

THE NEW DEGREE IN GEOGRAPHY

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In recent years the education offered by Spanish universities has undergone a period of far-reaching change. The ever increasing need to adapt to the requirements of modern society, the systems of production and the job market has led to the rejuvenation of certain degree courses which at times had fallen obsolete, with the consequent incorporation of new areas of study together with the transformation of others of long-standing tradition.

Geography is deeply immersed in this reform process, a process which has changed its institutional standing by allowing students to graduate in Geography as a degree in its own right, something which had formerly been impossible. This has clearly had important repercussions on the development of its teaching within the university, as well as on the professional prospects of today's undergraduates and tomorrow's geographers.

Based on the general directives published in the Official State Bulletin (BOE) on 20th November 1990, in which, for the first time ever in Spain, the geography degree was recognised, the various universities, under the University Autonomy Act, began the drafting of the curricula for this new degree course, which today is available in more than 20 universities. The teaching of certain geographical subjects also occurs, albeit somewhat unevenly, in other new degree courses such as Humanities, Environmental Science and Social and Cultural Anthropology, as well as in the diploma course of Tourism.

Although the reform process is not yet complete, the graduation of the first Geography graduates (June 1996) from those universities which were the first to adopt new curricula (Barcelona and Leon) seems to be an appropriate moment to reflect on the experience. The aim is that this discussion might serve as the basis for the debate which needs to be entered into over the next few years to evaluate the opportunities which have been created, as well as the restrictions and obstacles which have been encountered.

This paper, structured in three sections, examines the evolution in the demand expressed by students for the new degree course, the main characteristics of the educational offer within the various curricula, and concludes with some general reflexions on problems

related to structure and content. The paper does not, however, consider questions related to the specific implementation of curricula in each of the universities. This will have to await the gathering of data, be it by questionnaire or interview, from those lecturers and students involved in the reform process.

The data which form the basis for this study were sent by the Geography Departments from the corresponding universities to the Executive of the Spanish Geographers' Association, which since the 1993-94 academic year has systematically gathered data, regarding the number of students enrolled, the curricula and the literature designed to publicize the nature of the new undergraduate course within each university. We would, therefore, like to express our gratitude to all those persons who have helped in this process.

1. THE CONSOLIDATION OF DEMAND FOR THE GEOGRAPHY DEGREE

In Spain, Geography was traditionally integrated within the Arts Faculties and had particularly strong links with History. Thus, from the very beginning, one of the doubts which hung over the introduction of the new curricula was the capacity to attract a sufficient number of students to Geography in order to justify its presence in the many universities which had applied to offer this new degree course. The relative unimportance attached to Geography in secondary education, the consequent ignorance surrounding the work of geographers and the poorly defined nature of their job prospects, did not give rise to much initial optimism.

After somewhat uncertain beginnings, especially in some of the smaller universities, the considerable efforts poured into its promotion during the initial years appear to have borne fruit, so that there has been a progressive growth in student demand, with figures reaching levels which a few years ago would have been unthinkable. Thus, in 1993-94, 913 students were enrolled in the first year of the degree course at the 13 universities where the new course was on offer, which meant an average of 70 students in each department, although there were major deviations from the mean value¹.

The subsequent evolution has witnessed constant growth in these figures which in 1994-95 reached 1,363 students, divided between 17 universities (average of 80 students per university) and 1,643 in 1995-96 (average of 91 students per university)².

Nonetheless, beyond the simple overall number of students enrolled in the first year, there are two further complementary aspects which strengthen this initial positive evaluation. First, practically all those universities which began with very few students have both increased student numbers as well as their ability to attract students, while numbers have become stable in those universities where the total number of places available are usually filled, with the result that the territorial differences have been reduced³. Secondly, there are

1 While the University of Barcelona (246 students), the Complutense in Madrid (191 students) and the Autonomous University of Barcelona (120 students) had considerably more students than the rest, a total of five universities (Castilla-La Mancha, Lleida, Leon, Salamanca and Santiago de Compostela) had fewer than 30 students each, while the others (Alicante, Girona, Tarragona, Valencia, Valladolid) reported numbers somewhere in between.

2 Data obtained from 18 universities which returned the requested information.

3 Only two universities (Castilla-La Mancha and Salamanca) had fewer than 30 first-year students, although falling just below this figure, in ten others (Alicante, Baleares, Cantabria, Extremadura, Girona, La Laguna, León, País Vasco, Santiago and Valladolid) there were between 30 and 100 students, while 6 (Barcelona, Autónoma de Barcelona, Complutense, Autónoma de Madrid, Sevilla and Valencia) had more than 100.

currently around 3,500 students enrolled on Geography degree courses in all years of study, which indicates the degree of consolidation which has taken place. However, the information available to us does not allow us to determine the proportion of students who chose this option from those who came to Geography as a result of the selection process instigated by each university.

