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Assessment of competences: Social Education Degree Course run by Pablo de Olavide University, Spain

Evaluación de competencias: El Grado en Educación Social de la Universidad Pablo de Olavide, España

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ABSTRACT:

The European Higher Education Area has brought a change from assessing the achievement of learning outcomes to assessing the acquisition of competences. Linked to this premise, there is a need to revise study plans to ensure that they are in line with the needs and demands of society. To this end, this study investigated the assessment of competence acquisition from the perspective of three key agents: students, faculty staff, and supervisors of work placements.
Keywords: Professional competences, Assessment of competences, Area of European Higher Education, Social Education

RESUMEN:

El Espacio Europeo de Educación Superior ha provocado el cambio de evaluar el logro de los resultados del aprendizaje a la evaluación de la adquisición de competencias. Vinculado a esta premisa, es necesario revisar los planes de estudio para garantizar que estén en línea con las necesidades y demandas de la sociedad. Con este fin, este estudio investigó la evaluación de la adquisición de competencias desde la perspectiva de tres agentes clave: estudiantes, personal docente y supervisores de prácticas laborales.
Palabras clave: Competencias laborales, Evaluación de competencias, Espacio Europeo de Educación Superior, Educación Social

1. Introduction

Ever since universities first began to emerge as institutions, one of their greatest concerns has been to adapt to the idiosyncrasies of their surrounding environment (Altbach, 2010). Therefore, given that society nowadays demands professionals with specific qualifications, universities must adapt their courses in order to maintain their culture but also prepare students for the professional future that awaits them.

By de same way, we have to fight against the so-called model of institutional conformity

(Calvo et al, 2015: 12). With this model the idea that it is the institution responsible for the training of students is perpetuated. We believe that university students should already owning your own professional qualification process based on the competences acquired.

But firstly, a brief note on what is understood by the concept of competences here. One of the most widely used definitions is provided by Blanco et al., defining them as "a set of knowledge, abilities, and attitudes to perform an occupation or professional task" (2012: 322).

Although there is a wide variety of definitions and characteristics in this regard, such as observable behaviours, the existence of transversal, contextual, longitudinal, etc. competences, the research conducted here is based on a classification drawn up with a view to focusing the research task, using major blocks of competences. Hence, for the purposes of this article, competences are structured into five fundamental blocks, as follows:

- Analysing and diagnosing social reality.
- Designing and planning programmes and projects in Social Education.
- Developing and implementing programmes and projects.
- Evaluating and monitoring.
- Drawing up proposals for improvement.

Furthermore, although this classification is used as a starting point, it is important not to ignore other competences or other classifications or groupings provided by different informants, such as competences of communication, research, or intervention, among others.

Since the start of European Convergence, a process that began with the creation of the European Higher Education Area, one of the greatest concerns for universities has been how to deliver training in competences to their students. The different degree courses have structured their subjects with a view to providing students with the aptitudes and attitudes required for the specific professional career path of each individual student.

In order to respond to these concerns about whether students are receiving a proper grounding in competences at Higher Education institutions, the Social Education degree course run by Pablo de Olavide University in Seville (Spain) has been chosen as a case study. When developing this analysis, the references used were the experiences of the students during their work placements, the opinions of the external supervisors of these work placements, and the evaluation of the university faculty staff with regard to the professional endeavours of the students themselves.

Only by coming into contact with real-life practical situations can students transfer the competences they have acquired. Therefore, this study focuses precisely on such situations in order to identify their successes and possible shortcomings, with a view to making the necessary improvements to the focus and orientation of the degree course.

This research is part of the Innovation Plan for Teacher Training and Teaching Planning Centres at Pablo de Olavide University in Seville.

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2. Methodology

The general aim of this research is to evaluate the competences developed and acquired by students enrolled on the degree course in Social Education, focusing on their work placements and the final degree project. To do this, three specific objectives are proposed:

- Analyse the competences learned and transferred during work placements and the final degree project.
- Agree on and coordinate a model of work placements that presents continuity with the final degree project, making this project a space for learning and the transfer of competences gained throughout the degree course.
- Define proposals to improve the competences developed in the degree course, the work placements, and the final degree project to be incorporated when modifying the degree course.

