

# FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE. DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE DEGREES OF GEOGRAPHY IN SPANISH UNIVERSITIES

**Javier Esparcia Pérez**

Departamento de Geografía, Universidad de Valencia

**Dolores Sánchez Aguilera**

Departamento de Geografía Física y Análisis Geográfico Regional, Universidad de Barcelona

The adaptation to the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) is being the penultimate phase of a long process of change in Geography at the University in Spain. It used to be a small part, almost symbolic until the 70's, within the former Bachelor of Arts. Then we had the degree in Geography and History, and then the separation from History, with an independent degree in Geography. And now we have reached the current new Degrees in Geography, within the EHEA (passing from the previous five years to the current four).

Perhaps more than in other previous reforms, the new degrees involve several major challenges to the geographic community. The most important of these is to design and be able to implement a system less focused in knowledge and much more on training, learning abilities and skills for the students, that is to say, less teacher-centered and much more student-centered. This –new- re-orientation pursues a basic objective, the improvement of opportunities of students' employability. This paper makes an analysis of this implementation process, highlighting some inertia, and discussing to what extent we are moving towards the development of degrees that respond to these challenges.

During the last forty years Geography at the Spanish universities has moved from being part of a Bachelor on Arts to be an independent degree after the reform early 90's. Three have been the features on this process: convergence towards increasingly applied approach (mainly on planning), the deepening on contents (with a parallel increasing of specialization), and the growing importance of technical subjects.

As a result of this process there was some progress, albeit modest, in the definition of professional profiles, and probably because of all the occupational integration of geographers marked improvements over the past two decades. This increased employability occurred in three main areas, planning, environmental and geographic information technologies.

However, these achievements were still modest and due mainly to the dynamism in the labour market in Spain during those years.

The success was only partial because the still low social visibility of Geography. This highlighted that probably without the dynamism in the labour market employability levels had been significantly lower. Spanish Geography was pending, and there is still today, not only be scientifically and socially more visible, but above all more effectively respond to social needs. This required the design of training programs and teaching-learning process sufficiently adapted to the demands and social needs, that is to say, more professional profiles focusing on the employability of geographers.

The first years of the present century were marked by strong growth in enrollment. After that we had a steady decline until the introduction of new degrees in the context of this process of adaptation to the EHEA, which means a clear recovery.

In this context, the EHEA is an opportunity to re-think training programmes focused much more on learning abilities and skills by students than in acquiring knowledge. That is, an opportunity to work within a student-centered orientation and less on the teacher, as has happened until recently (which still occurs in most of our staff). To take advantage of this opportunity and develop effective training from the point of view of social needs and employability of our students, we must act in three areas:

- a) The staff, which must to assume a high level of commitment to these challenges. This implies a significant advances in teacher training in order to work towards more and better procedures and teaching-learning more active processes, for example in the context of «problem-solving» approaches.
- b) The teaching-learning processes and their guidance to the acquisition of skills, which have to be the result of a good detection of social needs and demands to which geographers may answer.
- c) The students are the third strategic factor. In most cases the recovery of the enrollment associated with the implementation of new degrees involves a change of profiles. For the new incoming students it is reduced, in some cases, the demand as a first option, with a parallel increased feminization. They are more and more demanding students and looking for an answer from the university under the form of training oriented to their employability.

The adaptation of degrees to the EHEA meant to open a debate within the Spanish Geography about its professional orientation. Planning has remained the backbone of most degrees in Geography (degrees of Geography and Planning), although some universities has introduced other variants (Geography and Environment). One of the challenges in the coming years is to demonstrate that Planning and Environment do not respond to operations of academic marketing.

Our analysis of the new degrees of Geography focuses on three elements:

- a) The role of basic training as an element of greater academic mainstreaming. The adaptation to the EHEA in Spain establish that the first of four courses of the degrees will be assigned to one of the five branches of knowledge, facilitating student transfer between degrees of the same branch, ie, greater transversality and interdisciplinarity. Many universities accepted the challenge of positioning in the branch of Social Sciences, given that professional orientation. However, this change in attitude and

awareness has not led -as expected- to the incorporation of social science subjects in the first basic training course of Geography, and it continues dominating matters related to the branch of Arts and Humanities and not those of Social Sciences.

