

AN INNOVATION EXPERIENCE IN THE MANAGEMENT OF UNIVERSITY DEGREES INVOLVING BACHELOR THESES, RECOGNITION AND TRANSFER OF CREDITS AND SUPPORT PROGRAMS FOR STUDENTS IN THE FACULTY OF POLITICAL AND SOCIAL SCIENCE OF THE COMPLUTENSE UNIVERSITY (MADRID)

M.B. Benítez Romero, S. González Pérez, C. Ortiz Soto, I. Schweiger Gallo, C. Sánchez Pérez, A. Sanz Gimeno, J.C. Revilla Castro, M. Velasco González, E. Carrillo Barroso, M. Blázquez-Rodríguez

Universidad Complutense de Madrid (SPAIN)

Abstract

We are currently developing a project that targets quality innovation for university degrees and is supported by the Quality Office from the Complutense University of Madrid. This project was initiated last June and aimed at developing protocols and tools to improve the coordination of the undergraduate programs offered at the School of Political Sciences and Sociology of the Complutense University of Madrid.

This project originated from the problems and key challenges faced by the coordinators after being appointed to their positions, including a lack of organization and information regarding the facilitation of horizontal coordination, as well as a lack of computer tools to support the management of some activities such as the organization of the supervision of Bachelor theses or the recognition and transfer of Credits.

Since 2009, when the first bachelor's degrees were offered within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), we have developed different strategies in the management of the undergraduate programs offered by the Faculty. However, this work has not been systematized so far. In order to share procedures of managing different tasks relative to the coordination of the undergraduate programs, we organized a meeting on November 3rd, entitled: "Innovation in the Management of Degrees". The meeting included four sessions featuring the analysis and exchange of experiences regarding the horizontal and vertical coordination of the degrees (definitions, aims, registration systems ...), Bachelor theses, and credit transfer and recognition. A total of 16 coordinators involved in the management of degrees at both the graduate and postgraduate levels at the Complutense University of Madrid were invited and contributed with their knowledge and experience with different protocols and digital tools, such as those for the organization of the Bachelor theses, and help and support programs for students.

Keywords: innovation, management, degree, university, coordination.

1 THE RELEVANCE OF THE MANAGEMENT OF UNIVERSITY DEGREES

When referring to excellence in the university, the focus is often on strengthening research and teaching, as well as on postgraduate compared to graduate training, rather than on the management of university research, which should be as relevant as teaching and research. Consequently, the management of university degrees is presented as a peripheral field that has already been achieved and does not need to be continuously strengthened and improved. However, it should be kept in mind that the Bachelor studies involve the largest number of students, as well as the majority of the teaching staff. In the School of Political Science and Sociology, for example, in 2016-2017, has an annual enrollment rate of 3424 undergraduate students is, while 528 study for a master's degree and 469 in the PhD program. However, these high numbers of students don't match with the lack of recognition and of administrative resources.

The university has changed due to a specific historical evolution (1), as well as of the framework established by the Bologna Declaration and the construction of the European Higher Education Area. This development has led to processes of evaluation, certification and accreditation complexes (2), which have to be complied with and require the availability of information and the implementation of actions that go beyond the usual tasks in the classrooms. Indeed, the set of resources and actions

that the Faculty makes available for the support and follow-up of the teaching, of the teaching staff, and of the students have to be made visible. Thus, it is of paramount importance to design strategies that improve academic management by developing tools and action protocols which can be applied to the coordination of all the degrees offered within the same School, as happens to be the case with the School of Political Sciences and Sociology, where 9 different degrees are offered.

In order to analyze the management of the Degrees in the School of Political Science and Sociology, a project was requested and approved in 2017 by the Office of Quality of the Complutense University of Madrid, which is entitled "Innovating in Academic Management: The incorporation of protocols and digital tools in the degrees of the School of Political Sciences and Sociology ". In order to share procedures regarding the management of different tasks relative to the coordination of the degrees, we organized a meeting on November 3rd, entitled: "Innovation in the management of degrees". The meeting included four sessions featuring the analysis and exchange of experiences regarding the horizontal and vertical coordination of the degrees (definitions, aims, registration systems ...), Bachelor theses, and credit transfer and recognition. A total of 16 coordinators involved in the management of degrees at both the graduate and postgraduate levels at the Complutense University of Madrid were invited and contributed with their knowledge and experience with different protocols and digital tools, such as those for the organization of the Bachelor theses, and help and support programs for students.

In this report, we would like to present the main results of this meeting, which was organized into three themes: Bachelor theses, credit transfer and recognition and support programs for students.