This study is descriptive in nature, making use of a mixed methodology, but focusing particularly on the qualitative perspective. This takes into account the vision of numerous

authors (Guba, 1983; Goetz & Le Compte, 1988; Cohen & Manion, 1990; Ruiz Olabuenaga, 1999; Medina & Castillo, 2006)who advocate a mixed approach, which is essential in order to describe and interpret reality and to establish a process of change and transformation subsequent to the research process, but always taking into account the qualitative nature of this research that brings that reality and the object of study into sharp focus at all times.

With a view to converging these two methodologies, the techniques used were questionnaires (quantitative), and interviews with professionals and discussion groups (qualitative).

Since this is a descriptive study, which makes it difficult to define the dependent and independent variables clearly, a distinction was drawn based on three blocks of competences acquired during: the degree course, the work placements, and the final degree project.

The research population encompassed students enrolled on the Social Education Degree Course, as well as their work placement supervisors and faculty staff from the university responsible for overseeing their placements.

Of the above population, the sample used in this study encompassed: 45% of possible students; 46% of work placement supervisors; and finally 30% of faculty members from different areas of knowledge who lecture on the Social Education Degree Course.

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3. Results

This next section sets out some of the most significant findings of this research:

3.1. Regarding the competences gained by the students during their training

a) Analyse their professional reality and define problems and challenges. 67% of the external supervisors interviewed considered that the students had learned the competences required to analyse their professional reality and define problems and challenges during their period of training; 57% of the students shared this opinion, and 16% of students considered that they had learned and transferred these competences.

b) Design an intervention with a view to resolving problems and challenges detected. 48% of the external supervisors considered that the students had learned and transferred the competences required to design an intervention with a view to resolving the problems and challenges detected; in contrast, 21% of students felt they had learned this, whereas 65% of students considered they had learned and transferred this competency.

c) Implement an intervention. 39% of external supervisors felt that the students had learned the competences required to implement an intervention during their training, and 56% of students felt they had learned and transferred this skill. Of particular note here is that 20% of students felt they had not learned this competency during the degree course itself, but instead had developed it during their placement.

d) Monitoring and evaluation. 48% of external supervisors felt that the students had learned the competences required to monitor and evaluate an intervention during their training, and 47% of the students felt they had learned and transferred this competency.

e) Design proposals for improvements. 56 % of external supervisors thought that the students had learned the competences required to design proposals to improve an intervention during their training, and 56% of students also felt they had learned and transferred this competency.

f) Other competences learned. The external supervisors thought that, in addition to the above, the students had learned other competences such as communication and interpersonal skills, methodological planning and mediation, networking and evaluation in research. They had also learned and transferred other competences such as the implementation of designed proposals and collaborative work. Furthermore, the students pointed to other competences such as the management of resources, and the recycling of knowledge and continuing development.

3.2. Regarding the competences acquired by students during their work placements

a) Analyse their professional reality and define problems and challenges. 65% of the external supervisors assessed the degree to which the students had learned the competences required to analyse their professional reality and define problems and challenges during their training as being very good, and 86% of the students agreed.

b) Design an intervention with a view to resolving problems and challenges detected. 52% of the external supervisors assessed the degree to which the students had learned the competences required to design an intervention in order to resolve the problems and challenges detected during their training as being very good, and 75% of the students agreed.

c) Implement an intervention. 57% of the external supervisors assessed the degree to which the students had learned the competences required to implement an intervention as being very good, and 79% of the students agreed.

d) Monitoring and evaluation. 57% of the external supervisors assessed the degree to which the students had learned the competences required monitor and evaluate an intervention as being very good, and 66% of the students agreed. It is, however, important to note that 23% of the students felt they had not performed any actions related with this competency, the highest percentage of these characteristics of all the competences.

e) Design proposals for improvements. 69 % of the external supervisors assessed the degree to which the students had learned the competences required to design proposals for improvements as being very good, and 66%of the students agreed.

f) Other competences learned. The external supervisors felt that, during their work placements, the students had also learned competences related to methodological planning and mediation, networking and evaluation in research, and the use and management of ICT.