- b) The role of optional subjects as a way of improvement of expertise. In respect to the previous degrees, it decreased the number of optional subjects, and even the formula of itineraries of specialization has not been widely used, mainly due to limited human resources in most universities. In any way, it seems that when it is more present, the optional subjects imply a more consistent offer with deep socio-professional orientations for graduates in Geography.
- c) Subjects on the final grade work and the external or professional practices, as elements of practical and applied development of abilities and skills of a higher socio-professional nature. The final grade work is compulsory everywhere, being between 6 and 12 credits. These works are proposed as a tool for development of skills and abilities with a clear professional orientation, but it will be in the coming years when we may see if we are reaching this goal. On the other hand, external practices are present in virtually all degrees in Geography, but in just over a third they are considered mandatory. And here there are some inertia from the past and positions which are probably less committed in the form of voluntary external practices and / or under-credited. However, we should also to face the challenge of overcoming the ignorance of many companies and institutions about the capabilities and potential skills of geographers. It still remains an important work for the University in general and departments of Geography in particular in order to ensure that the social environment may identify and make more and better use of such potential.

In order to conclude, there are three major challenges that still have the Spanish Geography. In the short term the maintenance of the number of students, in the short to medium term the progress in the culture of monitoring and next accreditation process, and in the medium to long term to convert the degree (and masters) in instruments of professional development.

Regarding to the maintenance of the students in the degree of Geography, we must remember that with the adaptation to the EHEA we have recovered the relatively high levels of enrollment of 2000-2001 academic year. The challenge now is to stabilize these enrollment figures, in order to make sustainable the Degree in Geography at the different universities. There is a risk of falling, after this first phase of expansion (linked to factors as diverse as the major attraction of the professional orientation associated with planning or the increasing of the number of students due to the contraction in the labour market among young people). The task of keeping the students in our degree also involves advances in the attitude of teachers to improve the quality of training offered to our students, and if necessary, also we have to paid attention to the preparation and training of teaching staff. Fortunately the new generations of teachers hold attitudes more open and receptive to everything involving quality processes.

Secondly, the quality improvement of the titles in this new context is more than one imprecise target. They have been put in place mechanisms that involve the need for formal accreditation (in the sixth year after launching each degree). There are three key issues to consider for monitoring: development of the degree (how far we are doing everything necessary to ensure that the implementation of the degree is produced in accordance with

the expected plans), the achievement of targets (to what extent we are achieving the intended objectives as well as we are getting results considered as positive), and finally the level of relevance and usefulness of the degree for students (to what extent it is useful for graduates and allows them to integrate socially through appropriate jobs). Taking into account the various indicators that are to be used we may highlight the outputs of the process, as the rate of student academic performance, dropout rates, rate of efficiency and graduation rates. But it is also intended to monitor the available resources (staff and their qualifications), evaluation methods, role of external or professional practices, student mobility and satisfaction of teachers, students and employers.

The third and last of the challenges that still remains in the Spanish Geography is to make new degrees (and also masters) as instruments for the professional development and employability. In the academic course 2011-2012 we are almost finalizing the process of implementation of new degrees, and for geographers it is time to think to what extent we are moving in the right direction. That is, if the designs that we did just four or five years ago and which began to be implemented, are best suited to meet the demands of competitive professionals in the labour market, and if our students are receiving appropriate training in procedures and competences. In the same way, we need to think if the transversality between disciplines is being achieved, if the number and type of optional subjects are really an instrument of expertise, or if the external practices and the final graduation work that the students have to undertake are an instrument of development of abilities and skills for professional practice, or it is leaving only as a compendium of knowledge.

It is also time to re-think about the links between new degrees and the range of masters, and the viability of the last ones (we have to remember that the design and implementation of masters was held almost parallel to the new degrees, and many of them have been running up between two and four years ago). It seems clear that in the near future we should move towards the rationalization of the supply of masters, probably through fewer masters and the ones that remain having a more inter-university and / or interdisciplinary scope, beyond the traditional administrative and bureaucratic inertia.