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Foreigner? Want to study in Spain? The integration process at universities

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Abstract

The student exchange programs being carried out at universities for over 50 years, have led to changes in the institutions, which had to adapt to accommodate these students. Despite those changes, the integration of foreign students not coming from the aforementioned exchange programs that come to our country to study at the University has been neglected.

These students face many barriers (language, cultural and origin customs mainly), so a clear and detailed information would be highly desirable in order to facilitate the necessary arrangements. This study aims to show the deficiencies in the integration process and hosting programs faced by a foreign student at University.

The study is performed by means of an analysis of statistical data from the Polytechnic University of Madrid and the Civil Engineering School over the last 12 school years (1999 - 2000 to 2010 - 2011), as well as surveys and interviews with some of these students.

The study is enhanced with the analysis of the measures and integration methods of the various minorities, which had been implemented by the foremost public universities in Spain, as well as other public and private universities abroad.

It illustrates the existing backlog at the Spanish universities with regards to supporting the integration of diversity among foreign students, providing data concerning the growth of such population and its impact at the university, and on the institutions in particular.

In an increasingly globalized world, we must understand and facilitate the integration of minorities at University, supplying them, from the first day, and before the enrollment process, the essential elements that will allow their adequate adaptation to the educational process at University. It concludes by identifying the main subjects that need to be tackled to endorse such integration.

1. Introduction

Throughout the last decade we are witnessing an increase in the number of foreign students arriving to begin their undergraduate degree at our colleges.

First steps in college are always difficult for students, which perform a huge qualitative leap from High School to College. But this change becomes amplified when referring to foreign students, mainly due to language barriers, cultural customs and lack of information at college, which are all destabilizing factors that may influence in a very decisive way the college's selection and the student's integration therein.

Even though there are University exchange programs for foreign students for over 50 years, these students usually enroll in the last years of their degree and have gained experience in their countries of origin regarding how college operates. In addition, universities of both exchanging countries have already implemented the means and mechanisms to welcome these students, so it likely that in their website there is a section solely devoted to students of programs such as Erasmus, Socrates, etc. Therefore, those will not be part of the study described in this article.

We must consider this: Are our universities prepared for the reception, welcoming and integration of foreign students who are not part of any exchange program?

Prior to the analysis of the conditions for welcoming and integration as well as the problems foreign students wishing to study in our universities are confronted with, we estimate the size of this group. To do this, we drawn on the overall enrolment data at the Polytechnic University of Madrid (UPM), composed of 22 colleges and 17 centers and research institutes.

Based on enrolment data at UPM for the school years 1999/2000 to 2010/2011 (Figure 1), we observe that enrolment has barely increased during this period, from 62.393 students in the school year 1999/2000 to 68.299 students in the school year 2010/2011, representing an increase of 9.5%. [1]

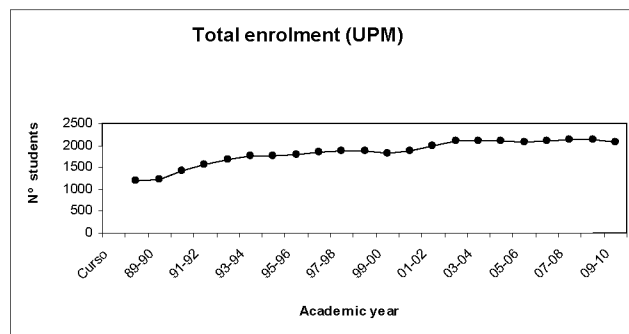


Figure 1: Number of students enrolled at the UPM

However, the number of foreign students enrolled during that period has grown up from 1.078 students in the school year 1999/2000 to 5.713 students during the school year 2010/2011, representing an increase of 529.96%.

If we consider their country of origin (Figure 2), we see that the biggest increase takes place on students coming from America, and more specifically coming from South American countries. This, on the other hand, is reasonable, because, firstly, they speak our language, and secondly, because of the massive increase of immigrants from these countries to Spain during the last decade, due to the construction boom. These workers often bring their children along enrolling them into the Spanish education system.