2 RESULTS ABOUT ANALYSIS AND PROPOSALS REGARDING MANAGEMENT UNIVERSITY DEGREES

2.1 Analysis and Proposals regarding Bachelor Theses

The implementation of the degrees included a number of new features, among which it is worth mentioning that in all the degrees the students must present a Bachelor thesis, with its own characteristics, including

i) The registration of the TFG. At the School of Political Sciences and Sociology, students can register in order to present their Bachelor thesis during their last year of study, once they have completed a minimum of credits, taught during the previous years. This particularity does not occur in other degrees at other Schools, where the students can only register once they have passed all other subjects. Consequently, in our School, there are certain students who can present their Bachelor thesis although they still have pending credits during the same academic year. In addition, there are only two periods of enrollment for the Bachelor thesis: the ordinary and an extraordinary period in February only for those students who are expected to pass core subjects or a greater number of credits during the first semester. On the other hand, other Schools have an open enrollment process throughout the academic year or require the student to present their Bachelor thesis within 4 months once the sign up for the Bachelor thesis.

ii) The establishment of a system of supervisors. As of today, Bachelor thesis supervisors are either selected from a pool where the teaching staff offer to supervise Bachelor thesis or recurring to a system of departmental quotas. Each modality has a positive and negative side. One of the problems involving the selection of a prospective thesis supervisor is the definition of how a supervisor is matched to a student. Whereas within the first procedure the supervisor can be chosen directly by the student, for example, because of a good relationship between the teacher and student, some students have to be matched to a supervisor among those with fewer students or according to other criteria.

The second procedure based on quotas by department allows for assigning each of the students to a supervisor, whereas it also has a downside insofar as supervisors and Bachelor candidates may lack motivation. So far, in the School of Political Sciences and Sociology, different systems have been tested: at the beginning, the supervisor was chosen from a group of professors who offered to supervise thesis. This system involved some problems, as many students wanted to write their thesis with other supervisors, which lead to a high number of complaints. As of today, the prospective students are allowed to choose. Though the satisfaction among the prospective students has increased, there are many teachers who do not want to act as supervisors, and, consequently, there is an unequal participation among the teaching staff. Other Schools, for example, rely on a computer application which assigns the supervisor to the student based on his or her average grade once the

student has chosen among five potential supervisors. In this regard, the convenience of these types of programs was highlighted during the Conference by all of the participants.

iii) The teaching organization of the Bachelor thesis, although with variations between degrees, is based on the autonomous work of the student and involves tutorials (individual or group tutorials) and workshops. This implies that each supervisor freely organizes the supervision and that there are cases in which a minimum of orientation workshops or tutorials may not be offered.

iv) Avoidance of plagiarism of the TFG is carried out through a plagiarism checker called Turnitin. One problem associated to the use of this program is that if you upload the same file more than once, the software detects plagiarism based on the first version of that same work that was uploaded first. In this regard, it would be desirable that the software detects that the same files have been uploaded and thus there is no plagiarism.

v) The evaluation criteria. In all of the degrees of the School, students are evaluated with regards to their participation in the teaching activities, the elaboration of the thesis and the oral presentation before an Evaluation Commission. Consequently, the Evaluation Commissions must be convened, which requires a great amount of work. In addition, Evaluation Commissions may differ with regards to their evaluations. In other Schools with a high number of students, only students who have obtained a grade equal to or greater than 8.9 present their thesis before a judging panel or commission.

vi) Computer support systems. In some Schools, such as in the one of Commerce and Tourism, the development of a specific software allows for selecting the supervisor by the students, as already mentioned. The student chooses a supervisor in a Google Application Form among various supervisors establishing an order of preference. Once this phase has been completed, the software generates new routines and takes into consideration the maximum quota of each supervisor. Next, the software sends mass emails to the supervisors and students with the results of the process. One of the requirements of the system is to know in advance the number of participating supervisors and students.

2.2 Analysis and Proposals regarding the Credit Transfer and Recognition System

Though the recognition of credits may be considered to a large extent an administrative task, the work of the coordinators is of relevance when it comes to analyzing the similarities and differences between the various subjects. Indeed, the process of recognition of credits requires a knowledge of the curriculum of the degrees as well as of the contents and competencies of the different subjects. Therefore, despite the administrative effort required for this task, the involvement of the academic staff with regards to the final decision of the suggested recognition proposal cannot be ignored. This task of analysis, review and decision, far from being specific to each of the requests, has a nature of "permanent utility", since every decision, although being always revisable, sets a precedent that can be used in future processes. Therefore, it serves to prepare a "results map" that can derive much of the work related to this task to the administrative staff.

The coordination between the academic staff and the administrative staff should be fluid and dynamic enough to facilitate the different steps of the process and avoid problems and blockades resulting from the lack of documentation, which is one of the most common problems. In fact, one of the aspects on which this initiative of innovation is based is the generation of a protocol, together with a computer tool, that serves to collect the accumulated results in the successive processes and requests for recognition, thus facilitating and alleviating the workload, both academic and administrative, of a large part of the requests, which are made on recurring proposals, course after course.

