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Students' perspectives on the processes of supervision and assessment of undergraduate dissertations / *Perspectiva del alumnado de los procesos de tutorización y evaluación de los trabajos de fin de grado*

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Abstract: The introduction of the European Higher Education Area means that undergraduate dissertations (UD) are now compulsory, which represents an important change for the Spanish university system due to the important consequences this will have on academic functioning. This study provides key information on the processes of supervising and assessing UD, from the perspective of students, as well as consequent proposals to improve them. The results obtained indicate that initiatives need to be put in place, at least in the participating institutions where the study has been developed, focused on the improvement of the time periods, means and resources needed to develop the UD, the introduction of more adequate criteria than those currently used for assessment, better training for the tutors involved, more appropriate and precise prior information for students in relation to the UD, and more preparation for students to enable them to carry out the UD.

Keywords: undergraduate dissertation; satisfaction; students; supervision; assessment; survey; improvements

Resumen: La incorporación al Espacio Europeo de Educación Superior ha supuesto la obligatoriedad de la elaboración de los Trabajos de Fin de Grado (TFG), circunstancia que representa una novedad importante en el sistema universitario español por las importantes repercusiones que sobre el funcionamiento académico acarrea. Este trabajo aporta información relevante sobre los procesos de tutorización y evaluación de los TFGs, desde la perspectiva del alumnado y las consiguientes propuestas de mejora. Los resultados alcanzados indican que, al menos en las instituciones en las que se ha realizado el estudio, es imprescindible la puesta en marcha de iniciativas orientadas a: la mejora de plazos, medios y recursos necesarios para la realización del TFG, la incorporación de criterios más idóneos que los actuales para su evaluación, la mejor preparación para la tutorización de los profesores implicados,

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References / *Referencias:* pp. 33–34

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proporcionar una información previa más adecuada y precisa a los estudiantes en relación con el TFG y elevar el grado de su preparación para la realización del TFG.

Palabras clave: trabajo de fin de grado; satisfacción; estudiantes; tutorización; evaluación; encuestas; propuestas de mejora

As a consequence of Spain's incorporation into the European Higher Education Area, all its universities were obliged by law to implement the educational model known as the Bologna Plan (BP) by 1 October 2010 (see European Ministry of Education 1999; Royal Decree 1125/2003 of 5 September 2003). One of the most visible results of its implementation can be seen in the compulsory nature of the undergraduate dissertation (UD) which students must write and present (Royal Decree 1393/2007, art. 12.3).

Prior to the Spanish university system's incorporation into the European Higher Education Area, only some degrees or university courses included assessment procedures at the end of academic training comparable to the UD (see Valderrama Vallés et al., 2009, for a detailed analysis). Similarly, the Master's degrees in place prior to the current degree courses had already developed their own regulations that included the development of a Master's dissertation. When it came to implementing UDs across the board, the experience offered by these final assessment procedures was particularly relevant. Nevertheless, only a small percentage of university tutors had been involved in the processes of tutoring and assessing degree or Master's dissertations compared to the number involved in the current process with UDs, as a consequence of the implementation of the new degree programmes. With regard to students, only those taking specific technical degrees or studying a Master's degree — a very small percentage compared to the total number of university students — were obliged to complete a degree or Master's dissertation under the supervision of a tutor. The European Higher Education Area has therefore meant that all degree students have become involved in the development of dissertations, a fact that represents a significant change to the Spanish university system in comparison with other university systems in the European context, in which the completion of an undergraduate thesis or dissertation while not carried out completely across the board, was nevertheless fairly common practice. The implementation and consequences of the UD have already been discussed in other studies (Adelman, 2008; Reynolds & Thompson, 2011; Rowley & Slack, 2004; Webster, Pepper, & Jenkins, 2000).

The implementation of the BP has also resulted in the use of a new common European currency to express the level of dedication invested in the construction of knowledge by the student; the European system known by the acronym ECTS, European Credits Transfer System, Royal Decree 1125/2003. Designed, among other reasons, to facilitate the establishing of equivalences between the qualifications of different European university systems belonging to the BP, the European Credit Transfer System means that the number of hours involved in carrying out a particular academic activity can be specified, thus facilitating mobility and transfer between studies being carried out or already carried out within the European

Higher Education Area. As a result of this, the curricular design of new degree programmes include descriptors in terms of credits for the subjects and courses that make up their study plans.

Following BP guidelines, Spanish regulations establish that one credit is equivalent to between 25 (minimum) and 30 (maximum) hours' dedication for the student. When designing their study plans, each university is free to choose the value of credits within these margins (Real Decreto 1393, 2007, art. 5). Within the institutional setting in which this study has been carried out, the value of credits chosen stands at 25 hours. For UDs, legislation allows for the possibility of attributing a value between six and 30 credits — between 150 and 900 hours — (Royal Decree 1393/2007, art. 12.7).