Thus, we shall shift our focus towards the analysis of the characteristics and structure of the present curricula, and evaluate their results.

2. STRUCTURE AND CONTENT OF THE GEOGRAPHY CURRICULA

Within the framework of the prevailing general norms, the various universities have drawn up their own curricula for the award of a geography degree, with the aim of adapting the curricula to the educational objectives and professional perspectives which are outlined in the introduction to each and which show evident signs of similarity. However, the specific characteristics of each department have given rise to a much greater heterogeneity as far as the internal structure and course contents are concerned, among which the following appear to be of greatest relevance.

Firstly, most universities opted for a course comprising a total of 300 credits⁴, the minimum established by law for the four-year degree course, although in some cases this total rose to a maximum of 340 credits. The priority now given to subjects which last a term or semester, which in most cases do not exceed six credits, has given rise to a proliferation of subjects - at times highly specialised - greatly diversifying the former offer, but at times overly so⁵.

While the norms establish a number of core subjects equivalent to a little more than a third of the total number of credits (108 credits), all the universities add to this figure a variable number of compulsory subjects which reduces the final number of optional credits to approximately a third of the total, although the variations observed here are great, ranging from 25-50% depending on the university. In general, the smaller the department the smaller the offer of optional subjects, although there is a certain diversity derived, above all, from the inclusion of subjects from fields not related to Geography.

Undoubtedly, this is one of the aspects in which the heterogeneity is greatest, both in the differing opinions on the suitability of including within the student's training areas of knowledge from neighbouring disciplines, and in the frequent adaptation of the curricula to the size and teaching possibilities of each Department. Thus, the typical curriculum is relatively closed and self-sufficient, with non-geographical subjects⁶ constituting a minimal proportion, a situation which becomes increasingly blurred in the smaller universities, where the inclusion of other subjects (History, Social Anthropology, Economics, Ecology, Law, Mathematics, etc.) increases in proportion, reaching more than a third of the total offer in some cases.

4 Each credit is equivalent to ten class hours.

5 In the study carried out in 1994, with the support of Rosa Mecha, from a total of 20 curricula, 626 subjects were identified, the title or limits of which did not coincide, which would seem to be evidence of an initial confusion.

6 Which the student can include as optional subjects which can constitute up to 10% of the total number of credits.

Finally, in contrast with former curricula there has been a positive increase in the number of subjects related to the different techniques and tools of analysis (Cartography, Photointerpretation and Remote Sensing, Statistics, Geographical Information Systems, etc.) as well as territorial planning and organization, and the inclusion of a large number of credits for practical work. This emphasises the investigative and professional orientation of geographical studies, as opposed to the educational which was widespread in the past.

3. AN EVALUATION OF THE REFORM

It is not yet possible to carry out an accurate evaluation of the results obtained, both because sufficient time has yet to pass, and because of the lack of qualitative information available on the actual working of the curricula in the universities. In spite of this, several points might be made, albeit subject to future revision, grouped into three themes:

- In many cases the scientific and professional profile of the geographer which is sought is not clearly defined, beyond declarations regarding general objectives. This would appear to be of particular importance in a science such as Geography, which has recently undergone an intense process of expansion, internal fragmentation and hybridization with other disciplines which have blurred its outlines, and with an introduction into the professional job market which is still weak and overly heterogeneous.
- A problem which is frequently mentioned by students and lecturers alike concerns the structure of the curricula. It is felt that the number of credits is too high for a four-year degree course, resulting frequently in an overloaded timetable and an excessive number of subjects. Similarly, the frequent limitations of teaching resources - human and material - together with their inadequate renewal, continue to form bottlenecks which hamper the reforms undertaken, above all in aspects such as the growing inclusion of practical activities, use of new information technologies, etc.
- Perhaps the most widespread problem is related to the lack of structure within the curricula contents - both vertical and horizontal - between the different subjects, resulting from the excessive fragmentation of the geographical field beginning in the first year. This can lead to a certain student disorientation and have a negative effect on their capacity to learn, while at the same time obstruct a relatively integrated vision of the geographical reality and territorial problems. Seen from a wider angle, this situation and questions regarding the desirable number of optional subjects has led to the current debate between specialisation and multivalence, in which the professional orientation of geographers and their introduction in the job market has been called into question.

All periods of rapid change bring a certain degree of confusion with them, so that the creation of new opportunities brings new risks and uncertainties. From within a conflictive and dynamic social reality, Spanish Geography is also undergoing profound changes which seek to adapt to the demands of the environment. The way forward is not easy and certainties are few; yet the provision of information and the maintenance of debate between all groups involved in the renewal are fundamental elements in ensuring the success of the process.