Thus, decisions on each recognition proposal would be integrated into a database, which would be available for the coordinator and for the administrative staff through a computer tool and would allow for consulting the new proposals and, based on previous procedures, facilitate the decisions to be taken with regards to each of the proposals, either through an automatic or semiautomatic process involving the intervention of the administrative's office.

Both a map with previous recognitions and the application would contain information on the subjects of each of the degrees, serving as reference elements and aiding in taking the decision of whether or not admitting new recognitions. Such a process would allow for a greater coherence and unification of the decisions that the coordinators of the different degrees make in this regard. Indeed, it would facilitate to create recognition tables such as those that can be found on the website of the School of Medicine (<https://medicina.ucm.es/tablas-de-reconocimiento-de-creditos-para-medicina>).

The integration of a database in corresponding specific computer application would allow for storing all of the data, including data of the students, the university and degree of origin and destination, the year in which the subject of origin was passed, the mark, the subject of destiny to be recognized, the credits and competences of each of the subjects, the dates of request and resolution, the resolution and justification in case it is negative, etc. All of these informations would allow for generating automatically recognition reports and facilitating academic and administrative work. In other universities this process is done directly by the student through an application that, depending on the requested subjects, immediately informs the student about the possible results of the recognition.

2.3 Analysis and Proposals regarding Student Support Programs

Another innovation promoted by Bologna has been the integration into academic activities of reception programs, as well as follow-up and support programs for students. The purpose of this type of program is to promote that the university develops not only educational activities, but also other activities that optimize learning, improvement of knowledge and promotion of the use of university resources, thus providing comprehensive attention to the students. In some universities and Schools all of these activities are included in the Tutorial Action Plan, which aims to facilitate the transit of students towards university education, and stimulate their active participation in the educational process. This Tutorial Action Plan was first developed when the degrees were implemented during the 2009-2010 academic year. Next, we list the different programs included in the Tutorial Action Plan, as well as our experiences with regards to each of them.

i) The *tutorial program* was carried out during the first two courses of the degree programs. During the first year, the program was offered on a voluntary basis for both students and teachers, and in the second year, a group of students was assigned to each teacher in order to ensure that all of the teachers and students participated. However, this program lacked positive results, as not all the students participated. One of the reasons was that the needs of support were greater among those of the first courses as compared to the last courses.

ii) *Tutorials or Mentoring Program*. In the School of Political Sciences and Sociology this is a voluntary program: the telemacs, the new students, sign up voluntarily, which means that many students do not sign up, while for those who do, the results in the evaluations are really satisfactory. Within this program, seven informative meetings on different aspects of the university life are offered to them and are directed by students from higher courses. These courses include presentations of the library, the rooms of computer science and material resources of the School, the virtual campus and the web page, as well as those demanded by own students.

iii) Information systems of the School: it has to be highlighted that there are multiple channels of information for students, including both physical (for example, advertisement tables, attention by the academic secretariat and the Erasmus office, as well as by the Dean with his team of degree Coordinators) and online channels of information. The online information is integrated on the website of the School, where important information is updated and the Agenda of activities is published. The Virtual Campus has also a specific space for the Coordination of the Degrees which can be assessed by all of the students, and where the Coordinator can send mails to the students or publish relevant information.

iv) Mobility Programs: Nowadays, the mobility programs are of great importance within the University programs for students. Some of these programs such as the Erasmus program is characterized by a high participation of students.

v) Host programs: information sessions for students of the first semester and of Erasmus courses. These Welcome Days is an event that has been consolidated over time and which is attended by the students. It includes the contact to their prospective teachers, as well as to students from associations, representatives and delegates from other courses.

vi) Graduation ceremony. This ceremony in this faculty is organized by the Vice Dean of Students with the collaboration of the Degree Coordinators.

vii) Dissemination of information about other resources that are offered by the university, including scholarships and grants, or the Equality Unit, which offers for example a guide and protocol for the prevention and detection of sexual harassment ...

viii) Training activities: including languages, bibliographic resources provided by the Library or the Complutense Latin American School...

3 CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of all these actions has allowed us to recognize the whole set of innovative experiences that we have been developing over these years. Further, the conferences and the exchange with other coordinators and managers have offered us key insights in order to reinforce certain programs, as well as specific strategies to face some difficulties. Third, a diagnosis of this type is in our view essential to differentiate between those actions that are specific to the different Schools, as opposed to others that require a joint structural approach of the entire university. Investigating the management of degrees is not only a good practice in order to learn, but also for making visible the relevance of the management of degrees in our universities.

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