

# EUROPEAN SPACE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION AND GEOGRAPHY: THE IMPORTANCE OF TRAINING IN COMPETENCES AND EMPLOYABILITY

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## INTRODUCTION

This article considers the changes and implications of the convergence of the Spanish university system with the European Space for Higher Education (ESHE), focusing on the future challenges to which the new Geography courses will have to rise. Particular emphasis will be given to the importance acquired by training in competences and employability, which will become the cornerstones in the definitive consolidation of our discipline. The article combines general perspectives about the ESHE with analysis of its consequences for the Geography qualifications, which must take advantage of the opportunity provided by the process of convergence with Europe to continue its development not only as an academic and scientific discipline but also professionally and as an applied science.

The European Space for Higher Education (ESHE), which is the new setting for the university, has promoted important advances and has provided higher education with an adapted framework of guidelines to enable the European university space to become a reality in Spain in 2010, which was the year established in the declaration of the European Ministers of Education in Bologna (June 1999).

The ESHE will provide the platform for the integration and convergence of the different European university systems toward a common philosophy, in which the specific nature of the training does not create an obstacle for the creation of a single set of nomenclatures, syllabuses and organizations that facilitate mobility of students and teachers.

This new approach will enable the development of the quality of teaching, with the aim of reorienting teaching starting from the learning of generic and specific competences that improve employability and bring the training process closer to our society's working requirements. To this end, the interrelation university-society will be potentiated, through communication and interchange flows in both directions, which will, without doubt,

proportion important advantages for the two systems. In this setting, the universities are both the driving force and the reference scenario and the university community, in its communal effort, is the main player.

In this context, the universities and the university community can play an essential role, given that it is important to adapt the training provided to society's necessities, within a setting in which geography will become the «*land science*» par excellence in Spain and in Europe (Romero, 2001).

## **GEOGRAPHY AND EMPLOYABILITY: THE IMPORTANCE OF TRAINING IN COMPETENCES**

The emphasis within the convergence process in the ESHE on employability is a remarkable part of the adaptation of the syllabuses. This is closely related to the well-known concept of «training in competences» given that if employability implies *ability to obtain-keep a job* (Formichella and London, 2005), the organization of university degrees based on the competences that must be attained will facilitate the incorporation of students into the job market. After all, the end goal of the training process is to enable the students to fulfil their expectations of working in their professions and attaining a suitable level of social welfare.

Without forgetting the challenges of the European Space for Higher Education for the universities, and so too for the Geography degrees, we consider that the existing syllabuses, which were introduced by a significant number of Spanish universities, have potentiated this university degree, whose introduction as a specific Degree in Geography was comparatively recent. Solid theoretical and methodological bases have been established, combined with a profile that is open to the new demands of the job market, which requires us to develop training in competences. Moreover, the momentum that is being acquired by the *Geographers' College* (created by the Spanish law 16/1999), which now has some 1,600 members in Spain, is another example of the high level that Geography has attained in applied sciences.

All the above presupposes a favourable context for the universities, faculties and departments, that have maintained the support and desires necessary to enable the configuration of the current type of degree, without forgetting the model shared by other players such as the Association of Spanish Geographers or the College of Geographers.

The integration of all efforts to reinforce academic geography and its adaptation to the demands of the job market contributes to the benefit of the profession, and to the possibilities and employability of the graduates. In this way, the social image of the discipline is also reinforced; a question which has been raised by some authors, such as R. Johnston (2001) who pointed out an important weakness of Geography in attracting students, namely, the lack of a clear relation between the degree and the professional outlets that it provides.

## **CONCLUSIONS: GEOGRAPHY, SCIENCE OF THE TERRITORY. THE ESHE AS AN OPPORTUNITY TO REINFORCE THE SOCIAL IMAGE OF THE DISCIPLINE**

The ESHE for Geography can be seen as a «space for opportunity» to revitalize the degree, as the creation of specific degrees in Geography was in the 90s, whose positive effects on the profession of geographer are still palpable nowadays.

