in research.”

One last piece of advice Fariza can give you is to get some prior working experience before joining a Master's program. It is not required from students, but it will help you to be more certain about your preferences in research. She had four years teaching experience and it helped her a lot during her first year when she had to choose topics for her course papers.

Our main goal was not to promote NUGSE's full-time master's program, but rather give the reader some insights into the peculiarities of this program compared to the MSc one. We want you to know what you can face and how to prepare for it. Of course, at the starting point students cannot control the kind of assignments they get and instructor's teaching methods.

But what they can do is to ask for help from the teachers if something is unclear. Peer-interaction is also very important in the full-time program. Students collaborate, build the knowledge, support each other, and learn from the experience of others. And to get the best from this cooperation and academic environment it is necessary to be organized and complete the work in a timely manner. We hope that challenges of the Master's program will lead you to self-development and sharpen the skills you need to pursue your career goals.