3.3. Regarding the conditions required to apply the competences learned in the professional scenario of work placements

The majority of external supervisors and students felt that the required conditions were in fact in place. Specifically, 90% of the external supervisors and 82% of the students.

Both groups indicated that, although in some cases they felt there was a lack of available resources – technical, economic, or human – they believed that the necessary conditions were in place in the vast majority of cases to develop their learning in the best possible way and in accordance with certain standards of quality. They focus the lack of resources on the presence of the Social Educator in the university.

3.4. Regarding the duration of the work placements to apply competences

The majority of the external supervisors and the students responded that the duration of the work placements was sufficient to apply their competences (78 % of the students and 63 % of the external supervisors).

29% of the supervisors indicated that the duration of the work placements was insufficient. Their reasons include the lack of time to evaluate results and assimilate certain learning outcomes and develop competences, since with a greater period of time the students would be able to participate actively in all stages of mediations and interventions, from start to finish.

15% of the students thought the duration was excessive in specific cases and personal situations in which the work carried out was a little monotonous and repetitive, or when the work placements were of such high quality that, with good guidance and supervision from

their external supervisor and the university, the learning process was much quicker.

The faculty staff from the degree course also confirmed, albeit not explicitly, that the number of hours required for the work placements was at least sufficient, since they observe a substantial decline in attendance at theoretical classes as of the second semester of year three.

3.5. Regarding the suitability of the tasks performed during work placements in relation to the contents and competences acquired by the students during their training

As highlighted previously, the majority of the students and external supervisors surveyed felt the tasks were adequate, specifically 56% of the external supervisors and 61 % of the students.

However, the responses given by the teachers and the students point to two important aspects that require further improvement: the first is the repetition of certain theoretical contents across different subjects; and the second is greater diversity in the range of optional subjects offered.

By decreasing the repetition of contents, different competences could be developed or in greater depth, and a greater sphere of knowledge could be encompassed in order to respond to more of the students' concerns.

3.6. Regarding the working relations of the students during their work placements for the development of their competences in their place of work

The majority of the external supervisors and the students rated this aspect to be very adequate, specifically 63 % of external supervisors and 61 % of the students. Both groups felt that the students had adapted well to their place of work, and that there was good communication, working environment, and collaboration.

The faculty members, on the other hand, stressed that more work was needed in the degree course to develop competences of interpersonal communication, critical attitude, and interdisciplinary work. There is a slight disparity of opinions, but the general feeling is that positive results would be obtained if more work was done to develop these competences.

3.7. Link between work placement and incorporation into the labour market

100% of the external supervisors felt that the training in competences acquired by the students will help them find work in the future, and 93% of the students agreed. In addition, 100% of the external supervisors and 84% of the students believe there is a link between the work placements and their future professional pathways.

3.8. Assessment of the guidance and support provided by faculty supervisors and work placement supervisors

a) Faculty supervisors. 57% of the external supervisors and 60% of the students rated the guidance and support received from faculty supervisors as being adequate. 48% of the external supervisors and 51% of the students rated the information received from faculty supervisors as being adequate. 44% of the external supervisors and 39% of the students deemed the monitoring provided by the faculty supervisors to be adequate. In general, 56%of the external supervisors and 51% of the students felt the work placements in general were adequate.

b) Work placement supervisors. 57% of the faculty supervisors and 53% of the students deemed the guidance and support received from the work placement supervisors to be

adequate. 57% of the faculty supervisors and 45% of the students felt that the Information received from work placement supervisors was adequate. 52% of the faculty supervisors and 53% of the students deemed the monitoring provided by the work placement supervisors to be adequate. In general, 48% of the faculty supervisors felt the work placements in general were adequate.