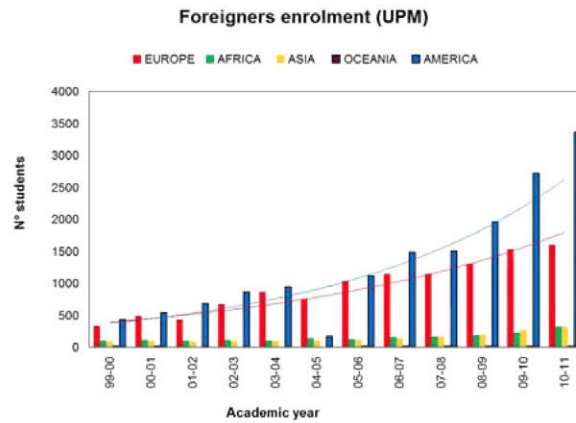


Figure 2: Number of foreign students enrolled at the UPM

We proceed to focus on the College of Civil Engineers (EUITOP), which is part of the UPM, and of which we are professors. Analyzing enrolment data coming out from this school (Figure 3) we observe that the total number of students enrolled has increased from 1831 students during the school year 1999/2000 to 1921 students during the school year 2010/2011, representing an increase of 4.91 %. [2]

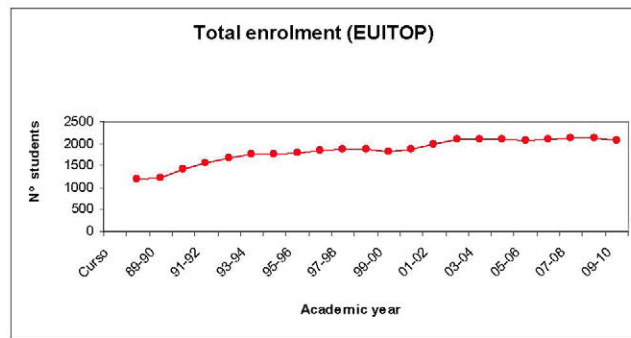


Figure 3: Number of students enrolled at the EUITOP

However, the number of foreign students enrolled during that period has grown from 10 students during the school year 1999/2000 to 176 students during the school year 2010/2011, representing an increase of 1,760%.

If we consider their country of origin (Figure 4), we see that once again the massive enrolment of students from Latin American countries is recurring, from 3 students during the school year 1999/2000 to 117 students during the school year 2010/2011.

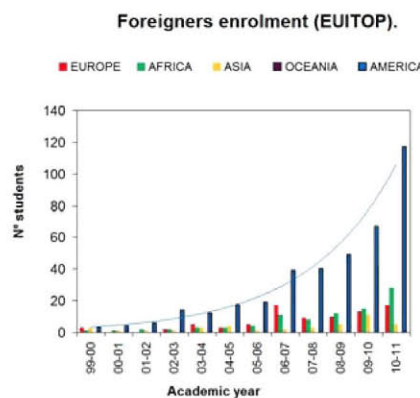


Figure 4: Number of foreign students enrolled at the EUITOP

So, in both scenarios the number of students has increase considerably, five times bigger when referring to the overall Polytechnic University of Madrid, and by seventeen times when referring to the College of Civil Engineers.

Therefore, we have a fairly accurate snapshot over the size and amount of this group of students in the overall UPM (accounting 8.36% of total) and within the EUITOP (accounting 4.74% of total).

Given that the number of UPM students is quite high, we believe that the data can be extrapolated (to a more or less extent) to other Spanish universities.

Most of the time teachers are concerned about taking care of the diversity that can be found in the classrooms, but ... how does this change of culture affects the student?