Nevertheless, within the European scenario, Spanish geography will take another step in the enrichment of the professional profile of the degree, which is compatible with the maintenance of the research line taking advantage of the Masters oriented to doctorate. Now equilibrium must be found among the general approaches necessary in the degree, the management of tools for working with geographical information and the specialization and capacity to relate diverse topics amongst themselves (natural, social, town and country planning, etc.). The time is right to highlight the territory (Reques, 2004).

Without doubt the formulation of the new degree will rely on the experience with the titles started up at the beginning of the 90s, to which the new aims and approaches of the ESHE will be incorporated. Over this foundation, some geographers have proposed ideas about the advances achieved and in parallel, about the weaknesses that still exist in the profession. In this context, the work of F. Zoido (2001) is of great interest. Here the author proposes as the first objective achieved that *«geography has expanded beyond the professional framework of teaching»*, an achievement contributed to by the departments and universities (with training and research) but also by many graduate geographers who in a way have made a *«self-study effort»* having had to complete their training to be able to do their specific professional work.

In this way, from the formulation of the new degrees an outstanding objective can be highlighted, namely *«to improve the starting situation to promote greater employability of the graduates, favouring the adaptation of the training profile to the profiles demanded by society and reinforcing the geographer's professional profile and their decision-making capacity compared to other professionals»* (Herrero, 2001, 186). All the above should be achieved while still providing the essential training in the theoretical bases of geography that provide criteria and geographical focus, which is the necessary characteristic, distinctive and integrating feature, which confers our discipline a fundamental scientific role in the development of territorial studies.

In relation to this adaptation to the working environment, knowledge of the job market and its demands is essential to geographers, in order to configure the map of competences in the new Degrees; some competences attempting to minimise the individual effort necessary to work in the profession once the corresponding degree and masters has been obtained. However, it is obvious that the market is changeable, the techniques and tools required to manage geographical information evolve and it will always be necessary to some extent to make a later training effort, requiring a lifelong learning (Herrero, 2001).

To accommodate these ideas, the concepts of applicability and employability must be dealt with carefully, as has been done in the proposals and ideas that the geographical scientific community has made in the last years. The approach contained in the White Paper on specific competences focused on *knowing*, conveniently explained and related to those referring to *knowing how* has contributed directly to this. The success of the professional profiles in the job market depends to a great extent on the equilibrium among specific competences and their combination with generic competences

To identify the professional profiles the College of Geographers and the geographic community as a whole are making an important effort whose tangible result is the White Paper. Using the basis of the professional occupations of geographers, six professional profiles have been identified (White Paper, 2004, 170): *Investigation, education and geographical*

*diffusion, Geographical information technologies, Physical Environment, natural resources and environment, Land planning and territorial Development, Territorial analysis of the population and demography and, finally, Regional and local development.*

These profiles include more than 30 working lines, which are developed in the universities (39%), the private sector (34%) and public administration (27%) according to the conclusions of D. Mongil and A. Tarroja from their study «The professional profiles of Spanish geography» (2004).

Finally, it is interesting to consider the SWOT analysis again, carrying out a study of «*Geography and society in Spain: presences (and absences)*» which highlights important trends about the situation of geography nowadays, in terms of both positive aspects, considering strengths and opportunities, and negative ones (weaknesses and threats).

According to the above-mentioned model, on entering the ESHE, geography in Spain can be diagnosed in the following way. *The strengths* include the level of territorial implantation and the progressive implantation in certain working fields, such as territorial demarcation or geographical information technologies; the *weaknesses* are due to the social image of the discipline, and the lack of knowledge of the professional profiles beyond the academic ambit; the main *threats* are produced by the occupation of geographical working areas by other professionals and the loss of the globalizing geographical concept; finally the opportunities of the last few years to reinforce geography's position are due to the necessity to manage geographical information originating from the new Communication and Information Technologies (Reques, 2004)

In this context, the ESHE can provide the path necessary for the reformulation of aspects considered to be necessary in the training ambit in order to reinforce society's knowledge of the area and to re-launch our discipline both academically and scientifically. After our disaggregation from the Arts in the 70s and our «emancipation» from History, in the 90s, and consolidation as a degree in the first half of the 90s, the new degree programme provides our third and possibly definitive opportunity to develop both as an academic discipline and as an applied science.