In this section we agree with research like Luna Serrano & Arámburo Vizcarra (2013: 20), the working relationship between practical experience of teachers, with teaching effectiveness and guiding role.

4. Conclusions

Below is a brief summary of the conclusions drawn from the data obtained in reference to the different competences, focusing on their learning and transfer during the training period, as well a show they are developed during work placements, from the perspective of the students and the work placement supervisors.

1.- Analysing and diagnosing reality. Students felt that they gained the strongest grounding in this competency during their degree course training, but that subsequently it was the competency they transferred the least. Furthermore, the majority of students perceive that they develop this competency well or very well during their work placements. The work placement supervisors agree, considering that this is the competency that students learn the best during training, rating it second in terms of how the students then develop it during their work placements.

2.- Designing and planning programs and projects. This is the competency that students feel they learn and transfer the most during their training period, also yielding good results in terms of its development during work placements, a perception shared by their work placement supervisors.

3.- Developing and implementing programs and projects. This competency is learned and transferred in over half of the cases, but it is the least learned competency and is not transferred during work placements. However, the students do perceive very good results when it is developed during their work placements. This competency needs to be developed and learned more during training so that the students can also perform tasks and functions of these characteristics during their work placements.

4.- Evaluating and monitoring. This competency is learned and transferred in almost half of the cases. It also yielded the highest percentage in terms of competences that are learned but not transferred. Therefore, more actions of this kind need to be developed during work placements. However, it is rated highly by the students when carried out during their work placements, coinciding with the perception of the placement supervisors as well. The supervisors also affirm that during the degree course this competency is learned rather than learned and transferred.

5.- Proposals for improvements. Students also feel that this is one of the competences that they learned and transferred the most, specifically in just over half of the cases. However, it is the least developed competency during work placements. Work placement supervisors, on the other hand, highlight that this is the competency that students learn and transfer the most during their training period, giving the best result during work placements.

6.- Other competences. The students referred to a series of competences when completing the three data gathering instruments. The majority of students mentioned these in each case.

7.- Communication competences. Students feel that the learning and transfer of these competences is fundamental, and that more work should be done to develop them during their theoretical training, since they encounter certain difficulties transferring them during their work placements. Furthermore, at the end of their work placements, an important transfer of these competences takes place, since that period learning that takes place within the classroom is complemented during their work placements, during which they make greater use of them. Therefore, these competences are acquired by the majority of students. In this respect, the work placement supervisors highlighted the professionalism of

the students along with their personal qualities and competences, which are crucial in the professional endeavours of an Educator.

8.- Research competences. The degree course is much more geared towards subsequent professional pathways than research. Bearing this in mind, along with the information provided by the students, research competences require greater emphasis and development throughout the degree course, along with the creation of research tools and the use of software and computer assistance programmes. It is very difficult to develop research tasks during work placements, so these skills cannot be transferred directly, partly because of the limited acquisition of these competences previously. The final degree project is also affected, since students lack sufficient confidence to conduct good research.

5. Proposals for improvement

Taking into account all of the above, there are certain aspects that need to be examined, reflected on and worked on in order to continue improving the training of students for their future professional pathways.

Some of the subjects studied, for example, should be reorganised to eliminate overlapping of contents, by means of greater coordination between the teaching staff. Furthermore, certain contents related with specific collectives with whom students have to interact in their work placements need to be studied in greater depth. This could be achieved either by structuring different pathways or specialisations, or by expanding the range of optional subjects on offer.

Furthermore, contents need to be updated and tailored in order to reflect the reality of today. This could be achieved by fostering direct interaction with the professional environment, specifically with professional colleges and bodies through the organisation of joint activities, seminars, research, talks…

Greater coordination between practical reality and university teaching is extremely important, to ensure that the students receive training in competences that are fully valid for their future professional careers.

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