Intelligence, skills and personal effort are factors which are independent from an individual's country of origin, and that directly influence what a particular student will learn. However, if we focus on the possible differences by country of origin, cultural diversity might have a considerable impact on learning process, as well as in the integration within the university. Historically, students enrolled in technical degrees in Spain were mostly men. In particular, in degrees directly related to civil engineering. [3]

Nowadays, the tendency is changing closing the gap between both genders, although men still dominate. If we evaluate the enrolment percentages during the last two years (2010/2011 and 2011/2012) by country of origin and gender (Figure 5), the pattern is followed, except in the case of Africa, where there are almost exclusively men. [2]

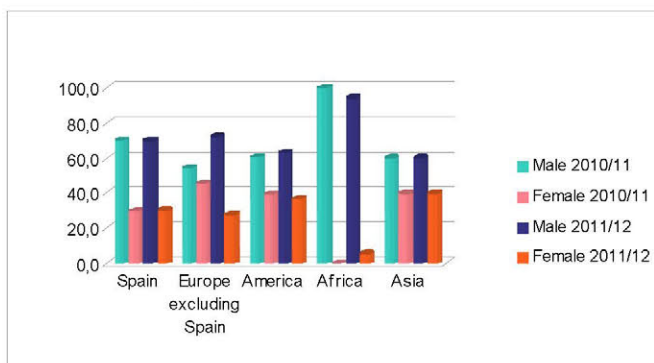


Figure 5: Enrolment percentages by country of origin and gender

Since this pattern has been discovered, from the school year 2005/2006 onwards, this group of teachers has conducted personal interviews with these students to get their impressions and to prepare a "catalogue of difficulties" those students are confronted with when they want to pursue university studies at the UPM.

Basically there are two sorts of blocks:

- Those due to the linguistic differences
- Those due to the customs of the country of origin

If we focus on the linguistic differences, although most of our overseas students come from South American countries, we cannot disregard the difficulties of students coming from other continents to follow classes, their verbal communication, and, consequently, not only to convey their knowledge through assessment tests, but also in their communication with both teachers and with their own peers. This process creates uncertainty in the student, leading to its isolation from the group and as a result, non-integration into the university. In short, not "mastering" the language (furthermore taking into consideration that is a very technical language), makes the learning process difficult and, ultimately, the successful completion of the student's education.

With regards to cultural traditions, they are a fact that cannot be ignored in this study, although our ability, as teachers, to steer any change in this area is very limited.

It is clear that making an effect on the linguistic difference is very difficult for teachers. This is an issue that must be addressed comprehensively by the University, adapting or implementing a language courses for students by country of origin. As difficult as it sounds, especially taking into account the profound crisis in which Europe has been plunged, solutions must be very flexible, and when possible with a little cost or zero cost. Those courses should be complemented by involving other students by means of conversational exercises and leisure and cultural activities. This means that the student does not only not see the language course as a class, but will be actively integrated into the university and the country's daily life.

With regards to the customs of the country of origin, the student should be able to inform the University prior to enrolment of any habit or traditional practice which essential within its country of origin. Thus, teachers may consider this particular practice from the student in order to respect the tradition, as much as possible, and never at the expense of other students.

Thus, the University should help the teacher by giving the right tools for the development of the student, and this without the teacher having to change in any way the scientific and technical content of the course.

2. Development

So far we have studied the impacts on the student due to the country of origin, while the student is attending University, but we still need to go one step further, to realize of how important are integration and acceptance and its influence on students.

As from this point, the student data we will use corresponds to the last two school years in which the curriculum has been changed from the old plan to the new plan issued for the convergence to the EESS (Bologna Plan). (Figures 6 and 7).

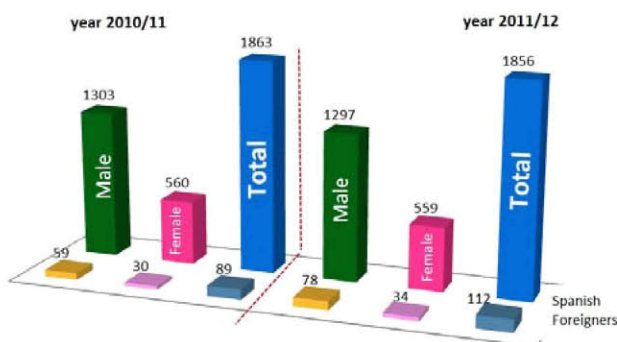


Figure 6: Number of enrolled students by origin in courses 2010/2011 and 2011/2012

So, given that we firmly believe that diversity is something very positive and enriching for our classrooms, we have put ourselves in the shoes of the students, and we go back to the first hurdle they had to overcome: the choice of the college.