Within this new scenario, which emerges from the implementation of the university model based on the BP, practically all university teachers are faced with the task of tutoring and assessing UDs. Equally, all students who complete their degree studies must fulfil the requirement to develop a UD under the supervision of a tutor. Therefore, since their incorporation into the BP and as established by law, all Spanish universities have proceeded to regulate the development and assessment of UDs. This fact has led to the development of research studies on university teachers' perspectives on this process (Briones & Vera, 2013b; Vera & Briones, 2014) as well as on the perspectives of students.

Method

Participants

During the 2011–12 academic year, a total of 1,686 UDs were presented in the two universities in which this study was carried out. The distribution of UDs presented by university and by scientific field is shown in Figure 1.

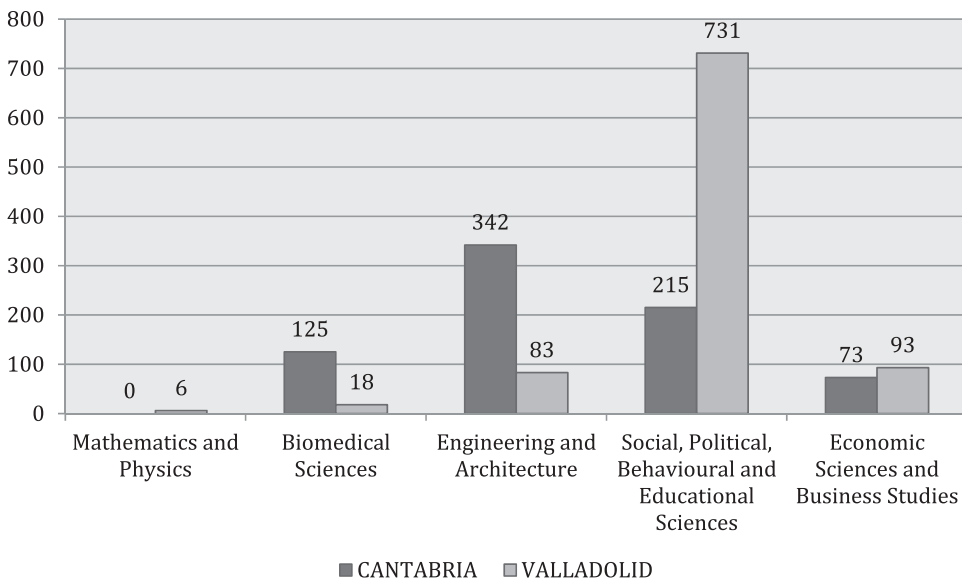


Figure 1. UDs presented by area of knowledge during the 2011–2012 academic year.

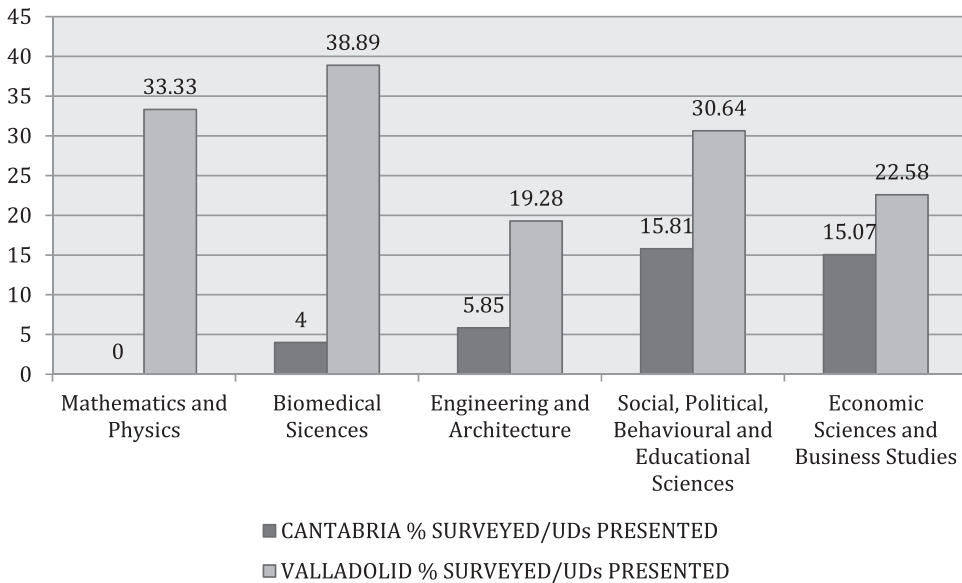


Figure 2. % of participants in the survey by area of knowledge and University in relation to the number of UD's presented.

With regards to participation in the study, a total of 340 students from 20 different degree programmes within five different scientific fields replied to the voluntary questionnaire (Figure 2).

Of those who participated, 79.4% belonged to the University of Valladolid and 20.6% to the University of Cantabria. Altogether, they represented 20.16% of the total number of students who presented their UD's in those universities during the 2011–12 academic year. A total of 100% of the participants state that the method used to assess their UD was through a presentation to a panel. A total of 83.2% of participants state that they were awarded six credits for the completion of their UD, while 5.9% were awarded nine credits and 10.9% were awarded 12. With regard to the qualifications obtained, 3.8% state that they had obtained a distinction with honours, 31.2% distinctions, 43.2% very good and 21.8% a pass. A total of 7% of participants appealed against the qualification they were awarded.

Instrument

The questionnaire Assessment of the tutoring process and presentation of the University Dissertation (Vera & Briones, 2013), comprising 62 items, was used. Appendix 1 shows the scales and number of items dedicated to each, as well as the reliability results for each of the scales.

Procedure

The questionnaire was sent out by post and by email and could only be filled in through an online institutional portal, thus guaranteeing the respondents' anonymity.

Results

The distribution related to the scales and variables studied will be followed in order to present and analyse the data, as described in Appendix 1.

Information prior to completing the UD

Comprising four items and with a reliability of .85 (see Appendix 1), the mean score for this scale is 2.89 (minimum score = 1 and maximum = 5, see Table 1).

The results for this variable are shown in graph form in Figure 3. Only 25.9% state that they were very or completely informed about the evaluation criteria used by the UD panel.

The second and third aspect studied by this indicator — knowledge of potential tutors and themes on which to develop the UD, respectively, show better results. Thus, 40.6% considered that they were fairly or totally informed about tutors and 41.2% about possible research themes. With regard to the fourth aspect evaluated, 47.3% of those surveyed stated that they felt they were provided little or no information about the competences to be developed during the development of their UD.

Information known about UD regulations

A total of 53.8% of the participants stated that they knew the qualification review procedure and the same percentage stated that they knew the timeframes for presenting the documentation to be presented. With regard to the time allocated to the completion of the UD after enrolling, 41.5% stated that they had been given up to three months, 30.6% between four and six months, 21.8% between seven and nine months, and the rest 10 months or more.

Suitability of time periods, means and resources

The mean score for the five items of this scale was 2.94 and the reliability was .63 (see Table 1 and Appendix 1 respectively).

The analysis of the different elements of the scale — Figure 4 — taken separately reveals that 49.4% of those surveyed considered the UD evaluation procedure to be fairly or totally suitable. A total of 47.9% of those surveyed considered that the thematic variety according to which they were able to choose which theme to develop their UD on was fairly or totally sufficient. With regard to the means offered by the university for the development of their UD, 32.7% asserted that they were fairly or totally suitable. Only 22.4% stated that the time they were given to complete the TFG was fairly or totally adequate. Finally, 45.9% considered the prior information available on UD's to be poor or very poor.

Perception of fairness in the credits assigned

A total of 58.5% of those surveyed stated that more credits should be assigned to the completion of the UD. This dimension is completed by the question related to

Table 1. Bivariate Pearson correlations, means and standard deviations.

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1. Prior info.													
2. Suitability	.78 ^a												
3. Effort-credits	.26 ^a	.31 ^a											
4. Choice of tutor	.05	.08	.00										
5. Preparation	.36 ^a	.45 ^a	.32 ^a	.01									
6. Dedication: months	.12 ^c	.19 ^a	-.00	.11 ^c	.17 ^b								
7. Time limits set by tutor	.15 ^b	.18 ^b	.19 ^b	.09	.25 ^a	.05							
8. Dedication	.11	.08	.09	.09	.26 ^a	.10	.35 ^a						
9. Score. Tutoring	.42 ^a	.55 ^a	.09	.11 ^c	.35 ^a	.14 ^b	.29 ^a	.21 ^a					
10. Score. Panel	.50 ^a	.57 ^a	.30 ^a	-.01	.12 ^c	.05	.05	.08	.25 ^a				
11. Satisfaction	.56 ^a	.72 ^a	.28 ^a	.01	.37 ^a	.14 ^b	.29 ^a	.25 ^a	.68 ^a	.63 ^a			
12. External attribution	-.16 ^b	-.24 ^a	-.01	.08	-.11 ^c	-.07	.01	-.15 ^b	-.13 ^c	-.38 ^a	-.38 ^a		
13. Internal attribution	.36 ^a	.46 ^a	.12 ^c	.04	.18 ^b	.12 ^c	.16 ^b	.21 ^a	.44 ^a	.48 ^a	.65 ^a	-.22 ^a	
Mean	2.89	2.94	3.06	4.49	3.51	3.80	4.30	4.54	3.60	2.67	3.50	2.95	3.64
SD	1.10	0.87	1.33	0.85	1.10	1.84	0.95	0.68	1.26	1.08	1.01	1.17	0.85

Note: ^a $p < .001$; ^b $p < .01$; ^c $p < .05$.