Foreign students coming to study in our country search the web for universities that have degrees they wish to study. Thus, this simple step will be critical when choosing.

This information must be both generic (visa, insurance, registration, lodging, embassies ...) and technical (syllabus, validations ...).

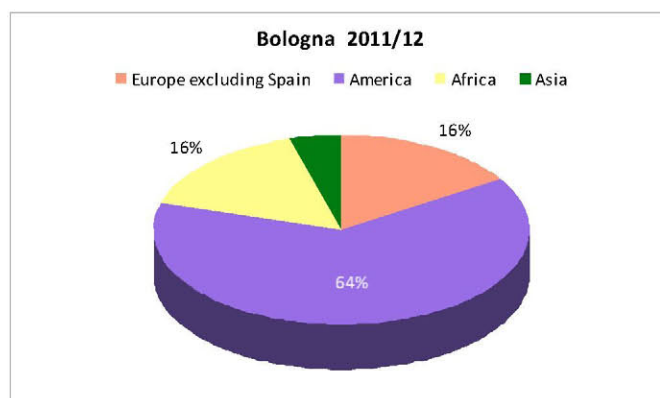


Figure 7: Percentage of enrolled students by origin in course 2011/2012

As first step the student will choose using the English language. Indeed, it is clear that students should study in Spanish language and must adapt to the country that welcomes them, but in order to study the curriculum and other vital information to enable the choice, English as an option must be enabled, because, although the student might know the Spanish language, there are always words such as “matriculación”, “competencias transversales”, “convalidaciones”, “preinscripción”, “prerrequisitos”, (“enrollment”, “transversal skills”, “validations”, “pre-registration”, “prerequisites”), which may not be familiar to the prospective student from their country of origin.

Another important issue is to guide the student quickly to the most useful information for him. To do so, direct links must be enabled from the home page with titles such as “Prospective Students” or “Foreign Students”.

Given the increase, in recent years, of the number of foreign students enrolled in the EUITOP and the need for general information, not scientific or technical, requested by them when speaking with them, we, a group of teachers from that school, have considered the needs these students could have for further information of such type, before enrolling in the Spanish University.

Firstly we analyzed the information these students can obtain from their countries of origin, in the same way these students usually manage and search themselves to get the information, this means, from the Internet through the web pages of Spanish Universities and as visitor without a login.

We performed a comprehensive analysis of the information, which the universities at stake, offer to potential students in 27 Spanish Public Universities among the different Spanish Regions. (Table 1). [4]

Where:

- A: Student mentoring and service office
- B: Special care service (Handicapped)
- C: Academic information service for foreign students
- D: Equal treatment unit
- E: University women mentoring
- F: Information service for foreign student in specific programmes
- G: Foreign students care programme

Table 1: Spanish Universities Web site study

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
UCM	x	x	x	x		x	
UAM	x			x			
UPM	x	x	x	x		x	x
Carlos III	x	x	x			x	
Rey Juan Carlos	x	x	x			x	
U Alcala	x	x	x				x
Almeria	x	x					
Cadiz	x	x		x			
Granada	x	x	x				x
Huelva		x	x	x			
Jaén	x*						
Málaga	x						
Sevilla	x	x		x	x		
Zaragoza				x			
La Laguna	x						
Las Palma	x				x	x	
Cantabria	x					x	
La Mancha	x					x	x
Burgos	x					x	x
León	x	x			x	x	x
Salamanca	x						
Navarra	x						
UP Valencia	x						
La Coruña	x						
Pais Vasco	x						
Oviedo	x	x					x
Murcia	x			x			

Once all the data was collected the analysis of such information had the following outcome:

1. Most of all universities have an information office, but, with few exceptions, over the Internet it was not possible to get much practical and useful information. In some cases, as in Malaga University, this information is extensive and clear.
2. Most of all the universities have an office at the service of disabled people.
3. Most of all the universities have an information office on gender equality, even in some cases, there is a specific unit servicing women at university.
4. Some universities have an information office for foreign students primarily for academic matters and, in some cases as the Huelva University, you have to access the information a formal student.
5. Some universities have information for foreign students enrolled in an exchange program and not in all cases it is available on the Internet.
6. Few universities have and extensive non-academic information, available to foreign students not enrolled in an exchange program.
7. There are two universities that have two specific programs of information and service for foreign students:
 - a) Leon University that has the “Padrino Program” through which every international student who wishes to apply to it can enjoy the welcome and advice from a local student. This is a voluntary activity that aims to facilitate the integration of international students with local students, and provide personalized attention in the early days in our cities and campuses which demonstrates a highly effective approach in resolving issues such as searching for a house, getting to know the environment and creating networks of contacts between Spanish students.

- b) Oviedo University with the “a-Duo Programme”. This programme aims to put in contact a foreign student with a Spanish student, preferably from the same campus, so the student will facilitate the integration into that university. With “a-Duo Programme” it is easier to navigate in cities, finding accommodation, using public transport and adapt to the local Community in general. Spanish students will find in a-Duo another way of seeing the world. In addition, by working together in a good manner in this program and they opt for a grant from the Erasmus program or a grant of cooperation agreements for the next year, the students will receive extra points in their evaluation to be selected. The international student shall certify the usefulness of the aid received.

8. In the UPM there is the “Mentor Programme”, which consists of assigning a student of the higher grades, under the supervision of a teacher, which guides a student newly enrolled; foreign students are included in this program.

9. The information provided by UPM to foreign students is obtained from the web site and it includes both academic information as well as practical information both in nature and culturality. The web is in Spanish and English. In paragraph “incoming students” shows “Information for Access to the University by Students from Foreign Education Systems”. Moreover, the University has developed a 30 page guide for foreign students, highly targeted at students who are part of an exchange program.

3. Conclusions

Most of the web sites of Spanish public universities lack a clear comprehensive information, and therefore, useful for foreign students willing to study in Spain, and that do not belong to an already established exchange program.

For a quick search of the student within a page, it is also important to highlight words such as "Future Students" or "Foreign Students" to focus the attention of the student.

Most of the websites of the universities have in their home page the option to select the language (usually English), but when selecting such option, then the information is reduced, and in others, all the captions are not translated at all. It is essential that websites have the possibility, on the whole page and especially in the syllabus and Teachers Guides pages, to show the pages in English.

We miss web links to other organizations that somehow could be useful for the successful completion of the journey and for the resolution of the administrative procedures relating to their staying in the country.

It seems advisable the possibility of unifying, as much as possible, the basic information together with any other additional information to be provided to future foreign students.

All students enrolled in universities are entitled to school insurance, and foreign students normally do not hire any additional medical insurance to cover them during their staying. Would it be advisable that universities together with medical enterprises negotiate a special policy?

Sponsorship from excellent students or students, who were in the same situation a few years ago, will facilitate and generate greater synergies between them. Thus, excellent students feel useful, and become more mature and secure, and those with difficulties, have them largely resolved. Regarding for learning, improvement of the language, knowledge of the habits and daily life; the same approach can be taken.

References

- [1] Data from www.upm.es
- [2] Data from www.euitop.es
- [3] Torralba, Domínguez, López, del Campo. Impact of immigrants and cultural diversity in the E.U.I.T.O.P. of U.P.M. INTED2011 Proceedings. 2011. p. 4597-4602.
- [4] Web Spanish Universities: www.ucm.es; www.uam.es; www.upm.es; www.uc3m.es; www.urjc.es; www.uah.es; www.ual.es; www.uca.es; www.ugr.es; www.uhu.es; www.ujaen.es; www.uma.es; www.us.es; www.unizar.es; www.ull.es; www.ulpgc.es; www.unican.es; www.uclm.es; www.ubu.es; www.unileon.es; www.usal.es; www.unav.es; www.upv.es; www.udc.es; www.ehu.es; www.uniovi.es; www.um.es